

Sunday April 16th, 2017
Easter Sunday

PRAYER: We go to the tomb with Mary Magdalene, early, while it is still dark. The stone is rolled away. We stoop with Peter to look on abandoned cloths, and we do not know what this all means. Now we stand with Mary weeping outside the grave. It is not an angel but your Son we seek. O God; send him to us. Let us turn and see Jesus standing there. Make him no stranger to our eyes; let us see our teacher. Make us familiar to his eyes; let him see his disciples and call us each by name. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: Today we declare the victory of Christ. “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks, be to God, who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.” Our gifts offered in the name of Christ are never offered in vain and by giving to Christ we declare our praise for his victory over death.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Lord, how you conquer! Not with birth in a palace, but with a bed in a manger! Not with a threat to end the world, but with a promise to begin a new age! Not with a mighty blow from your hand, but with a turn of your cheek! Not with an uprising against your enemies, but with the uplifting of your Son on a cross! Not with filling graves with rivals you have defeated, but by emptying the tomb of the Son you have defended!

O Lord, how you conquer! You sent someone we were not expecting, and we came to love him late. Our eyes had become accustomed to other masters. From the time we were small, we had been taught to defend ourselves; we were not ready to defend someone else. So when you sent your Son, though we wanted to follow, we did not know how. He demanded change. We could not give it. So, we gave him up-to die.

We still do. Every day. Turning, hiding, fleeing, denying, we give you up to the world. We can be your disciples in the night while everyone sleeps. But when the sun rises, we closet our faith. We do not want to be different from everybody else, so you are crucified in our place.

Forgive us, Lord. Conquer us as only you can conquer. Love us into submission. Lead us to the empty tomb; let us know you are greater than the greatness of sin. Then lead us back to our homes, our schools and workplaces, that in the power of your forgiveness we may change. Not for our sake, but for yours. Not for our sake, but for theirs. We will set our spirits on the demands of heaven that we may send our hearts to the defense of earth.

We place the earth in the hands of the One who rolled away the stone. May you touch those who are empty and make them filled; may you touch those who are filled beyond measure and ease their burden. Touch your world through us, even as you did through Jesus Christ. We offer our lives to you for resurrection. Triumphant Victor, into your hands we commend our spirits!

BENEDICTION: Do not be afraid. Jesus has risen. You have seen the empty place where he lay. Go tell the world that Jesus is alive. Even now he is going before you into your streets and your homes, your offices and your markets, your prisons, and your hospitals. Look and you will see him. Amen.

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Matthew 28:1-19

“Looking for Jesus in all the Wrong Places.”

Albert Einstein, the famous father of relativity, was making the rounds of the lecture circuit, but was quickly getting tired of being away from his laboratory and research work. One night, as he was riding to yet another dinner in which he was the guest of honour, Einstein mentioned to his chauffeur (a man who somewhat resembled the famous scientist in looks and manner) that he was tired of making speeches.

“I have an idea, boss,” the chauffeur said. “I’ve heard you give this speech so many times; I’ll bet I could give it for you.” Einstein laughed out loud and said, “Why not? Let’s do it!” When they arrived at the dinner, Einstein donned the chauffeur’s cap and jacket and sat at the back of the room, while the driver took Einstein’s place at the head table. After the meal, the chauffeur gave a beautiful rendition of Einstein’s speech, and even answered a few questions expertly.

Then a supremely pompous professor stood up and asked an extremely complex question on some minor point about antimatter formation. The professor made a real effort in his long, convoluted question, to make clear to the audience that he did not appreciate Einstein or his theories. Without missing a beat, the chauffeur fixed the professor with a steely stare and said, “Sir, the answer to the question is so simple that I’ll bet even my chauffeur who is sitting in the back of the room, can answer it.”

Don’t you wish that every time you confronted one of life’s great challenges you had your own expert you could call upon to bail you out? Actually, in most household, when a child asks their fathers a very difficult question, like “Can I stay up late to watch television?” Most fathers take advantage of the most convenient expert available to them. You guessed it, because what do they usually say? “Go ask you mother.”

Well today we confront perhaps life’s greatest challenge to our hearts and minds. In Matthew 28 we read the incredible account of Jesus’ resurrection. The resurrection event we celebrate at Easter is at the very core of our Christian faith. I cannot understate how critical the resurrection is. Without Christ’s resurrection, our faith is futile. The Apostle Paul said as much when he wrote to the Corinthian church. (1 Cor. 15:13-19) In fact, so critical is the resurrection Paul states the obvious not once but twice in four verses.

“For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ was not raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your trust in God is useless.... And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still under condemnation for you sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ have perished! And if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world.”

It is a blunt assessment, is it not; these words of Paul. But he is right. Without the resurrection, what’s the point of our even being here and frankly what is the hope any of us have?

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That being said, however, not everyone sees the significance of the events recorded in Matthew 28. In fact, on the very day of the resurrection, not all the eye witnesses understood what was happening. We read that, early on Sunday morning of the third day, after Jesus' death and burial, there was an earthquake. An angel of the Lord had come down from heaven and rolled away the tomb stone and then the angel sat on the stone.

Now just so we are all aware of the events that transpired before the angel's appearance; we read in Matthew 27 the religious authorities fearing Jesus' disciples would steal his body and then claim he had risen; went to Pilate and demanded the tomb be sealed and be guarded by soldiers. Pilate agreed to their request and a guard was stationed at the tomb. So, when the angel came and the earthquake happened and the stone rolled away: the guards observed it all.

