

WELCOME BACK

Mark 16:1-8

O God, you have glorified our victorious Savior with a visible, triumphant resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, where he sits at your right hand; grant, we beg you, that his triumphs and glories may ever shine in our eyes, to make us more clearly see through his sufferings and more courageously endure our own; being assured by his example, that if we endeavor to live and die like him, for the advancement of your love in ourselves and others, you will raise our dead bodies again, and conforming them to his glorious body, call us above the clouds and give us possession of your everlasting kingdom. Amen. (John Wesley 1703-1791)

Max Lucado tells a story about a physician in Arkansas who misdiagnosed a patient. He declared the woman to be dead. The family was informed, and the husband was grief-stricken. Imagine the surprise of the nurse when she discovered that the woman was not dead, but alive! “You better tell the family,” the nurse urged the doctor. The embarrassed physician phoned the husband and said, “I need to talk to you about the condition of your wife.” “The condition of my wife?” he asked. “She’s dead.” “Well,” the doctor mumbled with embarrassment, “she’s seen a slight improvement.”

When Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, headed to the tomb on Easter morning, they were not expecting an improvement. They were bringing spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus, and as they walked in the early-morning light they were worried about how they would manage to move the heavy stone away from the entrance to the tomb. They arrived thinking they were to complete the ending of a once promising life not knowing they were really there to begin again.

They went to face what they thought was the finality of death. A retiring minister, in his farewell remarks to his church, said, “The first person who came to believe under my preaching has backslidden. The first persons married under my ministry have divorced. But the first person I buried has stayed there.” And that is what we expected.

In December 2000, a man in Kazakhstan was accidentally electrocuted. He died and was buried. Then he shocked his friends and family by turning up for his own funeral. Buried according to Muslim tradition, the man had been

wrapped in a cloth shroud and interred in a shallow grave after apparently dying while trying to steal power cables.

Two days later, however, he regained consciousness and rose naked from the ground. Understandably he had some difficulty flagging down a vehicle to take him home. This man's resuscitation in Kazakhstan and Jesus' resurrection in the garden are not the same. But it does illustrate the huge adjustment in our thinking to accept the notion that one who was thought to be dead is alive.

The first given this message were the most unlikely of witnesses to bring the news of the empty tomb. Women then were given about the same low social status as we find in some Arab nations today. The women came with equally low expectations. We know this by the question they asked, "Who will roll away the stone from the tomb for us?" that they were not expecting a miracle to have taken place. They were just doing what was expected of women.

They were not expecting a heavenly messenger. Understandably they were – in a grand understatement – alarmed. It does not say who the young man was but since he was dressed in white – unless he was dressed for tennis – I am going to guess he was an angel. Later it says that terror seized them. Fear is normal, and sometimes healthy. We fear falling and so we guard ourselves. We fear poverty, so we are cautious with our money. But fear is not always the best response.

Our youngest son recently informed us that in due time he will go to Air Force jump school where he will learn to jump out of an airplane with a gun pack strapped to his back while tethered to a dirt bike . He is looking forward to it. I trust he will be cautious, but he should not be fearful because fear can paralyze us when we should act. The amazement and terror was such that even when they saw that Jesus was not there, the messenger dressed in white had to tell them to leave the tomb and tell the good news to the disciples.

Why did the women flee and why were they afraid? Was it because of the utterly unexpected resurrection? Or was it because they were told to tell the disciples and Peter? Or was it the shock of being told where to find their formerly dead leader? Or was it all of these things? Fear does many things. We can fear telling people something too bad to accept or telling something

which seems too good to be true. But the resurrection has a power to overcome all amazement and fear.

You probably do not remember the name Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin. He was a Russian Communist leader who took part in the Bolshevik Revolution 1917, was the editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda, and was a member of the Politburo. His works on economics and political science, I understand, are still read by some today. There is a story told about a journey he took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd he hurled insults, arguments, and supposed proof against Christianity.

An hour later he was finished. He looked out at what to him seemed to be the smoldering ashes of the Christian faith. "Are there any questions?" he demanded. Deafening silence filled the auditorium but then one man approached the platform and mounted the lectern standing near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left, then to the right. Finally he shouted the ancient greeting in the ancient language of the Russian Orthodox Church: "CHRIST IS RISEN!" En masse the crowd arose as one and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder: "HE IS RISEN INDEED!" And today it is a nation coming back to their Orthodox Christian faith. Such is the power of this affirmation, no matter how long it seems buried and dead.

