



from the desk of . . .

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Easter

TA DA!

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

A S.S. teacher had just finished telling her 3rd graders about how Jesus was crucified & placed in a tomb with a large stone sealing the opening.

Then, wanting to share the excitement of the resurrection, she asked ... "And what do you think Jesus' 1st words were when He came out of that tomb?"

Immediately one little girl shot her arm into the air & leaped to her feet & shouted excitedly ...

"I know, I know, I know!"

"Excellent," said the teacher, "Tell us, Polly, what did Jesus say?"

Extending her arms high into the air she said ... "Ta Da!"

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was indeed for the world a "Ta Da!" moment. It's been the central theme of our faith for 2,000 years. It's our hope. Paul stated ...

"If Christ has not been raised from death, then we have nothing to preach & you have nothing to believe."

(1 Corinthians 15:14)

Jesus promised ... "Because I live, you also will live."

(John 14:19)

At some point before daybreak on Easter morning Jesus came out of the tomb & into our lives with power & victory. Easter is the great celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead! ... Ta Da!

One of the 1st liturgies that was said in the early Church is still practiced today. It's the wonderful acclamation that's recited throughout Christendom every Easter Sunday.

The Pastor announces ... "He is risen!"

To which the people respond ... "He is risen indeed!"

Now I'm one who really appreciates liturgical aids to our worship experience ... especially those that have been around for 100's & 100's of years. But they need to be more than simply words. It's great to proclaim ...

"He is risen!" ... But how do we know that it's true? ...

Bible Scholar, Charlie Moule, (X) has written ...

"The birth & rapid rise of the Christian Church remains an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the one & only possible explanation to be offered ... the resurrection."

The truth of the resurrection ignited the early Church. (The Acts 2:41) It was the main point of Peter's 1st sermon on the day of Pentecost.

"God raised Jesus from death, setting him free from its power, because it was impossible that death should hold him prisoner." (The Acts 2:24)

"God has raised this very Jesus from death, & we are all witnesses to this fact." (The Acts 2:32)

Last week at our Deacons' meeting we professed our faith in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead with the words of the Apostles' Creed.

Listen to the middle paragraph ...

"I believe in ... Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, & buried; he descended into hell; the 3rd day he rose again from the dead."

The resurrection is paramount to our faith. Paul put it this way ... "If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is a delusion." (1 Corinthians 15:17)

The Apostle Paul, a 1st century witness, records for us the heart of the Easter story. It's the Gospel message. It's what we profess & believe. And if it didn't happen then we're simply wasting our time here.

Listen now to Good News as recorded by Paul, to the Church in Corinth, & to the Church here in Rolling Meadows.

Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

I passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures; that he was buried and that he was raised to life three days later, as written in the Scriptures; that he appeared to Peter and then to all twelve apostles. Then he appeared to more than five hundred of his followers at once, most of whom are still alive, although some have died. Then he appeared to James, and afterward to all the apostles.

Last of all he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen

The Apostle Paul records that at least 515 of Jesus' followers saw the risen Lord in the 40 days between His resurrection & His ascension to Heaven. Luke briefly comments about that. He writes of that time ...

"Jesus appeared to them many times in ways that proved beyond doubt that he was alive." (The Acts 1:3)

Kathy & I like to watch movies on the Hallmark Channel. We watch them because the world is stressful enough ... & with Hallmark movies things always work out at the end. We know that going in.

We like happy endings.

But the one thing we dislike about Hallmark movies is as soon as everybody gets together, & the guy & gal kiss ... the movie is over. We'd like to see some of their happy times together. That's what we've waited for.

And to be honest, there's a part of me that wishes the same thing with Jesus' resurrection account. We have 89 chapters in the 4 Gospels, 84 of them take us up through Jesus' crucifixion ... which means that only 5 chapters deal with the resurrection & beyond. We've watched Jesus struggle. I would like more of His triumph. Matthew, Mark, & Luke have a combined 14 verses that talk of the resurrected Jesus after Easter.

John presents more narrative, but it's only 4 post resurrection appearances, & the 1st 2 are on Easter:

- Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene as she stands crying at the empty tomb
- Jesus appears to all the disciples, except Thomas, in the Upper Room late Sunday evening

Then a week later ...

