

Matthew 28:1-10

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Mk 16.1—8; Lk 24.1—12; Jn 20.1—10)

28 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going before you in Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

This Is the Place

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: March 23, 2008

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Matthew 28:1-10*

The angel of the Lord tells the two Marys, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

In the first weeks of my first year in divinity school I was leading a Bible study in my field education placement. Out of the blue a young man in the group asked me, “What do we need Jesus for?”

I started to tell him about Easter morning. He rose from the dead. He gave us the victory over death. Like him we die; like him we rise, as the old hymn says. The young man listened patiently for a few minutes, and then he said, “Well I don’t get it. If God is all powerful and can do anything he wants, why doesn’t he just give us eternal life himself. What does he need Jesus for?”

I was stumped. His logic made perfect sense. And if I were honest, I agreed with him. Here I was, about ready to dedicate my life to the ministry, and I had to admit that Easter wasn’t doing it for me. I was sure I was called to ministry. I was even sure I was called by the risen Christ. But somehow the Easter morning thing just wasn’t connecting. I don’t know how I finally wiggled my way out of the conversation, but I do know this: I left with the uneasy feeling that I was missing a big part of what I was supposed to understand.

This morning I’d like to reach back that almost twenty-eight years and raise that question on which I stumbled so obviously. What do we need Jesus for? Especially, what do we need Easter for?

Now, I want to start with a confession. I don’t know what actually happens after we die. I have faith and some very strong beliefs, but I have no facts about what takes place. But I do know a few things. I know that many people I talk to about life after death think that it means that the soul separates from the body and, if you’re fortunate, rises to heaven. If you’re not so fortunate, it’s another story, but since that surely wouldn’t involve anyone here today, I’ll talk just about the first case. The thinking goes, if you’re fortunate, you go to heaven after you die. Now heaven is paradise. Of course, there is some controversy about what paradise looks like. The hobo in the old song, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” imagines that it’s a place where you can indulge in endless candy, cigarettes and whiskey. Paradise, in this view, is a hedonist’s utopia. The guy in “The Beer-Barrel Polka,” however, assumes that “in heaven there is no beer; that’s why we drink it here.” Heaven in this view is a more quiet place with harps angels. I wouldn’t be the first to quip that I like the hobo’s version better. But, either way, heaven is imagined to be an existence of great reward, somewhere up there; somewhere apart from and much better than this life full of trouble.

One fact we should know about this version of the afterlife is this: this version of heaven is much more in tune with Plato and the Greeks than it is with Jesus and the Hebrews. By the time of Jesus the Greek world-view had spread to the Holy Land, to be sure. But there remained

distinctive differences. In short, the popular version of heaven that we have is not the one Jesus had. It's not the one his disciples had. And it's not the one the Gospel writers had. While the subject is complex, the main difference is this. In the Greek version, earth is but a shadow form of the better existence in heaven. The idea is to escape the world and get to the better place. In Jewish thought this world, creation, was deemed good by God. "And God saw that it was good." Of course, this world has fallen, it has been corrupted. In ancient Jewish thought, then, the kingdom of heaven meant that this world would be restored to its goodness. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Resurrection, the hope for the future was not so much an escape from this world as a transformation of it, not so much an escape from a shadow existence, but a healing, a repair of the torn fabric of God's good creation.

With this in mind, let's rejoin our story. Let's go back a few days ago to the crucifixion. The crucifixion is a prime example of the corruption of creation. Jesus, God's son, comes into the world. John says he is the light of the world, but the world knew him not. Fallen, corrupted from its original goodness, the world crucifies the good and the innocent. And, of course, it still does. Jeremiah Wright, the great UCC preacher who has made headlines lately, has been excoriated for espousing a rather central Christian concept, basically that the world, including this country is fallen, and that certainly the treatment of black Americans is an obvious case in point. We may not like to hear it, but it is not a very controversial Christian point to say that we are damnable. The world doesn't like the light shining on its underbelly, and crucifixion is often the consequence.

So, Jesus, the light of the world, rejected and scorned by the world, was crucified. If Easter means anything, then, we should expect it say something about Good Friday. That is, Easter's story of resurrection is not about escaping the world. And it's not simply about bodily resuscitation, either. In Christian terms death has a double meaning. First, the corrupted world, the world of the flesh, as Paul says it, is death. Second, very often the death that is the world kills those who seek to bring it light. So, in Easter God means to reverse not only the death that the world causes, but also the death that the world is. God means to raise Jesus from death and in so doing to give a clear signal that the power that of the world to to kill is being overcome.