The angel said, "Tell his disciples and Peter." Why phrase it that way? Peter was one of the disciples. Recall that while the disciples all abandoned Jesus, but only Peter denied knowing him, only Peter swore that he had nothing to do with him. Not even Judas did that. Peter may have loved Jesus, but after that night in the courtyard by the fires when Jesus gazed at him in sorrow as the cock crowed, Peter might well have hoped never to have to see Jesus again. It would only remind him of his cowardice and denial. Maybe it was not Jesus' death that terrorized Peter so much as the report of resurrection.

Just as the angle sent the women to get the men who had denied and betrayed Jesus, today he still sends messengers to call each one of us to return, to welcome us back. The angle commanded: Go to Galilee and see the risen Lord. It was not a suggestion or a hint or a travel tip. Go and tell the others that no matter what happened we are welcomed back.

When our past is forgiven and we are invited to return, we are invited into a new world of responsibility we did not have before. We do not have to resurrect Jesus, but we do have to be willing to meet him, and in meeting him we too are commanded to go and tell. Jesus did not first send them out into the wide world but into Galilee, into their own back yard, which is where Jesus first sends us.

It is the nature of God to do so, but not human nature. Mark Twain is credited with saying, "If I were God, I would give the world a good swift kick right in the equator." Why even bother with these disciples? When Jesus needed them the most they abandoned him. Why bother with the women? In that social system they had no status or power. Why not show up at the Roman barracks? Show those who mocked you and beat you and thought they had killed you that they aren't as tough as they thought.

And why Galilee? Why not Jerusalem, the geographic and spiritual center of Judaism, the place where the religious leaders plotted against him? Their accusations and anger would be defeated by his presence. Why not Rome, the seat of power? If Caesar thought he was powerful, why not show him that you are more powerful than his armies? But the angel brought Jesus' message to the women and to the disciples because our God is the God of the second chance.

They got a second chance because evil had done its worst and had lost. We know the gospels tell the story of Jesus, his birth, his ministry, his betrayal, his death and his resurrection. The gospels also tell us the story of the disciples, their call, their confusion, their failure, their fleeing and their welcome back. The gospels tell the story of what the disciples did and what we are to do. It was not just Jesus who was resurrected from death to life but Mary and Peter and the others who were given new life as well. And it was not just they but we who are granted such new life.

We have heard, read again, the story of women's surprise when they found the stone moved to the side. We have heard the great Easter proclamation of the angel, "He is not here, he is risen. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee." God had watched Peter fall and now God is welcoming him back again.

"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid." That is

the last sentence in the Gospel of Mark. But we know this was not the end of the story. In fact, scholars believe that there was more written by Mark but somehow the end of the scroll was lost.

The gospels were written on parchment paper and were passed from one group to the next. It appears that the last part of the scroll broke off and was lost. Certainly it is not the end of the resurrection story because we know what came next. It is not written in this gospel but we know the women did as the angel told them. We know the disciples did what the women told them. If they had not we would not be here today.

In fact more chapters of the resurrection story are being written every day including this resurrection day. This is, in a sense, an open ended story. The Bible tells us about the mighty acts of God who created the heavens and the earth, God who establishes nations and destroys them by his will. It also tells us about us. The unfinished chapter, the unfinished work of Easter is the work God does this day in our lives.

How will we finish our chapter? We can write our own end to the story. We can write, "I was ashamed. I ran and hid. I got busy with other things. I took up a hobby." Or we can write, "I discovered I was welcomed back. I came home. I am living the good news Jesus brought and I am sharing that good news life with others."

Those that came to believe are those who showed up. The women showed up at the tomb. They did not show up believing, but by showing up they came to believe. They were fearful when they were told not to be, but they showed up. The men were off in hiding. It was only when Peter and the others went to the empty tomb and then went to where Jesus said they should go that they too came to believe. They felt guilty and remorseful, but they showed up.

Is there greater proof of the resurrection than the resurrected disciples? A defeated group of people became fearless in spreading the message of Jesus' resurrection. Cowards became courageous; the timid became triumphant; the inept did the impossible.

The resurrection story continues back in Galilee and in all the ordinary places where you and I spend our time, where we work, and live, and make our homes. The Easter story continues when ordinary people do the most

extraordinary things with their lives undeterred by some great stone. The Easter story continues when the hungry are fed and the homeless are given shelter, when the sinner is forgiven and broken relationships are mended. The Easter story continues when the lonely are made part of a church family, when the sick and the prisoner are visited, and those in grief are comforted. The Easter story continues each day we hear the angel calling with the message of Jesus: Welcome back. And we go to our Galilee to tell all who will hear the message we received: Welcome back.

O loving God, who through your only Son has overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life, grant we humbly ask you, that we who celebrate our Lord's resurrection, may, by the renewing of your Spirit, rise from the death of sin to the life of righteousness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

April 12, 2009

The Federated Church of Hyannis

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