

Mark 16:1-11
April 12, 2009

South Plains
Easter

Failure Overcome and Overwhelmed

Why do the women run? Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome all see the empty tomb, and they hear that Jesus is alive. Yet they flee in terror and amazement. Why? They are running away from the good news, the best news – that Jesus is not dead but risen from the grave. They not only fail to realize the good news of the gospel, they also fail to carry out the angel's simple instructions to tell Peter and the other disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. Now, we know that their initial failures will be eventually overcome because the story gets out. The disciples come to faith; and the young church begins worshipping on resurrection day, the first day of every week. But, the initial response of these disciples is to disobey and to run from the resurrection in fear.

On one level, it's a very human and understandable reaction to God's incredible work. Last week when our confirmands met with the session, they were asked about John Calvin. They re-told the story of how Calvin intended to spend only one night in Geneva, Switzerland before continuing a journey. However, William Farel confronted Calvin in his bedroom and demanded his help in making Geneva a truly Protestant city. You see the city council of Geneva had recently decided to follow the lead of Martin Luther and reform the

church. Farel was offering young Calvin the opportunity not only to reform the church, but to help change the whole city, to convert Geneva into a city with Christian government and Christian morals, a top to bottom conversion. Calvin had other plans for his life. He said, "No thank you," to Farel. He was running to the safety of his study where he would make a name for himself as an author and scholar. Calvin could not imagine what incredible work God was doing in Geneva any more than those women could imagine what God was doing with an empty tomb. Before Geneva could be converted, God had to convert Calvin. In the same way, these three women had to undergo a conversion.

Before we reflect on the meaning of the resurrection for us today, it will pay us to think about why the initial impact of the resurrection was so frightening for the two Marys and Salome.

They were understandably disoriented and they were right to be afraid. Their disorientation is obvious. They expected to find the corpse of a friend. They were prepared for that. They knew how to deal with death. Women know about such things so they had bought spices and the other ingredients necessary to dispel the stink of death. The body needed to be washed of all the gore and bodily fluids that accompany a violent death. They would clean it up, anoint it with those medicinal herbs and re-wrap the body.

But the tomb was empty. No body was there. The stone had been rolled away as though grave-robbers had beaten them to the tomb. Instead, they found an angel, a heavenly apparition dressed in white telling them not to be alarmed. "Jesus has been raised," he says. At that point, I suspect the women found their minds moving from a state of disorientation to disturbing and daunting fear. This was not the night, but the morning of the living dead. When the dead don't stay in their coffins, the living are right to be afraid.

But, let's look it another way. Suppose the angel had said, "Don't be alarmed. You will always have the memories of your time with Jesus. Don't worry. The good he did by healing the sick and telling the gospel of God will live on. The story of Jesus will be written down, and his influence will be remembered forever." If the angel had said that, the women might have been disappointed and perhaps even angry not to see the body, but they would not have been afraid. Of course, neither would they have had a reason to be very excited.

They were not afraid of death and its sorrows, but of life. They were afraid because life can be more demanding than death, even more fearful.

The Apostles' Creed says we believe in the resurrection of the body. In that sense, Christians are sensualists. We believe in the significance of life that we see and feel and smell and taste and hear. We believe in the goodness of the material world created by God the

Father Almighty. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God confirmed the goodness of created life, and raised the ante in the game of life.

What do I mean by that? First of all, the resurrection of the body means that life's questions are open-ended. They are not resolved by the grave. Children cannot wait to be teenagers. Teenagers cannot wait to grow into adults. I always thought that achieving adulthood would resolve all my uncertainties about what I would do with my life. As an adult all my anxieties would be settled, and my life would be on course permanently. There's a little bit of that fantasy involved in going through the process of confirmation. We imagine that when one's faith is confirmed, when we assume an adult role in the life of the church, the questions and doubts will fade away. We'll know what we believe and get on with the rest of the Christian life.

Alas, it seldom works that way. Adult faith will confront the problem of evil in our own hearts and homes. Adult faith will probe the mystery of God and begin to sense the vastness of God's universe, the incomprehensibility of God's way with the world. Adult faith is a little like Guy Noir, the private detective on Prairie Home Companion who is trying to find the answers to life's persistent questions. Adult faith will have to learn to live without all the answers. That can be frightening until we discover that God can be trusted beyond the answers, beyond what we can know and understand. That "beyond" is resurrection.

exactly what he means, but I know there's a danger in some kinds of spirituality. We can retreat into good ideas about God and sweet sentiments about the attitude we ought to have toward others while we ignore the hard, physical and institutional work of loving one another. You know the old saying: We can be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. Telling the story of the resurrection of Jesus and repeating faith in the resurrection of our bodies puts muscle and nerve into Christianity.

It's so easy either to forget the resurrection by shoving it to the back of the doctrinal closet, or to spiritualize it until it has become a worn out symbol, like the peeling numbers on your mailbox. Yes, it's important, but we use the word so often that it's lost its punch.

Paul has a cure for resurrection blahs. He ties the freshness and novelty of the Christian life, not only to resurrection but also to death and baptism. Here's how it works in the letter to the Romans. Paul reminds us that baptism is not just about the positives, washing away our sins and receiving the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells his disciples that his baptism will be a baptism of death. We have been buried with Christ, says Paul, in a baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from death, we also might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

Christ's resurrection is our guarantee of new life starting today. We have new confidence and assurance. Not a new set of rules, but a new energy to become the

In the second place, when resurrection confirms the goodness of created life, it means that everything we do and decide in this earthly life really does matter. It makes a difference whether we kiss our spouse goodbye before leaving in the morning. It makes a difference whether we smile at our neighbor and genuinely wish them a good morning. Someone told me last week that he has realized how much better his life is when he takes the time to listen to the people he encounters in his job. He's paid to tell them what he knows and what his company wants them to know. But, he's discovering the benefits of listening. He is affirming the importance of their lives. The resurrection affirms that what we feel and do with our living bodies matters to our Creator.

This can catch us up short. It means that when we abuse the life we've been given, the consequences are not short-term, but eternal. But, it also means that the tiniest act of kindness, especially kindness that affects someone's life here and now, that kindness lasts and lasts. We can't all save the world. Each of us, however, has opportunities to help someone. God values our efforts and so should we.

Finally, by raising the ante on the game of life, the resurrection of Jesus is a story worth re-telling again and again. We tell it because it is so easy to forget that life is open-ended and that what we do matters. My seminary classmate writes on his blog that he is a spiritual person now and no longer interested in religion. I don't know

person we know God intends. Not another guilt trip about our failures, but forgiveness that comes with a fresh start.

One spring my uncle planted corn and watermelons in a small field located far from the farmhouse. In those days it meant walking behind a horse for half a mile just to get to the field to prepare the ground. I knew that didn't make sense. What my uncle understood and I didn't know was that the field was bottom land. Every few years, Ivy Creek would flood its banks and deposit rich topsoil in that field that would grow the very best crops. Christ's resurrection is a welcome flood that overwhelms every mistake, washes away every barrier and wipes out every evil that would prevent us from enjoying new life. Most important, it leaves for us the conditions for abundant life. Believe the gospel that you might walk in newness of life in Jesus Christ. Believe and start really living.