

**March 27, 2016 (Easter)**

**TEXT: John 20:1–10**

**TITLE: Going Home With Jesus**

For a story about an amazing event, the bible description of what happened on Easter morning is quite low-keyed. If ever there was cause for hyperbole, for flights of poetic glory, it would be in describing when the Savior of the world was resurrected from the dead. Yet John only needs ten verses to tell us the bare facts: Early Sunday morning Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, found the stone rolled away and ran back to tell the others. Peter and another disciple ran to the tomb. Peter went in, saw the burial cloths, and then the two of them went back home. That's basically it.

Having said that, sometimes keeping it simple is best. Back in 1959, the Heinz corporation held a competition for a good slogan advertising their baked beans. The renowned British poet, Ted Hughes, thought he would enter the contest. He came up with this wonderful, though somewhat formal, slogan: *Whoever minds how he dines demands Heinz*. Not bad, even if it sounds like Carson spoke it on Downton Abbey. But it was blown away by a much more straightforward entry only three words long: *Beans meanz Heinz*.<sup>1</sup>

Maybe it is best that the Easter story wasn't buried beneath poetic language. There is something compelling about hearing the simple facts of how Jesus' empty tomb was discovered on Easter morning. And for me, the shortest verse in the passage is the most fascinating. Verse 10: *Then the disciples returned to their homes*. Talk about understatement! Two disciples see an empty tomb and evidence within it that suggests the resurrection Jesus had foretold actually took place—and then scripture says they simply returned home. Can you imagine what sort of mental fireworks were going off in their minds?

They had to be pondering all the things they'd just seen. Some time in the previous hours, the grave had definitely been disturbed. The stone was moved; the burial cloths were removed from Jesus and his body was gone. What had happened? Jewish authorities would not break purity laws to enter a sealed tomb on the Sabbath. Grave robbers might have thought someone wealthy had been buried and had entered the tomb to see if there was any jewelry left on the body. But seeing none, they had no cause to disturb the body. And if someone wished to steal the body to defile it and further insult the followers of Christ, why remove the burial cloths? Why take the time to remove the shroud and expose the corpse if you planned to hide it somewhere else anyway?

Peter had to be mulling over these options in his mind as he made his way back to where he was staying in Jerusalem. None of the logical reasons made sense that Easter morning, which likely prompted him to recall the times Jesus had foretold his death and predicted being raised from the dead. That had sounded poetic to their ears when they'd first heard it; but now it seemed to best explain

what had taken place. Peter had seen miracles done by Jesus before. Peter had been moved when Jesus preached and taught and shown such compassion to the lost and the least. He knew what he'd felt in his heart when Jesus washed his feet at their final meal together—and how his heart broke when the crowing rooster confirmed his betrayal of the man he loved so deeply. Walking along the path leading away from the cemetery, Peter must have sensed that truly something more than flesh and blood was involved here. Something more than human reality was active here. Something beyond life and death as he'd always known it became deeply, personally real for Peter on that long Easter walk home.

Let's shift gears for moment and let me tell a story about Ben Franklin. All his life, Ben Franklin was a pragmatic man—down-to-earth—one who was respectful about matters of religion but never one to push piety over practicality. In the 1750s, Franklin was named commander of the militia assigned to the frontier northwest of Philadelphia. One of his accomplishments was devising a reliable method for getting 500 soldiers to attend worship services: he assigned to the chaplain the job of doling out the daily rations of rum right after his services. Franklin wrote, "Never were prayers more generally and punctually attended."<sup>2</sup> Yet much later in his life, when he attended the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the rancor and disputes of that gathering threatened to undo the fragile union won in the Revolutionary War. Endless debates were held arguing how the balance of power between large and small states should work in the new government. Franklin longed for tolerance and compromise, telling the delegates "We are sent [here] to consult, not to contend, with each other." (How I wish today's politicians heeded Franklin's advice.) After a month of arguing, Franklin surprisingly suggested that they open each daily session with a prayer. He said, "*With this convention groping in the dark to find political truth, how has it happened that we have not once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understanding?*" Then he added these famous words, "*The longer I live, the more proof I see that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without [God's] notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without [God's] aid?*"<sup>3</sup>

