

GOD RAISED HIM ON THE THIRD DAY

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Camrose United Church
Easter Sunday
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Matthew 28:1-10 - The empty tomb
Acts 10:34-43 - Gentiles hear the gospel

These biblical stories are maps of our spiritual life, and so the story of the resurrection that is so central to the Christian tradition is perhaps one of the most crucial and central maps of spiritual life for all of us. In that sense, we are called to imagine ourselves living through this story with these women who went to the tomb that first Easter morning. The first thing they experienced as they arrived at the tomb was confusion.

We have done this so many times—Easter Sunday morning with Easter bonnets and eggs and bunnies and all of that. It's all so light and wonderful, and we wish each other a happy Easter. It is easy for us to miss those crucial stages of the first Easter experience. It didn't start out with "Oh, good, let's put on our Easter bonnets and have a parade because Jesus is raised." It started off with these two women who were at the tomb to do something that was quite routine—to anoint the body. But the body wasn't there; the stone had been rolled away. There had been an earthquake; something earth-shattering had occurred. Their initial response was one of confusion. They didn't know what was going on. It wasn't confusion about some little thing. This was the centre of their whole lives. This is what happened over the previous three years of following Jesus and his teachings, and what they had hoped for. No one could have imagined the horrific ending and the traumatic time they had been through, including the crucifixion. And now it was a time for some healing, but that wasn't what was happening. Who knew what was happening?

It is important for us to feel and identify with the confusion they felt because it is part of the cycle of our spiritual lives, too. It is the life of living in Christ, of being here whether it's Easter morning or any other Sunday, or whether it's being part of the church in any other aspect of its life, or whether it's our devotional life and our endeavours to live faithfully. It's not routine. It's not an ordinary, conventional, status quo kind of thing even though there is a very strong tendency for it to become so--to become so complacent, so benign, so ineffective, so ordinary. But really, at the heart of the Christian faith, it's anything but ordinary. It has a way, if we allow it, of surprising us and confusing us because it's not just the same old, same old, over and over again.

There is a cycle, there is a cyclical nature, and that's why we celebrate Easter in the spring. In winter everything seems dead. We even plant grain in the spring and it just lies there under ground for a long time before it starts to sprout and then grow and move toward the harvest. So there is a cyclical nature, and we can live through that death and

resurrection in our own lives--the times when life seems to dry up, and then miraculously something breaks us out of that dryness and life comes again. But that is never routine because there is always newness. It's not always exactly the same over and over again; there's always newness to it. There is reason for the confusion and disorientation that happens when that spiritual moment comes into our lives. The reason is that this truth about life, this sacred presence, this energy of the holy that moves and acts in our lives, is mystery. We can't understand it. It's not irrational in the sense that it's less than rational. It's beyond the rational; it's much more than we can understand in our minds.

And so we come face to face with mystery, and we might say "Oh! What's going on here? This isn't what I expected." These moments in our lives are just like those women experienced when they came to the tomb. They aren't moments when things are falling apart and going wrong. Often it's exactly the opposite. That's when God is moving, and something wonderful and new is about to happen. But we don't feel the wonderfulness right away. We begin just feeling confused, and indeed tempted to turn away. That's where we need the courage to go on. And it takes a lot of courage because, just as the women stayed even in the face of confusion, what comes next is not something that makes it easier. What comes next is the fear.

Fear is mentioned three or four times in that one brief passage--the angel telling the women not to fear, the women going away with their fear along with their joy. But the fear is there, and Jesus has to tell them again not to be afraid. Well, they were afraid. It was terrifying when it happened. Now there is one kind of terror that anyone feels who really has the sense of being face to face with God; that's the imagery in the picture of the angels. The angels were like snow, like white light shining, and that's always a Biblical symbol of sacred presence. And when we come face to face with sacred presence it's frightening in that awesome sort of way. The Bible talks about the fear of the Lord. Some of us have a lot of trouble understanding that, but there is a place of awesome fear in the presence of the sacred.

However, it was more than that for those women, and it is more than that for us. When this faith is seen for what it truly is, it's not benign--it's anything but that--it's not just comforting and easy. We are speaking of a military-occupied zone with one of the most brutal armies in all of history who executed people with a kind of torture that was so unimaginable we cannot recreate it. Mel Gibson did recreate some of it in "The Passion of the Christ," but for many people it is too horrifying to watch even though it is still nowhere near the full depth of the horror of a crucifixion. Jesus had lived truth and life and freedom so profoundly that it threatened the regime, and they had brutally murdered him and were watching for the disciples. So it was a terrifying time in which to live. You would feel your guts crunch when one of those Roman centurions just walked by.

