

“Surprised By Life” CHC 3-27-16

Isaiah 65:17-25

Luke 24:1-12

I remember it well. I was eight years old. Until then, death was a foreigner. When it came and took my paternal grandmother, I didn't comprehend it. The adults, my parents and extended family, were grieving. I didn't have any way to process it. My grandfather took me on his lap, holding me, said that she is in heaven with Jesus. It was in March, several weeks before Easter, and all I knew was that my grandmother promised to bake cookies with me in a couple of weeks.

There I was, standing in a cemetery before my grandmother's casket. It was a windy, gray, cool day on that Northcentral Montana prairie. I remember staring out across the horizon and occasionally at the casket as the pastor spoke words whose meaning I did not fully grasp.

Luke takes us to a cemetery. Matthew tells us that a wealthy man, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, asks Pilate for his body. He takes the body and wraps it in a clean linen cloth and places it in his own new tomb. That is where the women are going at early dawn. In observance of the Sabbath they postpone anointing Jesus' body. The next day they are on the way to anoint his body with “the spices that they had prepared”.

What they aren't prepared for is finding the tomb's stone rolled away and no body. They are perplexed. Then two men in dazzling clothes appear. Now they are terrified. Their bodies respond by bowing their faces to the ground. Then comes the question; “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Just like those women, we all bring a belief system to the table of life. Some things fit into our belief systems while other things do not. We have our ideas about God, what God is like, how God works, and what God is supposed to do or not do. By reasoned philosophic enquiry we attempt to make sense out of the world as a whole. The conclusions we make about God's nature, if we get to a belief in God at all, arrive from the inferential process of our rational thought or self-interest. Often we end up creating God in our own image so as to fit our solution to the perplexities of life. As George Bernard Shaw famously stated, “God created us in his image and we have returned the favor”.

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. A 92 year old woman is laid out in her casket, ready for the funeral. She is pronounced dead just hours before at the care home where she lived. Her body is taken to the Munstermann funeral parlor in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, for bodily preparation. Laid out in her casket she suddenly sits up, asking, “Where am I?” The funeral director, shocked, passes out. When he recovers he finds her lying in her coffin, both eyes wide open. He calls the ambulance and paramedics who find that the woman has a pulse. They take her to the hospital. Needless to say, an investigation by police into the nursing home follows.

If you are wondering, this circumstance occurs occasionally. The source I used suggested searching your browser for “sat up in casket”. A number of other stories will come up (Homiletics, March-April, 2016, p.42).

It is beyond our conceptual framework that the dead would arise. Perplexed, terrified, or passing out might describe a sampling of responses we could exhibit. Perhaps some of us here this morning might align more with the apostle's response; "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them". I have always appreciated the honesty of the gospel writers. Nothing is sugar coated.

Christianity is not a logically reasoned discovery of who and what God is like by any brilliant person. If anything, it goes counter to everything we know and understand about the universe. Human reason would not have thought this up. But if we assume that God exists independently of human thought and reason, then we must leave ourselves open to other possibilities. Is Christianity an illusion? Or is Christianity the self-revelation of God?

The men at the tomb answer their own question, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" with these words; "He is not here, but has risen". This statement lies outside their theological and personal expectations as much as ours. The resurrection creates a dissonance between the reality of God and who we think God is and what God is like.

Though details differ, one thing is consistent in all four gospels. The tomb is empty. Jesus' body is no longer in the vault. As one commentator puts it, "Given that the narrative dissonance is slight, these subtle anomalies actually strengthen the overall credibility of their unified claim, namely, Jesus has been raised from the dead. Even now, whenever the testimony of witnesses agrees in every detail, law enforcement agents and officers of the court tend to suspect collusion, and thus doubt whatever claim is being made—whether accompanied with solicited or unsolicited oaths" (Homiletics, p.41).

Years ago when I was attending Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, my student field work assignment was as a hospital chaplain through the Clinical Pastoral Education program. My supervisor, Chaplain Powell Royster, had a son who was a Wycliffe bible translator in Central America. One day Chaplain Royster received that call no parent wants to get. His son had been killed. He was beside himself with inconsolable grief.

A seminary friend of mine and I set a time to visit him in his home. By now it had been some weeks since his son's death. We knew that he had been making preparations to fly to Central America and to secure guides who could lead him into the jungle where his son had died by the bite of a poisonous snake. He wanted to see the grave where his son was laid to rest.

