

BEHOLD, HE IS GOING BEFORE YOU

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Mtt. 28:1-10

TEXT: *The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified him. Lo, I have told you."* (Matt 28:5-7 RSV)

INTRODUCTION

Michelle, a Sunday School teacher in Michigan, teaches a class of kindergartners. They'd been studying the creation story for several weeks and she was ready for review. She began asking, "What did God make the first day?" and the class responded, "Light." "And the second day?" she asked. Again, most responded with the right answer, "Sky." Encouraged, Michelle continued, "And, what happened on the third day?" One little child, his face shining with enthusiasm, blurted out, "**He rose from the dead!**"

This child was well-taught in knowing the significance of Christ's resurrection on the third day. While it wasn't what the teacher was seeking, the resurrection of Jesus does apply to everything. But putting it into the right context is sometimes a problem for all of us. We need more than disjointed facts. We need this resurrection truth integrated into our living. Peter proclaims the implications well when he tells us that through Christ's rising from the dead, we have a new birth into a living hope and an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade (1 Pet. 1:3-4). Unfortunately, we don't always live in the reality of this truth. And we often have a hard time applying it to our everyday living.

We can be like Martin Luther, who launched the Reformation in the 16th century. He battled depression all his life. He had been in one of his black moods for a number of days. In the midst of this, his wife Katie, had had enough. She came downstairs dressed in black mourning clothes. Surprised, Martin asked, "Who died?" Katie replied, "God." Luther immediately rebuked her and said, "Katie, you must not say that. It is blasphemy." To which, Katie replied, "What's the difference. I say it. You act like it." That brought Luther out of his depression. And it was a forceful reminder that when we know God is alive in Jesus Christ, we need to daily avail ourselves of that life He gives. And of course our attitude and countenance ought to reflect that reality. How well are we doing?

While depression might not be your problem, most of us can identify some area where we need to apply resurrection hope and joy. Are you tired, overwhelmed with life, feeling burdened? Maybe you are feeling anxious about your life or about our world. Last Sunday night on "60 Minutes" there was a segment on global warming. As they described frightening projections of what this may mean, I found myself feeling an inner anxiety. I remembered Augustine's comment after the sacking of Rome, "The world is getting short of breath." It really seems true with global warming. But then I reminded myself that this should not surprise us. God has

clearly told us all this in His Word. Our hope and our future are in Him. We look to God and His kingdom which will endure forever. This world will pass away. And, because of the resurrection, we can live in the assurance of an eternity with God no matter what happens to this old earth. In fact, He promises a new heaven and a new earth. The resurrection means irrepressible hope for those who are in Christ Jesus. As Jesus reminds His disciples that last night with them,

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! [KJV, Be of good cheer!] I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

The resurrection is the answer to all the trouble we have in this world. Our challenge is to apply the resurrection of Jesus to every aspect of life.

I find the first words spoken from the tomb on Easter ones that give us guidance in how to move us from belief in the truth of the resurrection to living in the power and joy of resurrection life.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you." (Mtt. 28:5-7)

The three commands given the two Marys and reiterated by Jesus a few minutes later apply to us as well:

1. "Do not be afraid"
2. "Come and see"
3. "Go and tell"

It is followed by that promise, that Jesus *is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.* Galilee was home to these disciples, their places of work. Don't you want to see Jesus in regular life— the places you live and work in?

DO NOT BE AFRAID

It is interesting that fear is the most frequently mentioned response to Jesus' resurrection. We can understand the terror of the guards with the earthquake and the sudden descent of the angel of the Lord. But for the women, the first words they hear from the angel and from Jesus are "do not be afraid." Fear also applies when we are startled, when we meet the unexpected and don't know what is going to happen, along with the feeling of disorientation we get. The spoken "fear not," my brother notes, has the effect of transforming ordinary fear into the "fear-of-the-Lord." "Fear-of-the-Lord" is fear "with the scary element deleted." But we are left with the wonder, the awe, the mystery, the feeling that we are most definitely not in control. This is more like reverential awe at what God is doing that is light-years beyond anything we can comprehend. The result of the angel's assuring "fear not" is, quoting vs. 8, *the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy.* "Afraid yet filled with joy," is a good description of entering into "the fear-of-the-Lord," where they are lost in the immenseness of what God is doing. In meeting Jesus, their first act was worship. It is in worship we begin to get some application.