- Jesus appears to Thomas, along with the other disciples, again in the Upper Room

And then finally ...

- in a postscript to his Gospel, John tells us that Jesus appeared to 7 disciples: Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, & 2 that are unnamed ...
& had breakfast with them (John 21:1-14)

If the resurrection is paramount to our faith, if it's the key ingredient, if it's what separates Christianity from all the other religions ... why didn't John share more of these encounters in his Gospel?

Well, the simple answer to that question is that wasn't the aim of his Gospel.

John sums up his intention with these words ...

"In his disciples' presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, & that through your faith in him you may have life." (John 20:30-31)

In other words, John isn't writing a history book as we know history books ... rather he's writing theology ... he wants to awaken our faith ... he's out to get us!

So he has a specific reason for recording these post resurrection appearances. He's been selective with everything he's written. John's Gospel concludes with this statement. "Now, there are many other things that Jesus did. If they were all written down one by one, I suppose that the whole world could not hold the books that would be written." (John 21:25)

John's saying ... "I've given you enough in these writings to believe that Jesus Christ is the risen Messiah, & how knowing that will encourage your faith."

This morning I want to focus on the 1st 3 encounters with the risen Lord that John records in his Gospel.

As I was reading them again & again this week it seems to me that each specific event shows a struggle that we all deal with, & how, through an rendezvous with Jesus Christ, our faith can be encouraged.

And we're going to start with Mary Magdalene.

Now I want us to do a kind of Bible Study this morning with this. If you brought your Bible, terrific! If not, take the Bible out of the rack in front of you, & turn to John 20:11 ... page #1297.

If there's any story in all of literature more poignant than the account of Mary Magdalene's meeting with Jesus in the Garden on Easter morning ... I don't know what it is. But to understand it we have to put ourselves in the frame of mind of the disciples between the afternoon of Jesus' crucifixion & the morning of His resurrection ... & that's not easy to do.

Our experience of Easter is one of faith & joy ... bright colors, Spring, etc. But in the days between Jesus' death & resurrection, those who were closest to Him were filled with the deepest disillusionment & gloom.

They had been told of Christ's resurrection, (Matthew 20:19), but they hadn't understood it. (Luke 18:34)

So, when Jesus died ... in a sense, they died too.

For 3 years this diverse body of men & women had followed Jesus in His itinerant preaching ministry; & if they had any faith at all,
it was totally wrapped up in Him.

They didn't understand much of what He said. But they tried to, & what they did grasp they believed. (John 2:11) And then, when Jesus died, their faith died.
They had believed once ... but now it was over.

Well, faith may have died, & hope may have died, but ... love hadn't died. And we see that lived out best in the actions of Mary Magdalene.

Scripture tells us that Jesus had saved her from something terrible, & she loved Him for it. (Luke 8:2) Those who have been forgiven much ... love much. (Luke 7:47)
And that was certainly true of Mary.

Again, we're not going to understand the account of Christ's appearance to Mary at the tomb unless we recognize that it was love, & only love, that brought her there. On 3 separate occasions we read that she was among the women who witnessed the crucifixion.

(Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25)

She saw Jesus' beaten & bloody body. She watched the spikes being driven into His hands & feet.

She heard His terrible cries ... "I am thirsty." (John 19:28)
"My God, my God, why did you abandon me?" (Matthew 27:46)

And then came the darkness (Luke 23:44-45),
the earthquake (Matthew 27:51), & finally, His death (John 19:30).

Who would be able to stomach all of that? It would have been difficult for the cruelest of men. But Mary witnessed it all. What kept her there? ... Was it curiosity? No. It wasn't faith. Nor was it hope for a miracle. Mary was there only because she loved Jesus & consequently would not leave until the very end.

But even then her loved lived on. And though Jesus was dead, Mary still wished to do something for Him. She determined to buy spices, which she did before the shops closed for the Passover Sabbath. And then she watched as Jesus' body was removed from the cross, & followed as it was hurriedly placed in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. (Mark 15:47)

Sunday morning, she, along with "Joanna, & Mary the mother of James, & several other women" (Luke 24:10) made their way to the tomb to perform their final services. They knew that a large stone had been placed over the entrance to the burial cave.