On Easter morning when the two Marys go to the tomb, they receive this double message. First, Jesus' body is not there. The angel says, "He has been raised from the dead." This was the worst fear Pharisees and Pilate. They have placed extra guards at the tomb to be certain that no one removes the body and then begins to spread the rumor that he has been raised. If the people believe that the nails of Rome cannot hold him down, the power of the corrupt world will already begin to decline. Even worse, the guard has been in place, and still the body is gone. It's not just a matter of believing the resurrection; they have incontrovertible evidence. The first part of the message is clear. He is risen; he is no longer dead.

But the angel isn't finished yet. There's more to the very same sentence. "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him." "Indeed he is going before you to Galilee."

The force of the original text suggests not just that he is going to Galilee before you get there. The angel isn't saying that Jesus got a head start, so he'll get there before you. Nor is the angel saying that Jesus can teleport his way there, since he's resurrected. The force of the Greek means that Jesus is going before you to Galilee as in he will be there to lead you.

I don't know about you, but this part of the story begins to make more sense to me. For a

long time I wondered why it was important for Jesus to see the disciples in Galilee. Sure, part of it might have been to alleviate the disciples' own doubts about what happened. But more important, in Galilee Jesus commissioned them and would lead them into the future. At the very end he says to them, "I am always with you until the end of the age."

The risen Christ is to be with them always. He is with them always until the end of the age. In short, Jesus commissions the disciples and promises to lead them until that time when creation is finally healed; that's the meaning of the end of the age. Jesus will be with them and lead them not just in companionship, but also in their own work, in the work of the church, in helping to mend creation and restore it to wholeness.

All of a sudden we see that the resurrection and the kingdom of heaven are no escape from this world at all. Indeed, Jesus tells the disciples that this existence, this earth, this creation is the place. It is the place for their work. It is the place for their future. It is the place where the kingdom of heaven will finally overcome the world's corruption, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Here. This place.

In the end we have a most remarkable story. Why do we need Jesus? Why couldn't God have just waved his hand and fix everything. Well, I don't know all the reasons now anymore than I did twenty-eight years ago. Now, I would have my wits about me enough to say that I don't know because I don't know the mind of God. But I would also point to this most remarkable story.

A loving God gave us creation, creation which God loved along with his creatures. God loved them even though they became corrupt, even though they had become so corrupt that they called evil good and called good evil and killed good when it came among them. And God came into the world, the epitome of goodness and light. And as God knew would happen, the world crucified the light. And God then held up a mirror so that the people could see what they had done, that they had crucified the light. To be sure, many said, "It was not me. It was someone else that crucified him." Many, in his name, even took vengeance against the supposed infidels. "We will kill those who killed the son of God." But the light keeps showing us the mirror nonetheless.

And if we look into it, we see first that it is we who have crucified the light. And then we hear God say, "There was no other way to convince you of the evil you do." But we notice that there is not rage and vengeance in God's voice. God's voice is filled with love. "There was no other way to convince you of the evil you do. And until I could convince you of that, there was no way to begin the work of your resurrection, your restoration to wholeness."

And then we notice. How much does God love us. Enough to suffer the evil we inflict? Yes. Enough to do it so that we might be made whole? Yes. But look at this. Also enough that God chooses us to be disciples of the one whom we have crucified. God has loved us enough to say even to us, "Follow me." God has loved us enough to say, "Come to Galilee, where my ministry began, and there I will meet you and I will be with you until the end of the age. I will be with you as you, my disciples, follow on in the work of mending creation." God has loved us enough to take us up, battered and corrupt, and not only love us, but also believe in us, to commission us, to demonstrate that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Finally, I would say a word about the resurrection and our eternity. I think the

resurrection is ultimately a good argument that God grants us eternal life. It's not so much that God raised Jesus from the dead, and so therefore he raises us. After all, God could raise Jesus and leave you and me in the ground, as it were. But the fact that God, through Jesus, loves us enough to save us from the deathly corruption that we have fallen into, the fact that God loves us enough, at huge expense I might add, to help us see ourselves as we really are, the fact that God loves enough to call us to participate in the work of mending creation – these facts make it unthinkable to me that God leaves us for dead at the end of the age. God who saves us from our own corruption surely means more for us than that we waste away.

Jesus' message for us this morning is the same one he left for those first disciples so long ago: Do not be afraid. He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going before you in Galilee; there you will see him. Even now he awaits you. Even over the distance of time his voice calls out, Come, follow me. Amen.