This is where we too must start in applying the power of the resurrection in our lives. We must realize that what God is doing is WAY beyond what we can imagine both in our lives and the

affairs that concern us. This world keeps reducing things to human terms, to our abilities, and what we can control. Death is the ultimate manifestation of our limitations. Here, resurrection means that even death is not final. There is nothing in our lives, no limitation that, given to Jesus, He cannot bring resurrection to. But resurrection is totally out of our control. It will look different than anything we dreamed— yet, it is promised to be glorious.

We enter into this reverential awe through exposure to the greatness of God. That happens in worship, in meditating on the truths revealed in His Word, and in relating to Him in prayer. Time in Jesus' presence begins to restore our perspective from what we can do to a heart quickening sense of wonder at what He might be up to. Every Sunday as we gather, our worship should redirect our focus to the greatness of God so we begin to see the troubles and difficulties of our lives and this world in the perspective of resurrection power. Hope, peace, and joy is always restored when we get that right.

COME AND SEE

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago in my sermon on proofs of the resurrection, Christianity is fact-oriented, rooted in real history. It is not merely a system of belief, but experience and relationship with the living person of Jesus Christ. The resurrection accounts are not mystical visions— but flesh and blood experiences. John details the carefully folded grave clothes. Jesus shows his scars to the disciples and eats with them. Thomas puts his hand in Jesus' side and concludes, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn. 20:28). The resurrected Jesus is a real, living person with a body that is now no longer limited to this world's physical laws.

The "come and see" also applies to us. We are meant to experience the work and power of God in our lives. It is not theory but it can be lived reality. "Born again" is not just a nice religious concept but a reality attested to by millions upon millions of Christians. The old nature really is dead and gone and a brand new life springs forth within. The power Jesus talked about through the Holy Spirit is real. Yes, people are healed through the prayer of faith and miracles do happen because Jesus lives within us. And the list can go on and on.

Everything about Christianity begs to be tried in your own personal life. Your faith doesn't have to be complete or perfect. None of us is complete in that. And, even in the midst of questions and doubts on that first Easter, Jesus comes and offers what open hearts need to believe. It is still true today. All you need is an honestly seeking, open heart and Jesus will begin His work within you that will ultimately convince you that nothing could be more real.

GO AND TELL

These two Marys are immediately given a commission to spread the good news. While there are a number of personal appearances by Jesus in His resurrection body, the main way the message is to be spread is from one believer to another. Matthew emphasizes this by ending his Gospel with Jesus' giving His Great Commission,

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:19-

20)

Those early Christians took the “go and tell” with utmost seriousness and the Christian faith exploded across the Roman Empire. And, it continues to spread. Did you know that 175,000 people a day come to Christ? Christianity is still the fastest growing religion and the world’s largest religion with one-third of the world calling themselves Christians. In China, 50,000 a day are coming to know Christ through the house churches. In India, 40,000 a day are being converted. Within the a decade, Africa will have the greatest concentration of Christians in the world. It went from 10 million Christians in 1900 to over 360 million in 2000– 46% of its population. It is projected that within 20 years, the number will double, outnumbering North American Christians three to one. And even in Indonesia, 20% of the population is Christian. That’s the power of Christ’s resurrection in action.

A few weeks ago, we received a call from our seven-year-old granddaughter, Hannah. She was telling us she feels called by God to change her school. Now she is in the second grade and attends a Christian school, so we were a little surprised to hear the school needed changing. But Hannah said she is concerned because many of her classmates haven’t accepted Jesus into their hearts. So, she is forming a group to lead others to Jesus. They were going to go to the school officials to get permission to do Bible skits and dramas during recess to introduce others to Jesus. She said they had three in their group for sure, maybe five. Their first skit would be Jonah and the whale. She was going to make posters and her friend was going to ask their church for funds. Hannah said they also planned to write the White House and offer to come there and put on one of their skits “when they were a little older.”

