

Fear of Resurrection?

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Biblical Passage: Matthew 28: 16-20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The first Sunday after Easter. This particular day has often been called "Low Sunday." It was originally given this name, because Easter was called "High Sunday." But for most churches today it deserves that name because it seems to be a letdown after the great and joyful celebrations of Easter. Gone are the crowds that we will not see again until Christmas. Gone are the new dresses and new suits. Gone is the big family dinner. Gone are even the Easter Bunny and the colored eggs. Easter has passed, and it is time to get back to normal life.

But if that is what we think, perhaps we have another thought coming. If that is what we think, perhaps we have not understood what Easter is all about. Because, you see, for Christians Easter is not just a celebration. Easter is a new reality, and the more we understand it, the more we come to realize that, while Easter is good news, it is also upsetting news. Easter is an entire redefinition of life and its meaning. And that is scary!

Think of Mary Magdalene, and the other women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, and who according to Luke 8 had provided financial support for Jesus and his other

followers. Thursday and Friday of that week must have been terrible days. Friday they saw him die as a common criminal. By Saturday they had to begin coping with the end of their dreams. It was time to return to Galilee and pick up their lives where they had left them. The exhilarating hope they had enjoyed in the company of Jesus had yielded to pain and disappointment. It was time to go back to Galilee, to whatever measure of peace they would be able to find in going back to the routines they had left. They approach the tomb as a last act of love, before returning to their previous settled lives. But the stone has been moved, and that open tomb opens up new realities, new hopes, new challenges. Once again, as when he first called them, their lives will be turned upside down. Once again, the security of routine must be abandoned. It is a time for great joy, but also for great fear. And so Matthew tells us that they left the tomb “with fear and great joy.”

Or think of those two discouraged disciples, walking back to Emmaus, “and talking with each other about all the things that had happened.” Luke does not tell us more about that conversation; but we can well imagine its sober and somber tones. It was all a dream. It has ended. It is time to go home. There we will find a measure of peace in doing what we always did.

But then just as the women had found the tomb empty, the two disciples met him in the breaking of the bread. And just as the women cannot go back to their routines, the two have to change their plans. They immediately turn around and go back to Jerusalem. And so last Sunday

we celebrated Easter, after the sorrowful time of Lent and Good Friday. And now, having celebrated Easter, we are ready to return to the old routine. Little has changed. We continue doing things as we have always done them. Even church becomes a matter of routine. And therefore we correctly call this day “low Sunday.” It is low because all celebrations are past, and now is time to go back to our usual life —much as those women were ready to go back to their homes in Galilee.

You see, Easter is more than a celebration. We celebrate birthdays, and the next day we simply return to the routines of life, and continue getting old until our next birthday. We celebrate patriotic days, and the next day we go back to our political bickering. We celebrate a new year, and make all sorts of resolutions knowing we probably will not keep most of them. Celebrations are good. They help us remember and acknowledge all the good things of life. But celebrations seldom bring about much change.

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But not so with Easter, with the resurrection of Jesus. If you read the Gospels carefully, you will note that not all is joy and enthusiastic faith. At least for a time, the women are afraid, and for a time the disciples too refuse to believe. In the entire narrative, the words “Do not be afraid” appear repeatedly, both on the lips of an angel and on the lips of Jesus. “Do not be afraid.” Why would anyone be afraid? Clearly, in part because anything unexpected and overpowering produces fear. But also because the resurrection itself upsets all of life.

The Galilean fishermen might have already sent word home: It was all a dream. It was good while it lasted. We learned and saw marvelous things. But it is now over. We are going home. Hope there will be a boat for us.

In the Gospel of Matthew the story continues with what we often call The Great Commission, the text that has been read this morning. It is a text many of us learned by heart in our very early years in Sunday school: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I have commanded you.” It certainly is a powerful text, for it is impelled by it countless numbers of men and women have left their home and their kindred. Impelled by it Patrick decided to return to Ireland, the land where he had been a slave, and Frumetius likewise returned to Ethiopia, where he too had been a slave. Impelled by it David Livingstone crisscrossed the continent of Africa and fought the slave trade. Impelled by it William Carey went to India, learned more than a dozen languages; and, when all was bleak and all his plans were destroyed, he wrote back to England declaring that therefore, he had no other option but to go on forward. Impelled by it, churches all over the world have gathered funds and resources to support the worldwide mission of the church.

And yet, perhaps it is time we look at it again, for Scripture always opens our eyes to realities we may not have seen. As we look again at the text, the first thing we note is that it does not say “Go and make disciples of all nations.” It says “Go **therefore** and make disciples of all nations.” We do not usually begin speaking with a “therefore.” “Therefore” implies a previous

reason. One does not simply say, “therefore, take an umbrella.” One does say, “It will be raining, therefore, take an umbrella.” In other words, take an umbrella **because** it is raining.

The Great Commission includes a “therefore”: “Go **therefore** and make disciples of all nations.”

What precedes the commission is the reason for the commission itself. And this is: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; go, therefore...” This is crucial. What Jesus says is not, “go and make me Lord over new lands.” He says that he is already Lord of heaven and earth. The call is not to make him Lord, but to make disciples who know and acknowledge and celebrate that he is Lord. “Go, therefore” means “go **because** all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

In this, as in the Easter story as well, there is joy and fear, assurance and challenge. Presumably, before Easter the disciples were quite ready to go; they were ready to go home, back to their boats and their nets, to their counting tables and their old routines. Now they are told to go, yes. But this is a radically different going. This is not just going back to their usual routines. This is going to all nations—or, as Jesus would say in Acts, to the ends of the earth. And it is a going that lasts forever—or, as Jesus says here in Matthew, “to the close of the age.” It is a commission that reaches beyond the farthest horizon we could imagine: to all nations, to the ends of the earth. It is a commission that reaches beyond the farthest future for which we could plan or which we could imagine: “to the close of the age.” It is this far-reaching because it is grounded on the far-reaching assertion of Jesus: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been

given to me.” All authority is his, to the ends of the earth and to the end of the age.