What was the guards' reaction to these incredible events? Probably much the same kind of response a lot of people would have; they shook with fear and they fell into a dead faint. Now remember, these were hardened soldiers who had seen a lot of rough things, but this was too much to cope with and they fainted. The resurrection was a devastating event for the guards. Like the very earth itself, they shook with fear.

Now the women who were present saw all this too, but did they faint away? No! In fact, some of you ladies might want to remember this tidbit for future reference when the men in your life get too self-assured. As they brag about their courage and manliness you can point out to them that the all-male security force at Jesus' tomb fainted at the sight of the angel, but the women remained standing.

Now here is the interesting question today, what accounts for the difference in the reactions between the guards and the women, besides gender? Both groups saw everything and both were probably afraid; but the guards were utterly wrecked by what they saw. Matthew wants us to know that the women had something the men didn't possess. The women had an expert to help them accurately interpret the events.

The only difference between the woman and the guards was that the angel of the Lord spoke to the women. It is a critical development. The angel's first words were, "Don't be afraid!" We might agree that that is easier said than done, perhaps. It would be near impossible not to be frightened by what they had observed. Then the angel said to the women, "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn't here! He has been raised from the dead, just as he said would happen."

"Come; see where his body was lying. And now, go quickly and tell his disciples he has been raised from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Remember, I have told you." Remember, I have told you. The events that paralyzed the soldiers, was interpreted by the angel. With great authority, the angel (angel by the way means messenger) communicates that the resurrection wasn't the devastating event the soldiers believed it was.

It may have caused fear, but when properly interpreted it brings life.

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Matthew's point is this. The events of the resurrection: the earthquake, the stone being rolled away, the angel being present and the empty tomb: do not, in and of themselves, prove anything. In fact, as the soldiers' experience demonstrates, some events like the resurrection can have a negative, incapacitating effect on people; this despite the essential need to observe such events. It takes a proclamation of the meaning of these events to elicit a positive response.

This is exactly how we respond to all kinds of fear invoking events in our lives. For example; let us say that you awaken one morning with a terrible pain in your abdomen. I mean the pain is so bad you cannot function. You become very fearful, that something has gone horribly wrong with your body. Your mind suggests all kinds of awful things as probable causes for this pain.

Now suppose you do the wise thing and get yourself to the hospital for help. The physician examines you and determines that your appendix is inflamed and it needs to come out. That information may not eliminate your fear, but it does empower you and the medical team to action. So, you call your family and tell them you are having an operation. You call your church for prayer support. You make arrangements to have someone look after your cat.

You are still scared, but you are making positive movement to resolving the major issue in your life at that moment; your inflamed appendix. Events without interpretation cause us paralyzing fear. Not knowing the meaning of unusual events, removes all motivation for us to move forward. In fact, a good portion of Jesus' teaching has to do with interpreting unusual events, like his crucifixion, or the end times.

In today's passage, the angel interprets the frightening events of the resurrection, and instead of these events paralyzing the women, it motivates them to action. "Go, quickly and tell his disciples he has been raised from the dead." The proclamation of the resurrection by the angel now places a claim on the hearts and minds of the women. Now that the angel has explained the meaning, it is time for action.

Just as when the doctor tells you it's your appendix causing you pain and it is time for action. Can you imagine, how you would feel, if after the diagnosis of appendicitis the doctor said, thanks for coming, hope you are feeling better in the morning but did nothing to correct the problem. Information about significant events demands action. I found a very profound thought composed by Wolfhart Pannenberg.

In reflecting on the resurrection of Jesus, Pannenberg wrote, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: first, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believed it happened, you have to change the way you live." Pannenberg is right on point.

For I believe that most of the resistance to Christ's resurrection has little to do with the evidence that it happened, but rather more to do with consequences of what it means for those who believe in it.

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As I have said so many times before, “all theology is transformative”. If you believe something to be true, then it will change your life. Matthew would add that it also will move you to action. When you realize the truth of the resurrection, your life will never be the same. This was true of the women at the tomb, and of course, the disciples. In meeting the resurrected Christ, their lives were given a new focus, a new purpose and new motivation. Jesus even seals the deal later in this chapter of Matthew.

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” We call these words the Great Commission. But without the resurrection of Jesus, and the subsequent interpretation of its meaning, where is the motivation for the disciples to carry out this great commission.

The same holds true for you and me today. If the resurrection of Christ happened, then we can never be the same again. Our whole life’s direction has got to change. I was wondering how many of you know who Anne Rice is? Anne Rice has been called by the media “the Queen of the Occult,” because she has written and sold millions of copies of novels about vampires and witches.

Some of her work has been turned into films, starring the likes of Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise. Recently, Anne Rice has had a change of heart, because she has turned to Christ. She recently stunned her fans by declaring: “I promise from now on that I will only write for the Lord.” The November 2005 release, *Christ the Lord, Out of Egypt*, portrays Jesus as a seven year old boy, and she has worked very hard not to contradict scripture anywhere in the novel.

In the after word of her book, Rice summarizes what she found in Jesus, calling him “the ultimate supernatural hero...the ultimate immortal of them all.” How is your life different because of Christ? What has the resurrection and its subsequent interpretation motivated you to do with your life? Maybe even today, the resurrection frightens you, not because you don’t believe it, but because you do believe it and you know it makes a claim on your life.

“Don’t be afraid!” Remember that when we set off on the course to serve our Risen Lord, he is with us always, even to the very end of the age.