So that, too, is part of the terror those women felt when suddenly there was this angel saying Jesus is alive. What is going to happen is the backlash of that power system. The rulers who desperately in their pathological despair needed to kill him. He comes back to life. When we start talking about him being back to life, how much more terrible is that backlash going to be? We live that today if we really hear the gospel, because the gospel isn't just comforting and pastoral. The gospel is also challenging and prophetic, and there is power in the world today, run by greed and violence and hatred, that is challenged to the core by the real truth about Christianity. If you and I walk out that door and say it

loudly enough in this world to be heard by the ones who are in power, then we really have something to fear, we really have something to fear.

I remember Jim Strathdee telling me about singing the words of the “Magnificat” and the words that Jesus spoke in the synagogue: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” Translating that into Spanish and singing it in Latin American countries such as Nicaragua, the people knew that if they stood up in public, even in church, and said those words they would be lying dead on the street in the morning. That’s much more real than the life we live. So if we really hear the gospel there is a fear, and we all need to live through that fear with those women, to know what it is to proclaim this kind of truth in this kind of world. And so both the fear and the confusion are real.

The women then go to tell the disciples about what they have just experienced, and the reading from Peter talks about afterwards as the disciples go to tell others, Peter preaching to gentiles. We live that with them, too, as we leave here asking ourselves how to proclaim this truth to our world, for it is not heard by the world around us in the same way in every generation. We need to articulate that faith from our own hearts, from our own minds, from our own lives, in a new way in every generation. Part of living in Christ is learning how, for goodness sake, to say this so the world around us can hear it?

The announcements this morning mention a faith talk coming up in a week and a half, and I hope many of you will participate in that because it’s real front-line living of our faith in the sense of articulating it. It’s the United Church of Canada rewriting its statement of faith. Now, that’s not a benign little thing to do. It is a profound task for the United Church of Canada right across the country to rethink what it is we believe, what we’re about as a church, what we have to say to this world; and to put that into words and have a conversation about it across the whole country. The first stage happened a couple of years ago when we got together and did some study and reflection, and sent that into the national office which drafted a statement and sent it back to the churches for study and a response. In the summer of 2006 a final draft will go to General Council. The present draft is about ten pages long, and there are copies for you to pick up on your way home. You are urged to read and think about it, and to come out on the 5th or whenever it is to join in the conversation so we can reflect together about how it is we put this faith of ours into words.

Imagine those women, Mary and Mary, going back to the disciples. What did they say? What does one say? How does one describe what has happened? And then Peter, off preaching that word; how does he describe what has happened? How does one say it? And we have something to say, although we don’t say it loudly and clearly enough. So there is a challenge in that, too.

And then, finally, there comes the message from the angel, and Jesus reiterates it. He says he is going ahead into Galilee. We don’t have Jesus just gone, risen and out of the world. What we have is the Christ in the world, so that we now live not on the basis of somebody’s story from long ago who experienced Christ in the world and God’s presence. Rather, we now live encountering the sacred in our world every day. The challenge is to learn how to recognize the Christ in the people with whom we interact, in the events of our world, in the beauty of nature, all around us. We need to learn how to

encounter the sacred. We are living in a time when people who have a reawakening interest in spirituality and in organized religion, people who are coming into the church either for the first time or only after long absence, are not looking for some status quo affirmation of a nice, moral way of living. They are people who are now looking for, who are hungry for, a way to encounter the sacred as a living presence in our world. As we engage the sacred, as we experience the Christ in the world, we then live that faith. It then becomes a living faith--not just a memory, not just a story from long ago, but a living faith that we live together as individuals and as a faith community and as a world.

We live through that cycle in our everyday lives with the confusion that comes whenever the sacred moves with some newness in our lives, and with the fear when we realize its meaning and realize that it calls us to live that truth in this world. And then that presence—the sense of encountering the sacred in the world, and of finding words to say what it means to live that cycle of death and resurrection over and over again in our daily lives just as Mary and Mary lived through it on that first Easter Sunday—that presence becomes a model for our spiritual lives and we learn how to truly live resurrection.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor