

31 March 2024 – Easter Sunday!

Acts 10:34-43 / 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 / Mark 16:1-8

What began with palms ended on Friday with the tomb. What began with love was touched by death. What was understood as an end continues through God's love and power. The women come in early morning as a somber procession, bringing scented oil and clean sheets to prepare the body according to their custom (since it was originally entombed after the Sabbath had begun on Friday evening without proper anointing). They come with a kind of naïve confidence, having no idea how they are going to move the massive stone that blocks the entrance to the tomb. Even though they have no clear plan, they do what is expected – do what they are called upon to do – they show up.

And they are surprised when they see that the stone is already out of the way. Maybe they have a moment of relief... “Thank goodness! We had no hope of moving that boulder ourselves – what luck!” But their surprise turns quickly to alarm when confronted by the young man explaining that the body is gone – raised up – going ahead of them to Galilee.

Say what?! This can't be – it is beyond belief – beyond hope. Jesus lives – really? And overwhelmed by the whole experience – both terrified and amazed – they flee. They keep quiet about the whole experience – not even discussing it with one another – because they are afraid...

They had arrived knowing that their beloved Jesus, the Saviour, had died. Their future seemed lost – it had slipped through their fingers like so much sand. They arrived knowing they could anoint his body but uncertain about what they would do next – what would be left to do after that? And then, even the ritual of tending to the body of the one they loved was stolen from them. They cry out in their hearts, “What do we do now?”

They do what we do... we wait, beyond eternity – we hope, beyond every hope we've ever had – we trust, beyond belief in a God who cannot – will not – absolutely did not – leave it there...

So here we are... no longer at the foot of the cross upon which Jesus hangs, no longer in the tomb... today we stand proclaiming the gospel with Peter... *Jesus Christ is Lord of all. ...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power... he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him... They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day... And we stand proclaiming with Paul... Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures... he was buried, and he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...*

For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is the foundational moment when death is swallowed up in victory, and it becomes for him the definitive message of the gospel. He makes little reference to the life of Jesus (not even the scant notes Peter outlines in the passage from Acts) and no reference to his birth. For Paul everything hinges on three days – Good Friday to Easter. It is for him the central and life-defining position from which he lives – the only position from which he envisions any believer living. The cross – representative of the death and resurrection of Jesus – heals our relationship with God and our relationships with others.

Both Peter and Paul articulate the heart of the Christian gospel: *Christ died for our sins / everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*

After having really died – remember, we were there on Friday when it happened. Now Jesus is raised from death into new life – the Christ – raised by God (not by some mysterious folks who raided the tomb to freak out the women when they arrived early in the morning). God was the one responsible for that raising.

Peter says, *John announced...* and *...all the prophets testify*. Paul says, *...in accordance with the scriptures*. This might be a mystery, but it is a well documented one. Not only validated by prophets and scripture but by those to whom the risen Christ appeared: Cephas (another way of referring to Peter), the Twelve, over five hundred disciples, James the brother of Jesus and to the rest of the apostles. Paul is adamant that he didn't make all this up. He delivered to others what he had first received – and whether he proclaims it or those who have heard him proclaim it, this gospel is what we have come to believe. All who receive the good news are to preach and testify – to pass it along – to share it from person to person, from age to age.

In the Acts passage, Peter is passionate but not quite as personal as Paul sounds in his account from First Corinthians when he identifies himself as the least of the apostles – one untimely born. It is a phrase that we might misunderstand – it gets lost in translation. Paul contends that he doesn't deserve to be among those to whom the Risen Christ appears. “Untimely born” makes it sound like he was just born at the wrong time – as though he was born too late to be among the twelve. But the word that Paul uses to describe himself is a premature birth – a birth fraught with danger – one that even today might result in death. At the time it would have been considered the epitome of weakness. In a world where only fifty percent of full-term births reached the age of ten, a premature baby had little to no chance of survival. This is the same term used to describe a stillbirth. It is as though Paul considers that his life before Christ was really death and that there is more than one resurrection story being told here.

Paul so firmly believes the resurrection because he was as good as dead when Christ appeared to him. He was killing the church of God. He was doing everything in his power to end the Jesus movement. He was a murderer and a persecutor and completely unworthy of God's grace. And God chose him anyway.

By his own admission, Paul was the unlikeliest of apostles, not because he considered himself inadequately religious, but rather because he had tried to destroy God's church. He remains overwhelmed by God's grace – amazed that God could forgive him for such atrocities. *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*

And he returns that gratitude in service to God. He notes how hard he labors for this gospel. He was the least likely candidate for God to choose. If God can do something good through Paul the murderer, surely that God has the power to work wonders in the lives of others. The fact that the Corinthians have believed the scandal of the resurrection demonstrates that they too have been touched by God's grace.

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you – unless you have come to believe in vain.

The last word of each of those statements in Paul’s message really stuck with me –confounded me. What does it mean to believe in vain? What does it mean that God’s grace, afforded to Paul and thereby to us, has not been in vain?

I think it means that our belief in the gospel – that Christ died for our sins, was buried and was raised by God to new life – cannot be empty rhetoric. It isn’t just something we say – a creed that never touches us. Christ died because of the fickleness of humanity – because we abandoned him to crucifixion – because we couldn’t see and comprehend the depth and breadth of God’s love. Christ died for our sins. He really died – he was buried and was entombed. Christ was raised and was seen by many who went on to share the experience of his new life which in turn offered them new life.

I think it also means that whatever we are – whatever we have done or left undone, God’s grace is not misplaced when it rests upon us. We may well be the “untimely born” who stir in the pews or speak from the pulpit.

Clarence Jordan, a leading force behind what is now Habitat for Humanity International, is described by one theologian as a hero and a twentieth-century saint because of his conviction expressed in these words: *“The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church... Are we continuing to partner with God today – transforming despair into hope, apathy into compassion, hate into love, and death into new life?”*¹

Seeing the resurrected Christ and experiencing divine grace changed the trajectory of Paul’s life. Grace emerges from resurrection – experiencing or encountering Jesus, changes lives – Paul’s life and our lives. We cannot go on with “life as normal” when we know that God does not leave us in the despair of Good Friday but remains always in our midst as the Risen Christ. And though we may feel, like Paul, that we are unworthy of this life-changing revelation, may we also, like Paul, work tirelessly to extend God’s grace to others. My hope – my prayer – my belief – is that the women who fled from the empty tomb eventually allowed amazement to overcome terror – that they came to experience the grace of Christ Risen and lived renewed lives as Easter People just as the lyrics of this song proclaim...

*Every morning is Easter morning from now on!
Every day's resurrection day, the past is over and gone!
Goodbye guilt, goodbye fear, good riddance! Hello Lord, Hello sun!
I am one of the Easter People! My new life has begun!*²

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/03/practice-resurrection-progressive-christian-theology-for-easter/>

² *Every Morning is Easter Morning*; words & music: Donald S. Marsh & Richard K. Avery; © 1972 Hope Publishing Co.