



Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

St. Paul's on-the-Hill

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Here we are on the most important day of the Christian year. It is the day upon which our faith depends – without a resurrected Jesus, the uniqueness of our theological claims is

lost. We believe that a Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth, who preached, taught, and healed for about three years, mostly in Galilee, a little over two thousand years ago, rose from the dead on the third day after he was put to death on a cross. In this rising from the dead he was revealed to be the Son of God, our Savior, who promises us that we now share in this resurrection. We look to him for guidance and direction in every aspect of our lives, and worship him as our Lord and king.

It's a story we know very well, of course, yet it never ceases to thrill and inspire us. But even this best known of Christian stories can contain something new each time. I've told the story before of my preaching professor in divinity school, the great Krister Stendahl, who eventually became the Lutheran bishop of Stockholm. He told us always to pay attention to anything in a text we were preparing to preach on for anything we had forgotten was there. The sermon, he told us, might very well be in those forgotten words.

It certainly makes psychological sense. Our minds have a great capacity to repress things that are too difficult or challenging for us. Trust me on this, I'm a psychotherapist. We human beings expend a lot of energy trying to stay comfortable.

So how about the resurrection story as told by Matthew in today's gospel? We probably remembered that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb early on that first Easter Sunday morning. I certainly remembered the extra details that Matthew provides about the events at the tomb once they arrived: the earthquake; the angel of the Lord descending, rolling back the stone and sitting on it; the terrified guards. And of course, those words that resound through the ages: "He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay" (Matt. 28:6). But did you remember the next part? It is unique to Matthew's account. The women run out to tell the disciples that Jesus has risen, and is going ahead of them to Galilee, as the angel had explained. Jesus then meets the women, and repeats what the angel had said: "go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (Matt.28:10cd). And indeed, only when they reach Galilee do the disciples see the risen Jesus, on a mountain, where he delivers the Great Commission, to go and make disciples of all nations.

This is what I'll confess I had to be reminded of, that jumped out at me as I returned to Matthew's Easter story. The disciples are sent ahead to Galilee, and it is only

there that they see the Risen Jesus. Galilee is where most of Jesus' ministry with them had taken place. The disciples are sent back to that place to be given instructions to begin the new ministry that they would now carry out without Jesus' physical presence with them. So from the first moment, the way Matthew tells us, the resurrection is linked directly to continuing ministry. In this telling of the story, even on Easter, this Easter just as on the first Easter, we are asked not simply to dwell on the joyous truth that makes us Christians. Yes, Jesus is risen, and lives and reigns forever with the Father and the Holy Spirit. AND – this Jesus is sending us, each one of us, ahead to the ministries that has prepared for us. It is in these ministries that we will encounter him, again and again.

In a wonderful article called *The Plain, Difficult Sense of Scripture*, in a recent issue of *The Christian Century*, Mark Labberton, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary, writes of the importance of “context and faithfulness in reading and living the text [of the bible] so its meaning becomes perspicuous (clear) to the world ... I was converted again to this conviction,” he writes, “one night in northern Uganda:

The Lord's Resistance Army was still at its evil games, and children slept in “night commuter” camps to try to stay alive and not be captured and tortured into becoming a child soldier. This night, as every night, hundreds of children came to sleep together in the rough of an empty school. Only one adult was stationed there – a middle-aged woman available to help and comfort any who might have need. Her husband and children were at their home a few blocks away. She explained that she came each night as a volunteer. We talked, and eventually I asked her why she was doing this. She talked about the children's need and her desire to do what she could under such difficult circumstances and in the face of such fears.

Still wanting to know more, I pressed, “But what motivates you to care? Why do you do it?” She looked me up and down and finally said, “Well, I am what you call a Christian. I read my Bible every day, and every week I go to a church where we eat something called the Lord's Supper. I can't read the Bible every day and share in that meal and not come here at night,” (*The Christian Century*, April 12, 2017)

We can't hear the Easter story – really hear it and digest it – without living it as well. It compels us to ministry: to acts of justice and mercy, to laying down our lives for our friends, to sharing the glorious good news that Jesus, the risen one, is Savior, and Lord, and King.

Where is the resurrected Jesus sending you? Go there. Don't delay.

Amen.