

MATTHEW 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There will see him. This is my message for you."

So the women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

CROSSROADS

Matthew 28:1-10

So we have now arrived at the Crossroads. For the past three months we have concerned ourselves with the weighty issue of our faith. We coupled a six-part series on Exploring Our Faith to a three part series on Expressing Our Faith. And here we are on Easter morning when we must inevitably make a decision about what role the claim the New Testament makes about Jesus' resurrection will play in our faith. How necessary is it to believe in a physical flesh and blood resurrection which may challenge the logical cells in our brains? The very idea gives a lot of people a bad case of cognitive dissonance. How could that happen? And what might make us more uncomfortable is another difficult question. If we

decide that a literal resurrection is outside the realm of possibility allowed by our minds, does that negate our entire faith? The occurrence of deities rising from the dead was a commonly accepted idea 2000 years ago. But scientific inquiry over the centuries now may raise skepticism in the modern mind.

But let's be clear. This is really not a logically debatable subject because the only place it can lead us is into a tangled mess of weeds and thistles that will grab our ankles and endlessly frustrate us. And it is totally unnecessary because our faith need not rely on solving its mystery. We can't. Indeed, to bracket out the physical resurrection and make believing in it the litmus test for the truth of Christianity, let alone for the salvation of our souls, actually makes for a very fragile faith. Because just to argue the point, what if archeologists actually found the bones of Jesus still in the tomb? Would that make Christianity a lie? This is the sort of absurdity that debating it leads to.

Instead, what we need to understand is that whatever it was, the resurrection has no meaning without its connection to the cross. Because the heart of the Easter message is that love is stronger than death and that God's love for us cannot be crucified and killed. And however you interpret it, the resurrection needs to be there because otherwise all we will be left with is an execution of one more of God's messengers. And Jesus' cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" will be the last word. End of story. Goodnight.

Union Theological Seminary president, Serene Jones said on the subject, "For me it's impossible to tell the story of Easter without also telling the story of the cross. The crucifixion is a first century lynching. It couldn't be more pertinent to our world today. Crucifixion is not something God is orchestrating from upstairs. The pervasive idea of an abusive God-Father who sends his own kid to the cross so God could forgive people is nuts. For me, the cross is an enactment of our human hatred. But what happens on Easter is the triumph of love in the midst of suffering."

Herein lies the power of Easter. Jesus' followers did not allow his agonized cries on the

cross to be the last word. It began with the two Mary's who reached the Crossroad of their faith and rather than dissolve into despair, their conviction was buoyed by some experience and excitedly ran to share their joy with the disciples. And from there began the expansion of Jesus' message of God's love into the world. And it just kept going as the early Christians practiced it in spite of the fact that many of them were murdered for their efforts.

We have got to realize that the God of Easter is not some high above grand manipulator of human history, but vulnerable to suffering and intimately connected to the world. God does not stand aloof from suffering, but in its very midst. How else could God invite us to move forward in our pursuit of justice, love and mercy? Perhaps we want God to be above it all because we have a notion that if God is untouched by pain that God is somehow less vulnerable and therefore able to help us out of ours. The opposite is true. Would you really want a doctor who has no idea what pain feels like? It makes God more accessible.

Resurrection means to rise from the dead. And isn't that exactly what the two Mary's experienced when they heard the angel announce that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb? They came in grief ready to anoint his corpse, but then *the women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy...* Spiritually, they just rose from the dead. They were alive again, reenergized, prepared to charge into the world with a new vigor and commitment to not let the story end on the cross. What they felt was excitement born of gratitude leading to their joy.

And here we are, a couple of months into our confinement and uncertainty over our future because of the virus that plagues our world and is dramatically changing it in ways we can ultimately only guess at. We are lonely. We are frightened. We may feel like running, but there is nowhere to run. It may not be the darkest hour in the history of the human race, but because it has spread its tentacles into virtually every corner and cubby hole of the globe, it might just be.

We need real hope, not just Pollyannish proclamations to make us feel better. We need reason to believe that something good will actually come out of this and that our brightest days

are the ones ahead of us, not behind us. It is an enormous challenge. Because we are here at the Crossroads of our faith seeking resurrection too. But it is not the resurrection of Jesus that we are actually concerned with—it is our own. When the women went to the tomb, *there was a great earthquake*. If you really absorb the impact of what it means for God to enter into the arena of human despair and suffering, your spiritual ground will shake and joy will eventually overtake you. Rest assured, my friends, that God's Word will be the last Word.

HE IS RISEN!

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