God is active in human affairs. Simply stated, yet profound. When Peter walked back home from the cemetery, all the evidence he pondered pointed to an intentional movement of God's Spirit, resurrecting Christ and changing how we understand all of human life. In this drama, there were Roman soldiers, a death by crucifixion, a tomb sealed with a heavy stone. Yet God spoke the definitive word: *Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen.* That simple, direct truth persisted in Peter's troubled mind: God in Christ is alive, is among us, is active and at work in our midst. Christ is resurrected.

I imagine Peter using that walk away from the tomb as a time to compose his thoughts and imagine what he was going to say to the others when he saw them again. The disciples were all still in hiding. Pilate, Herod, those who'd cried "Crucify him" at Jesus' trial were still there in the city and still a grave risk,

literally. Would the news of the resurrection change how each of them dealt with these very real threats to their lives? Now consider this: In a similar way, every one of us walks beside Peter. We walk away from the Easter news of Jesus' resurrection and go back home to friends and family. Yet our heads are troubled by so much evil and violence posing grave risks to us: the bombings in Brussels and reported terror cells active in the West; the family gunned down not 10 minutes from here in Wilkinsburg; the church scandal of pedophilia; the persistence of racism and hate language delivered in political speech innuendo or social media bullying; the ticking time bombs of the unjust gap between the rich and the poor in this country and the shrinking fresh water reserves around the world; the millions of young adults daily coming of age in a global society that is marred, scarred and jarred: marred by war and terrorism, scarred by persistent violence against women, and jarred by the realization that tomorrow only means more of today's suffering. Those thoughts trouble our minds when we read the paper or browse the Internet. If God is active in human affairs and resurrection is real, in simple terms, what does that mean for us today?

So in simple terms: It means for Peter or for you and I, we are going home with Jesus. In our Easter morning walk home from the empty tomb, we are going home with Jesus. Not "going home to Jesus." That's an old-time churchy euphemism about death—"going home to meet my Lord." This is different. This is "going home with Jesus." The one who was crucified, then raised to new life, is the one with us now and forevermore. Mary Magdalene learned this truth when Jesus appeared to her in the garden. Two other disciples learned this truth when they walked the road to Emmaus and Jesus joined them for the journey and a meal. Peter and his friends would learn this truth when Christ appeared in their midst in the Upper Room. But Peter first realized this good news on that walk home Easter morning. If the grave cannot hold Jesus, then every part of our life is a place for God to be active—for the Holy Spirit to move—for Jesus to be with us as our risen Savior. As our Baptist brethren might say, if before we were marred, scarred and jarred, with Christ we are shifted, gifted and uplifted. Or as Ben Franklin said, the one who's aware of every sparrow's fall is the same one whose strength allows us to rise and triumph over adversity. Christ being with us plants the seed of hope in every circumstance of life, reminding us that there is a resurrection light brighter than whatever shadow of darkness may have fallen over us temporarily.

Verse 10 is our verse: *Then the disciples returned to their homes.* That's where you're heading today—that's happening right here and right now. We will travel down a road through a troubled world often carrying a troubled soul. But we are not alone. We are going home with Jesus. He is not in the tomb. He has been raised. And that means he is with us, with all people, this day and always. Alleluia! Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed.)

PRAYER: Lord Christ, whom death could not conquer nor the tomb contain, walk with us now as we go forth into a hurting world. May this Easter mark the

beginning of a renewed humanity, risen to new life with you, our Savior and Redeemer, the first and the last, our eternal hope. Alleluia! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Column by James Parker, *New York Times Book Review*, Feb. 21, 2016, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, 2003, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp, 447, 451.