Upon our visit, both of us were observing a peace within him we hadn't recently seen. I remember asking how his plans were going in preparation for his trip. He stunned us by saying that he was not going. Naturally we asked why. Relating his story, having the airline tickets purchased and the guides secured, he told us that he heard the Holy Spirit whisper in his ear the same question the women were asked that first Easter morning. "Why do you look for the dead among the living?"

He immediately dropped all of his plans. God's deep peace flooded his heart. He heard God say to him, "Your son is not there. You don't need to go. He is risen with Christ". Do you remember what Jesus says to his disciples? "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:18).

The radical message of the Christian faith is that God through the risen Christ is the starting point for all living. God is not the conclusion of our reasoning, but the beginning. This is what St. Augustine means when he says, "We do not understand in order to believe. We believe in order to understand". What these women discover is the power of a relationship based upon faith and love, focused in the person of the risen Christ. Life changes when they personally encounter the love of the risen Christ. We feel this transformative relationship as John tells about Mary's experience. Mary is weeping outside the tomb. She looks into the tomb and sees angels who ask, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She complains that Jesus' body is not there. Someone is standing next to her who she supposes to be a gardener. This person asks, "Why are you weeping". Who are you looking for?" Mary responds, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away". John then reveals to us that it is not a gardener but Jesus, who addresses her, 'Mary!'" (John 20: 11-16). In that very moment she knows. It is the transformative personal address that changes the dynamic and direction of her faith experience.

We believe in God because God in the person of the risen Christ has taken hold of us, called us by name. The men tell the women, "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again". The lights come on. "Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and the rest".

Sometimes we just need to remember, hear once again, and respond to that personal address. I recall at age 19 when the lights came on for me. I sat in church for years. I went to Sunday School and youth group and heard scriptures read and multiple sermons preached. But it all seemed disconnected to my life and understanding, just like that day on a Montana prairie. It seemed an idle tale. So off I set to discover God through other pursuits. I couldn't shake the words of Christ off, however. Looking back, perhaps I needed to leave home in order to come back. Peter found his way back to Jesus through his denial. Thomas reconnected through his doubt, the disciples through their betrayal. Disbelief, resistance, and doubt have been a part of the journey for many.

Having tired quickly of trying to build my spirituality, philosophy, and theology on other people's ideas, I finally heard the gospel I'd not understood and ignored. It came through the person of Christ who said, through the words of somebodies' sermon, "I love you, follow me". I found myself becoming drawn to the person of Christ as the basis of faith and action. I have since found that all things good in life are bound up in my relationship with this person. He is the one who has defeated death and who I must allow to lead me by the life of his Spirit within me. The resurrection narratives emphasize that the path to God goes through the person of Jesus, not through the Temple, the church, the mosque, any well-defined doctrine, philosophy about God or holy site. Jesus tells the religious leaders, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39).

A few centuries ago an obscure pastor said these words in one of his sermons: "As God sees the world tottering to ruin because of fear, he acts unceasingly to bring it back by love, invite it by grace, to hold it by love and clasp it firmly with affection" (Peter Chrysologus, Sermon 147, found in Doohan's book, 'The One Thing Necessary', p.57).

Belden Lane, a theologian and spirituality writer thinks through this question, 'Who is Jesus?' Listen in. "Who is this Jesus who rattles my cage and rumbles through the history of my life? This contradictory figure who proves an embarrassment and stumbling block to my mind, but who won't go away? This man who brings awe and tears to my eyes, who makes me want to resist authority when it is wrong, who points me to a God who works from the underside of every system of power?

Who is this Jesus? Disturbing teacher of the gospels, comfortable with children and irritating to scholars, unsettling people by his enigmatic stories. This is the Jesus who refuses to be contained in rigid, orthodox formulas of doctrinal confessions.

This is the Jesus who lures and seduces my heart, making me fall in love with a God more sensuous than I can imagine. But he is also a Jesus who bugs me, uprooting my comfortable, white, straight, male middle-class values. He roams the streets with the homeless....yet he rages against those who turn him into an other-worldly savior, safely ascended into heaven, too distant to be real.

Who is this Jesus? He keeps out-growing-and yet building upon-all my inadequate images of him. He forces me into an ever-widening inclusivity. In the end, I'm less concerned with defining this Jesus than I am with experiencing him.

He affirms my doubts. Encourages my yearning. Forbids my indifference. I can't get away from him. Nor, at last, do I want to" (Sojourners, April 2016, article, 'Who Is This Jesus?' by Belden Lane, pp.35-7).

Be surprised by life this Easter, the life of the resurrected Jesus.