

SEEING THE RESURRECTION

John 20:1-18

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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The story of the empty tomb and the differing reactions to the announcement “The tomb is empty, he is risen” is really the story about us grappling not only with whether it really happened or not but also coming to terms with the impact Christ’s resurrection should have on you and me, the Church and the world.

The Final Battle is C S Lewis’s allegory of the New Testament Book of Revelation’s last ditch battle between the forces of good and evil. Midway through the battle we read how the Dwarfs decided to reject both sides and only fight for themselves, all the while chanting, “The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs!”

When the battle was over and the victory won, the Dwarfs were left sitting in a circle facing themselves still chanting, “the Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs,” oblivious of an enchanted doorway leading into the new Narnia, reminiscent of the New Heaven and New Earth foretold in Revelation.

Lucy, one of the heroes in the story, despite the Dwarfs’ treachery, wanted to help them move on through the door into Paradise but she first had to convince them to open their eyes and realize that despite what they thought they weren’t really sitting in total darkness, but the head Dwarf chided her by saying, “How can I see what ain’t there?”

Not ready to give up Lucy then begged Aslan the Lion (the Christ figure) to save the Dwarfs from their self-imposed stupor. Forewarning Lucy he could only do so much, Aslan provided the Dwarfs with a sumptuous feast, but the dwarfs were unable to taste the food properly and immediately convinced themselves they were actually eating things you’d find on a stable floor like straw and bits of turnip and cabbage. Although dissatisfied with their lot, they comforted themselves by saying, “Well at any rate there’s no humbug here. We haven’t let anyone take us in. “The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs!”

Aslan then explained to Lucy, “You see, they won’t let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their only prison is their minds...and so afraid of being taken in that they can’t be taken out.”

Like the Dwarfs from C S Lewis' imagination, there are real people who either cannot or will not see the Kingdom of God unfolding all around them. But until we get too smug, let's be honest and admit even though we may be Christen and accept the premise Christ was raised from the dead on the third day, we too can blind ourselves to the reality of Christ rising up before our eyes. For some reason there comes a point we cannot or will not see what God wants to us to see. "The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs" can be rephrased to, "The Christians are for the Christians," as we side only with ourselves and refuse to get involved in the eternal struggle going on not just in the world but in our own neighborhoods.

If someone begged Jesus to get Pilate, Caiaphas or Herod to open their eyes to see the New Creation, can you hear Jesus saying, "We can only do so much if they won't let us help them. They have chosen cunning over belief. Their only prison is in their minds...so afraid to be taken in that they can't be taken out."

It's good to sing "Jesus Christ is risen today. Alleluia!" but once the music stops we're still left to ask ourselves, "Does Christ's resurrection have anything to do with me, is there any inner transformation allowing me to be empowered to throw caution to the wind and become a risk taker like Chesterton's "fearless, happy troublemakers," out to change the world because we believe Christ has already overcome the world, or do we still sit in that little circle facing each other with our eyes closed shut because we don't want to be taken in.

Easter morning challenges as much as Good Friday. Sure, after the grief and sadness of the crucifixion we deserve a celebration, but isn't this day also the time to carefully consider how this resurrection should impact and inform our lives?

Certainly Christ's passion and resurrection, demands something commensurate with the price Christ paid dearly on the cross. I'm not suggesting there's any way we can pay him back or earn our salvation. Even so there is an appropriate response. It comes in the form of a question. Here it is: If Christ died for us and was raised in power for us, than what are we going to do about it? Better still what is Christ telling us to do about it?

If you're wondering where to start looking for the answer to this question, look no farther than the scriptures.

In Matthew, Luke and Mark we read that after the angel at the tomb said, "Come and see the place where he lay," with fear and great joy Mary Magdalene and the other women couldn't contain themselves and started spreading the news.

In John's Gospel, the story is expanded to include something that took place several weeks after the resurrection. Jesus appeared on a beach one morning soon after the disciples' boat was pulling in after a long night of not catching any fish.

When they finally came ashore they found Jesus making them a breakfast of bread and fish over a charcoal fire. It was then Jesus commanded Peter, “If you love me, feed my lambs...If you love me, tend my sheep.” But Jesus didn’t stop there, he continued by telling Peter, “...when you were younger you used to fasten your belt and go where ever you wished.” In other words when you were younger before you met me you pulled up your pants and buckled your belt you lived for yourself, footloose and fancy free. But then Jesus said, “When you grow old, you will stretch out your hand and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”

I think you get the message. When you submit to the Risen Christ your life isn’t your life any more. Hearing that probably makes you bristle because it means you’re giving up your independence, which, truth be told, is really an illusion. No one is truly independent, in fact all of us are totally dependent on the people around us, our careers, our good health, and lots of other things, both good and bad.

