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“Who Do You Say I Am: The Risen Lord”
April 24, 2011 (Easter)
Matthew 28:1-10

Imagine sitting at a huge wooden writing desk that is covered with things related to Easter – stacks of books about the early church, papers about how to understand what resurrection means, lily plants, Easter eggs, jars of jelly beans, and paintings depicting Jesus emerging from the tomb. Your task is to pull out a clean sheet of writing paper and say something original about Easter. (OK, maybe not many of you can relate to this scenario, but believe me – I can.) Over the centuries so much has been said about Easter that it is hard to know how to even begin to address this topic in a fresh way. So you clear all the stuff off the desk – well, except for the jar of jelly beans – and you write at the top of the page: Jesus Christ is the Risen Lord. Over the centuries, Jesus has been given many different titles – Messiah, Savior, the Light of the World, the Crucified King, Spirit of Truth, Word made Flesh. But the earliest title came from the experience of Easter, when the first disciples, men and women, proclaimed that Jesus is the Risen Lord – the One resurrected from the dead.

You stare at those words on the page for a moment. Then the first insight comes to mind: No one truly expected Jesus to be resurrected from the dead. To whatever extent Jesus predicted rising from the dead, or his followers hoped he would rise from the dead, scripture makes it clear that everyone on Easter morning thought Jesus was still dead. The women who went to the tomb were not going there early in the morning to be the first to welcome Jesus as the risen Lord. They went to the graveyard to anoint a dead body, to finish a burial ritual they had not had enough time to complete on Friday. In Mark’s gospel, it tells how they were carrying spices for his grave, and they were horrified to discover the tomb had been disturbed; that the stone had been rolled away. In Matthew’s gospel, an angel begins by naming their surprise – “Don’t be afraid” – and then naming their false expectation – “I know that you are looking for a dead Jesus, the one who was crucified.” Then the angel tells them what they were not expecting to hear and offers proof of this surprising message – “He is not here, for he has been raised. Come, see the place where he lay.”

The resurrection was not expected – not by the women who anticipated completing a burial ritual on Easter Sunday; not by the male disciples who, if they thought Jesus was going to be resurrected, had a strange way of showing it since they were all back in the city hiding somewhere behind locked doors. Resurrection like this was not part of the Jewish vocabulary. Rabbis were wise teachers, but they didn’t come back from the dead. The Messiah was God’s chosen leader to re-establish the Kingdom of David, but Messiahs weren’t resurrected. The predominant Jewish belief was similar to what Martha expressed when Jesus met her near the tomb of her dead brother Lazarus. Do you remember that story? (John 11:21-27) When Martha expressed sadness that Jesus had been away when her brother died, Jesus comforted her by saying, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha replied, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the

last day.” That was the Jewish belief – resurrection is part of God’s coming kingdom and it will be a general event on the great Day of the Lord. But Jesus gave her a new insight: “No, Martha, I am the resurrection and the life.” Easter morning took the traditional language of the Jewish faith and transformed talk of a general resurrection to now refer to a particular, immediate resurrection – something involving our physical bodies, something happening now versus in the great bye-and-bye; God’s love that conquers the power of death once and for all.

So on the paper we’ve written: Jesus is the Risen Lord. And below that we’ve noted that it was not expected, that it was new vocabulary transforming the lives and faith of all who were touched by that first Easter event. But notice what happens next in the story. After the angel countered the women’s false expectations and had them inspect the empty tomb, the angel kicked them out. “Go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead.’” There wasn’t anything for them to see there, no image for them to burn onto their retinas so they would see it and remember it for the rest of their lives. No, there is something about Easter that is not immediately evident, but only later becomes self-evident.