But it also means —and this is the most difficult part— that the mission is not really ours. It does not belong to us. It does not depend on us. It belongs to the One to whom all authority has been given, in heaven as well as on earth. This is what makes it great. This is what makes it difficult.

And because the mission is not ours, we must be ready to be surprised. We may make the plans that we deem best. And we must do so. But we must always remain open to the possibility that God may have other plans. We obey our mission as we best understand it. But it is still God’s mission, and the ways of the Lord are higher than our ways.

Take the Apostle Peter for example. He clearly was as fired up for the mission as any of the others. The book of Acts tells us that the mission was progressing well: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied” (9.31). Peter himself was obeying the commission they had received. He had been in Lydda, where he had healed Aeneas, and in Joppa he had wrestled Dorcas from the grip of death. But now, in Joppa, things get confusing. He has a mission that leaves him perplexed. Then came the messengers from a Gentile centurion in the mostly Gentile city of Caesarea —a city that most good Jews saw as a malignant tumor planted in Judea by the Romans. He goes with them because the Spirit tells

him to do so. But he apparently is not very enthusiastic about it. Indeed, when he arrives at Caesarea he begins his speech by saying: “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean” —in other words, if it were up to me that is precisely what I would call you!

You know the rest of the story. Acts tells us again that the Peter and the Jewish believers that had come with him “were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” Suddenly, unexpectedly, Peter’s mission takes a new turn. The Lord had told him that he was to be a witness “in Jerusalem and in all of Judea.” But, in Caesarea? To Gentiles? Peter, who at first was reluctant to go to this house of Gentiles in Caesarea, now baptizes Cornelius and his companions, and then stays with Cornelius for several days.

And it is not only Peter’s mission that takes a new turn. When he returns to Jerusalem the church there calls him to account. They have misgivings about what he has done. But when he tells them what actually took place, they too are surprised, and declare: “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life!”

Peter and the entire church in Jerusalem are surprised by what God is doing in mission. Yet even then they do not see all that God is doing. God may be calling Gentiles, but still the center of the church is in Jerusalem. In the rest of Acts we see how, when there are questions as to on what

terms the Gentiles are to be brought into the church, it is a gathering in Jerusalem that decides what is to be done. But Acts also shows how the center was actually moving to Antioch. Peter and the church in Jerusalem may not have seen it. Paul tells us that when Peter went to Antioch his attitude was at best vacillating. But the center was shifting. And by the time Acts was written, when after a great Jewish rebellion Jerusalem had been taken and destroyed by the Romans, it is clear that the center has shifted, and is now in Antioch and in the entire region of Asia Minor, where missionaries from Antioch such as Paul and Barnabas had worked.

Peter's journey to Caesarea was an important step for him. What happened in Caesarea was important for the entire church at the time. But if Peter was amazed that Cornelius and his people were brought to faith, imagine what he would have said if someone had told him that shortly after his death Jerusalem would no longer be the center of Christianity, that two and a half centuries later the Roman Empire would declare itself Christian, and that less than twenty centuries later, in a far land across the ocean, at a distance that he could not even conceive, in a place with strange Gentile names such as Tennessee, and Knoxville, and Reardon, people would gather to celebrate that very resurrection which he had witnessed when he ran to the empty tomb, to offer the same baptism he had offered to Cornelius, to obey the same Great Commission that he and others had received on that mountaintop.

So we come to this "low Sunday," one more of the nearly 100,000 Sundays that the church has celebrated since that first Easter Sunday when the women went to the tomb. And there is good

reason to call it “low.” It is not just that last week’s crowds are no longer here. It is also that things are changing in ways we do not like. We remember a time, a few decades ago, when going to church on Sunday morning was generally expected. We remember a time when the United States and Europe were sending thousands of missionaries to the rest of the world, when the voice of the church had an influence that today it has lost. But today things are different. Today Western Europe, the former center of Christianity, has become radically secularized. And the same is happening in the United States. So, as Christians look around, we tend to be low, to feel depressed. Or, even worse, to become angry at an increasingly secular society, and to turn Christianity into a channel for wrath, rather than an expression and celebration of grace and love.

But no matter how we feel, in truth for Christians there should be no such thing as a “low” Sunday. There should be no low Sunday for two reasons. One has to do with mere observation, and the other is grounded on faith. On the first, it should suffice to say that it is not true that Christianity is declining. Certainly, there are new difficulties and challenges in areas where we thought Christianity was dominant. But there is also new vitality in those very areas. And, what is more, there are new centers whose vitality is unparalleled. Even though from our perspective it might seem otherwise, there are now more Christians in the world than there have ever been before. Even though from our perspective it might seem otherwise, there is now more missionary activity than there has ever been before. But that is a subject best left for tonight and the other two lectures.

If we then turn to the point of view of faith, there too we can say that there is no such thing as a “low Sunday.” There is no such a thing, because the mission is not ours. We may well fail; but our God never fails. Our plans may not work out. But God’s plans do. We may be perplexed as Peter was perplexed. But God is not. We may not know all that the empty tomb entails, and we may even recoil from its challenges. But the God who raised Jesus from among the dead, the God who promised that the very gates of hell would not prevail against the church, the God who has given Jesus all authority in heaven and on earth, is still saying, “Go! And I will be with you till the end of the age!”

So be it. Amen.