Now, even if it’s not your granddaughter, you have to love the energy, the scope of the plans, and the passion to share the good news. She sees her friends that don’t have the life, the power, and the strength Jesus offers and wants to introduce them to it. Hannah has the “go and tell” part down. How are we doing? How much creativity and desire is there on our part to reach those who need to know about Jesus?

GOING BEFORE US

The angel’s instructions to “go and tell” are followed by specific directions. Jesus *is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him* (7). Jesus a few minutes later confirms those directions saying, *Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me* (10). Now, the disciples plus the two on the road to Emmaus do see Jesus later that day in Jerusalem. But the clear directions are to go to Galilee. Why Galilee?

Galilee is home for all these disciples. While Jerusalem was the spiritual center and much that happens in Acts is there, Jesus clearly wants these disciples to go home, back to their regular lives and “there they will see Me.” Here is the application to our ordinary living– our families, our workplace, and among our friends. But, nothing is the same because of Jesus’ promise that He is “going before you.” And, lest we be in doubt, the last sentence of this Gospel, the conclusion of the Great Commission is, *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*

Sometimes we tend to relegate our experience of the risen Christ to the spiritual centers of our lives— church, retreats, and special events. But Galilee is where we live and work and play. He wants to live in and through us in all of it. And in our uncertainty of what this looks like, we have His promise that He will be there ahead of us and we will see him there, in those places— often surprised by His presence in the midst of our living.

The promise of Jesus to go before us is, to me, a thrilling truth. In everything I do, if I'm walking in obedience to Him, He goes before me— an advance man, preparing the way. What a different perspective this gives when I approach everything— every encounter with a person, every meeting, every time of worship, every sermon— with the thought, “Jesus has gotten here first. What is He doing? He's already been at work here. What is He saying?” This takes a huge amount of pressure off us. Our job is not to make something happen but to discern what is already going on through Jesus and simply join in facilitating that.

This is a call for us to live alert to what the risen Christ has been and is doing. When we want to share Christ with a friend, in conversation be listening for the hungers, longings, and questions that maybe Jesus has already been at work stirring within them. In your workplace, can you discern situations where it might suggest Christ has at work? Try this in everything in your life. As we pray and listen to the Holy Spirit, we'll begin to be aware of new insights and understandings. It is an exciting way to live, simply following-up on what's already happening through the risen Christ.

CONCLUSION

Three commands— “Do not be afraid,” “Come and see,” and “Go and tell,”— followed by a promise, *He [Jesus] is going before you*, give us much of the practical application to our living this Easter. When we integrate these truths into our lives, no matter what comes our way, we can live within the peace of Jesus' abiding presence. And we know, that even the worst that life can throw at us is ultimately impotent to destroy what God has planned for us and our world.

Dallas Holmes captured this truth so well a number of years ago in his song, “Rise Again.” It is Jesus speaking in the song, words of relinquishment and assurance. “You can do your worst to me, but that isn't the end— there's resurrection and that means your blows only ended up facilitating God's glorious plans.” The same truth applies to us. Who are in Christ. Can you say it his morning?

“Go ahead, drive the nails into my hands
 laugh at me, where you stand
 Go ahead and say it isn't me,
 the day will come, and you will see.

Refrain

‘Cause I'll rise again, ain't no power on earth can keep me down.
 Yes, I'll rise again, death can't keep me in the ground.

“Go ahead and mock my name,
My love for you is still the same.
Go ahead and bury me,
very soon, I will be free.
Refrain

Have you known hurt, being made fun of, or being mocked? Some of you are in physical or great emotional pain this morning. And we all suffer from a terminal illness— we’re going to die. Apply these words of assurance and hope to your heart as the quartet sings them for us. The resurrection of Jesus makes all the difference on how we live because it means we have the power of resurrection life right now and the assurance of eternal life.