"On the way they said to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'" (Mark 16:3-4) They hoped that someone might be there to move it, but they weren't really thinking clearly at that point. They were only concerned with anointing His body.

(Luke 24:1)

One of the struggles that we all deal with is grief. And certainly Mary is exhibit "A" as she stands at the tomb crying. She's alone; totally deserted. At which point she looks into the tomb with tear-filled eyes, & sees 2 angels, who ask, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"She answered, 'They have taken my Lord away, & I do not know where they put him!'" (John 20:13) Do you see the significance of that reply? ... Mary's so upset that she's not even startled by angels, & she turns away from them, & sees Jesus ... but doesn't recognize Him ... she thought He was the gardener.

At which point she states one of the most touching sentences in all literature. "If you took him away, sir, tell me where you have put him, & I will go & get him."
(John 20:15)

Here is the heart of a good woman. Here is love.

Mary turns her back on Him ... she's not interested in the gardener. At which point "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'

"She turned toward him & said in Hebrew, 'Rabboni!' (This means 'Teacher.')" (John 20:16)

Mary responded to Jesus' saying her name.

Remember Jesus' promise to those that are of His flock. "My sheep listen to my voice." (John 10:27) Jesus doesn't say ... "My sheep might hear my voice" ... or, "my sheep should hear my voice" ... or, "my sheep could hear my voice."

Jesus' words, His promise is crystal clear ...
 "My sheep listen to my voice."

In that moment, when Jesus spoke her name, Mary experienced her own resurrection. Her faith had died ... but now it came leaping from its' tomb. Her hope had evaporated ... but now it gathered again around the person of the Lord.

What happens when tragedy comes into your life? It may be the death of a close friend or loved one. It may be suffering. It may even be just extremely bad news. But whatever it is ...
 your faith & hope has been fatally shaken.

At that point listen for Jesus ... "Brian, Lorna, Sue, Rodney, Pat, Sara, Bill, Linda" ... whatever your name. In that moment faith will be born in you & hope will triumph.

"Faith, hope, & love; & the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13) So, grief is overcome by the voice of Jesus.

The 2nd incident deals with fear. Let's go down to verse 19. "It was late that Sunday evening, & the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities."

(John 20:19)

The disciples had gone through the most traumatic week of their lives. For 3 years they had followed Jesus in & out of 100's of villages in Palestine & had come to know Him & love Him.

They watched Him do miracles. (Luke 8:25) They heard Him teach. (Matthew 5:1-2) They knew that the religious leaders were growing hostile toward Him. (Matthew 12:14) They were concerned about His going to Jerusalem.

Still they were unprepared for what happened.

Suddenly, there was an arrest at night in the Garden of Gethsemane, & they scattered in fear. (Mark 14:50) And then when these frightened men finally gathered together several days later, they learned that the worst had happened. Jesus had been tried & crucified.

Jesus was now dead & they were afraid. (John 20:19)

Philip, born with Down syndrome, attended a 5th grade S.S. class with other 10-year-old boys & girls. Typical of that age, the children didn't readily accept Philip with his differences, & often made fun of him.

One Easter Sunday the teacher brought plastic eggs to class ... those colorful ones that break open so that something can be put inside, & then snapped back together again. It was a beautiful morning so the teacher took her class outside & told them to find something that represented Easter & new life & put it inside their eggs.

After running around on the Church's property in wild confusion for about 10 minutes, the teacher brought the kids back into the classroom & placed their eggs on the table.

Surrounded by the children, the teacher began opening the eggs one-by-one.

There were pretty flowers, leaves, a butterfly.

Then one was opened, revealing nothing inside. The children exclaimed ... "That's stupid!

Somebody didn't do their assignment right!"

Then Philip spoke up ... "That's mine!"

And the children turned on him ... "Oh, Philip, you never do anything right! There's nothing in there!"

But Philip insisted ... "I did too do it!"

To which the teacher said ...

"I don't understand. The egg is empty."

"I know," said Philip. "The tomb was empty!" ...

Philip passed not long after that from an infection that most kids would have simply shrugged off.

At the funeral, this class of 10-year-olds marched up to the front, not with flowers, but together with their S.S. teacher, & each one of them placed at the foot of Philip's casket ... an empty plastic Easter egg.