Let me explain this next point. In writing biographies of famous people, there is always a tension between telling the unvarnished truth about their lives or enhancing their story by glossing over the messy parts. Recent books about Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X have raised some controversy because they talk about these revered leaders’ accomplishments as well as some of their moral and personal failings. Author Mary Roach wrote a column about how Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet cosmonaut who was the first man in space fifty years ago, was always amused by the hagiography that grew up around his accomplishments. If you go to Moscow, there’s a 125-foot tall titanium statue of the famous cosmonaut. But in reality, Gagarin did very little during his 108-minute orbital flight aboard Vostok 1. The ship’s controls were locked; the capsule was maneuvered entirely from the ground. Gagarin was supposed to write down his observations, but he failed to do that after he inadvertently let go of his pencil in orbit and it floated away. Gagarin used to say that he wasn’t sure if he was the first man in space or the last dog.¹

With earthly heroes and heroines, we can look at them head-on and try to get the full story of their life and accomplishments. But Easter has never been a head-on, staring straight ahead type of event. Easter resurrection is something that surprises you, that catches you off-guard; it’s something you glimpse from the corner of your eye or only recognize after the fact. And there are big and little resurrections happening every day, if you have the eyes of faith to see them. Let me share some mundane examples. My mother lives in an independent care facility now and is particularly vulnerable to lung infections. When she is well, she is an Energizer bunny – going to meals, aerobics, whatever program is being offered. When she is sick, she is largely bed-ridden, depressed and lethargic. Because of her short-term memory loss, she doesn’t remember being well when she’s sick – nor does she remember being sick when she’s well. So I can call and talk to her when she’s down and everything’s lousy. Or I can talk to her when she’s well and she’s happy, grateful, and in a word, fully alive again. Those

are types of resurrection moments that catch you off guard and are often only noticed in retrospect.

Think about times when people you've known have been hobbled by intense joint pain or blinded by cataracts, and then after surgery they are new beings altogether, resurrected to new levels of seeing, moving, and living. Think about people who battle with depression, addictions, with bipolar mood swings or debilitating migraines, but who, by medicine or by grace, snap out of their funks and pain and are resurrected back into full life. These may seem like trivial examples compared to someone stepping out of a tomb alive again. In this day and age of media spectacles, we tend to think that only the big stuff, the fireworks and splashy events are things that matter. But a resurrection that is small does not make it any less real. Movement from death to life happens all the time. Seeing it in the people around you and in your own life, seeing it with gratitude, seeing it even from the corner of your eyes of faith, means that Easter is real and happening right now.

On our Easter sheet, we've written: Jesus is the Risen Lord. It was a surprise – something not only unexpected but impossible to be expected until it happened. It was something not seen so much as experienced, glimpsed in a sidelong glance as the women ran away from the tomb and went back to tell the others. But as it was glanced, it changes the way we see the world – the way we see ourselves. Suddenly God is God, Christ is alive, and resurrection has been added to our vocabulary. That means there's one more thing to be added to our sheet, one more insight that comes with this day: Easter is a verb, not a noun. Easter isn't something frozen in time long ago. It's not something you can categorize, analyze, and systematize. It's active, alive, and life-changing. Sure, it has a few nouns in it to make it understandable – tombs, rocks, guards, and the early light of dawn – but its spirit is captured in its verbs. "Don't be afraid. The One you're looking for isn't here. He is risen. Go and tell the others. Go quickly. There you will see me, says the risen Christ."

Easter is one holiday that can't be celebrated sitting down. That's why each year we go to the tomb and then hurry away from it again. We read the story and the words on the paper, but then we get up and put it into action – make it real in our own lives. We share a meal where Jesus is the host, and then we literally take the host with us, as nourishment, as companion, as healing love and renewed life and lasting hope. For each of us is alive by God's grace; death has no ultimate dominion over us and neither need we fear any purveyor of death who would insist otherwise. We are resurrected. Christ is alive! Such is the mystery and wonder and joy of our faith.

Perhaps the oldest title for Jesus is the best after all: Jesus Christ is the Risen Lord. Now go and tell the others.

AMEN

¹ "In Space, Nice Guys Finish First," Mary Roach, *New York Times*, April 10, 2011, WK12.