But when you become dependent on Christ, somehow you gain your independence from the things that once held prisoner. Now you can be free from everything that confined you in that tight little circle facing all the other frustrated people who refuse to be taken in so you can be taken out to “feed Christ’s lambs and tend Christ’s sheep.”

You see, Christ is risen so you can be free to love God and enjoy him forever. Your life isn’t your own anymore, but isn’t that a good thing after all? On our own we limit ourselves to what Thoreau called, “lives of quiet desperation.” You might argue, “My life is fine thank you. I’m a realist, I can see things quite clearly on my own.” But try telling yourself that when your back is against the wall and all your fears and frustrations that you’ve forced deep down inside you can’t be held down any more. Isn’t that why many marriages fail after thirty years? One spouse looks at the other over breakfast one morning and says, “You don’t make me happy anymore.” Could it be that absence of happiness is really to be found in yourself?

Or you might think the problems of the world aren’t your responsibility. You didn’t make the mess so why should you be asked to clean it up? I have my own problems so why should I sacrifice my time and energy, my money helping someone I have nothing to do with?

These are the attitudes caricatured by the mantra, “The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs,” I’m only on my side; I’m looking out for myself. I refuse to be drawn into other peoples’ mess.”

What you don’t realize, if that’s your take on life, you’ll always be blind to Christ rising up in people and places, bringing the kingdom near whenever someone feeds the hungry, clothes the naked or visits the sick and those in prison. Remember how Jesus inaugurated his ministry, what he preached? “The kingdom of God is at hand..., the Kingdom of God is within you..., thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ”

But Jesus also said, “If anyone would come after me you must deny yourself, pick up your cross and then follow me.”

You see the cross and the empty tomb force a decision. What side will you take? There are three choices. First you can go over to the other side and be an oppressor. Second you can side with God and his angels by embracing the resurrection and all its implications or Third, you can refuse to take any side but your own and try to live in a sealed bubble with your eyes closed shut to Christ rising up from the mess we’ve made in the world and do nothing at all.

But realize these options are not just available to individuals. Groups of people, specifically congregations are also given options to choose from.

Sadly some congregations always look inward protecting their assets financial or otherwise, not wanting to really get involved in the broken lives of the people in their neighborhoods. Then there are those congregations who talk a good game and pride themselves on their occasional outreach accomplishments but still by and large play it safe. Then there are those congregations made up of those “fearless, happy, troublemakers” who’s membership is committed to reach out into the world to make and be a difference in the lives of ‘those people’ if only because they have opened their eyes to the Risen Christ expanding the boundaries of his Kingdom.

When Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb before the dawn broke she was looking for the light John spoke of in the opening verses of his Gospel, “In him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone was coming into the world.”

Of course when Mary discovered the tomb was empty she feared the body was stolen, maybe by the Temple priests, maybe Herod or Pilate to make sure the disciples didn’t steal it first and pull a fast one by claiming Christ was raised from the dead as he predicted he would be.

The angels tried to comfort her but she couldn’t see yet because she was so wrapped up in her grief. Even when she turned around and saw Jesus standing there she still couldn’t see Jesus until he spoke her name.

It’s hopeful to realize that Mary’s darkness dissipated not because she was looking for Jesus but because Jesus came looking for her. It’s when he spoke her name, “Mary,” that her eyes were opened and she recognized him. But she didn’t like the hymn says “tarry long” alone in the garden with Jesus, she went out to spread the news, she went right back into her dark, broken messy world to bring the light by loving and serving in Christ’s name.

Here’s the Good News, Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed! I offer no proof only my conviction even though I must admit his presence sometimes eludes me probably because I’m sometimes too preoccupied with other stuff. But Christ is persistent. He comes looking for us

and when we least expect it, he speaks your name, and if you want to you can hear him and see him rising up in just about every person you meet and every situation you encounter.

I've said this every Easter morning since I've been here: if on that first Easter morning there were reporters with cameras broadcasting to the world images of Christ stepping out of the tomb only to be met by biologist who'd take a DNA sample from the Risen Christ to be compared with the DNA sample of the Crucified Christ taken on Good Friday, there'd still be naysayers who say, "Fine, you Christians proved your point, Christ was raised from the dead, but what does it have to do with me?"

We have a choice, we can close our eyes and declare, The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs, or we can open our eyes, listen for Christ to speak your name and proclaim with angels, "Christ is risen." Just before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead he said to Mary his sister, "I am the resurrection and the life, if you believe me you will have eternal life." Do you believe this?