The disciples were gathered behind locked doors because they were afraid. Jesus had been crucified, & they were scared about what might happen next. Then Jesus came to them & spoke words of comfort ...

"Peace be with you." (John 20:19)

Fear is overcome by experiencing the presence of Jesus. Remember that "where 2 or 3 come together in His name, Jesus is there with them." (Matthew 18:20) Jesus is present when believers gather in His name.

Jesus is in their midst ... & He says, "Peace be with you."

Jesus was telling them that because of His death & resurrection there was nothing to fear.

"Now that we have been put right with God through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1)

But there's more ... there's the peace of God. That's what Scripture is referring to when it teaches ...

"Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart. And God's peace, which is far beyond human understanding, will keep your hearts & minds safe in union with Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

Fear can cripple us. It can make us irrational. (It did with the disciples.) And at those times we need to remember that Jesus is actually present with us. He's promised that ... & with His presence will come peace.

It's a peace that passes all human understanding.

So, grief was overcome by the voice of Jesus. And fear was overcome by the presence of Jesus.

And 3^{rdly}, there's doubt. Jump down to verse 24.

The disciple Thomas has received the rather unflattering title for the last 2,000 years of ... "doubting Thomas." In fact ... "doubting Thomas" ... has even entered into the English language dictionary. We call someone who doesn't believe something ...
 a "doubting Thomas."

But remember that Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when they 1st saw the risen Lord. (John 20:24) We don't know why ... but, as a result, he didn't benefit from what they had seen. He couldn't rationally comprehend that Jesus had really risen ...

it was something totally outside of his experience.

"Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands & put my finger on those scars & my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25)

Our faith is not an unreasonable faith. It's not a blind faith. Our faith is based on a firm foundation.

And what is that firm foundation? ... Jesus is alive!

And a week later when Jesus appeared before him, with His arms outstretched, Thomas makes the greatest testimony of faith in Christ found in all of the Gospels ...

"My Lord & my God!" (John 20:28)

I appreciate the story about the man walking down the street when he noticed in a store window a beautiful painting of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

He stood there gazing at the picture for the longest time, then he realized that a little boy was standing beside him. He patted the little boy on the head & said, "Son, what does that picture mean?"

The little boy replied ... "Don-cha know? That there man is Jesus, & the woman that's crying is His mother, & them others is Roman soldiers. They killed Him."

The man smiled & then started walking away. In a few moments he heard footsteps, & turned & saw that it was the little boy, who had come running after the man. All out of breath, the boy said excitedly ...

"Mr., Mr., I forgot to tell you ... He didn't stay dead!"

Ta Da! ... that's why we're here this morning ...
Jesus didn't stay dead!

Tradition tells us that Thomas took the Gospel to India. And after several years of fruitful missionary work & founding a # of churches, he was confronted by a group of Brahmin priests who feared that the Christian faith would eclipse Hinduism.

They demanded that Thomas deny his faith in Christ.

The onetime doubter stated ... "I will never, ever, renounce Christ." Thomas was committed enough to die for his Lord & his God. And he did. Thomas was martyred. He was speared to death.

He went from doubt to total committed faith.

An atheist named Lee Strobel was also a doubter ...
but came to faith. His pilgrimage is now out in a movie ...
"The Case For Christ." He writes ...

"To be honest, I didn't want to believe that Christianity
could radically transform someone's character & values.
It was much easier to raise doubts & manufacture
outrageous objections."

(X) "I went to a psychologist friend & said if 500 people
claimed to see Jesus after he died it was just a
hallucination. He said hallucinations are an individual
event. If 500 people have the same hallucination,
that's a bigger miracle than the resurrection."

Through his investigative research Lee Strobel
encountered Jesus Christ.

Jesus encounters each person individually.

Mary simply needed to hear the voice of Jesus ... &
her grief was healed. The disciples needed to receive
the peace of Jesus ... & their fear was released. And
Thomas needed to see ... to receive a touch from the
risen Christ ... which released his unbelief.

Each of us has different needs ... we each ask
different questions ... but there's only one answer ...

Jesus Christ the risen Lord. Ta Da!

He is risen! ... (*He is risen indeed!*)

MARANA THA