

Our Hope for Transformation

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Reading: Matthew 28:1-10

Easter, April 4, 2010

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

My preacher friend, Roland Perdue, tells a story about two close friends, one black, the other white. These two friends agreed on just about everything and their families spent much of their spare time together. They vacationed together; their children went to the same schools; they usually voted for the same candidates; they loved to cook a special meal together at the home of one or the other and their wives were the best of friends.

There was only one thing of significance they did not agree on: the color of God's skin. The African American was convinced that God was black and the Anglo was sure that God was white. One day, when on a trip together, their car was involved in an accident and crashed, killing them both. When they got to heaven they were asked to have a seat in the heavenly waiting room. God would be with them shortly. Sure enough, in a few minutes God walked out to greet them and she said, *"Buenos dais, senores. Coma esta?"*

My friend, Roland Perdue, takes from that little story the reminder that the Christian faith is often a laughing matter, so filled is it with bizarre and unexpected happenings. "Easter," he says, "is a day of God's divine frolic." Centuries earlier Dante called this story a Divine Comedy.

II

As you listen to this surprising take from Matthew's gospel, you will hear three unprecedented statements that are vital to understanding the difference the resurrection of Jesus has made. Like our little opening story, these developments are not what anyone expected on that morning when the angel spoke to them.

“You have nothing to fear,” said the angel. (That is to say, God is still in charge of your life.)

Then, next he says, “You are looking for Jesus. He is not here. He has been raised from the dead.” At that point the two women were probably ready to run or scream. They may have laughed at the absurdity of the angel's message, but not until later. They still thought they had plenty to fear.

And finally, the angel is heard telling them that, “Jesus has gone before you to Galilee” (i.e. into the wider world, into all the words that are).

If you remember nothing else from this morning's lesson, remember these three declarations from the angel in white at the empty tomb. These declarations are the bedrock of our faith:

1. They are the counter-force to being afraid of the future (“you have nothing to fear”).
2. They are the unique declaration about Jesus by the Christian community of faith (“He has been raised from the dead”).
3. And they provide the foundational mission statement for us, the church (“He is leading you into the world where you will find him, declaring good news”).

We are gathered here in the year of our Lord, 2010, to affirm our faith in these remarkable declarations. It is enough to make us laugh at ourselves for even believing we can pull it off.

Someone is heard saying, “First of all, I don't believe in angels. I'm a skeptic about such things.”

“Okay,” we say in response. “Think of the angel as a literary device, an aid to communication, a figure who speaks for God. Have a little fun with it. It is the *truth* of the message from this angelic figure that you want to concentrate on.”

The angel's declaration is motivated by an interest in seeing Jesus' followers move on after the resurrection. We, similarly, can move beyond our fears with Easter hope because we have seen that nothing, not even the powers of death, can defeat God's determination to resurrect our anxious lives. The resurrection message is that a new beginning and new ways to view the world are available to us. Our, sometimes drifting, lives can find direction and purpose.

III

Your presence here today is a sign of your commitment to the resurrection hope and to the future of this church in this place. You who are gathered today for worship want Bryn Mawr to thrive and extend its potential for ministry to and through this congregation in this region and beyond. If that were not true you would not be here today.

But to allow this resurrection hope to transform our life together we have to get over a few obstacles. One of them could be a touch of congregational apathy. It isn't a rampant disease but it's present in most churches today. We have grown tired of hearing about the economy's effect on non-profits and churches. We grow restless with transitions even though they are a constant in every other dimension of our lives. Nothing is as permanent as we thought it was and that throws us off

balance sometimes. Our apathy can get in the way of our imagination and creativity and snuff it out like a flame extinguished on a candle. How much better it is when we all look for ways to be part of the God movement in this place, beyond our fear, following Jesus who is already ahead of us, beckoning us to join him.

We will also want to be on the alert to the questionable notion that the new days will never be as good as the old days. The truth is that they will likely be better if we will just let it happen. When I was a boy I used to think there was no place better to eat dinner in Springfield, Missouri than Davidson's Cafeteria, downtown. Why Johnny Davidson was in my third grade class at Greenwood School! Whaddya think of that, huh? Once in a while we would splurge and eat Sunday dinner at the Cat and the Fiddle, out on the perimeter road. But it wasn't the same. You couldn't beat Davidson's for good, down-home cookin'. I felt the same, as did my whole family, about our church in Springfield, First and Calvary Presbyterian. Why nobody could preach like Arthur James McClung or sing a tenor solo like Wyman Hogg!

But you know what, those old days and old ways are nothing compared to what is available to us today in the year of our Lord, 2010. Why, just on the restaurant front alone, I can think of half a dozen or more places that can beat Davidson's or, even, the Cat and the Fiddle.

And as far as church is concerned, I wouldn't trade Bryn Mawr for any of them, not even for First and Calvary. What we do here in mission and program and music and worship, and what we have the capacity to do in the future is enough to give the most somber skeptic great hope. Why it is enough to make you smile and then laugh and then weep, saying, "How could we have ever thought our future was less than bright?" We have the opportunity of a lifetime, right here. And it's all in the name of the one who is still "going on before us", even Jesus Christ, the resurrected one.

IV

But here is the greatest secret of all about moving the family of faith out of the environs of the tomb and into the world where Jesus has gone before us: There is an *invisibility* about faith commitment that soon enough takes on a *visibility* that all the world can see. What I mean by this is that as you and I in our affirmations of faith are transformed by that experience. And as we are transformed, we will have a transforming effect upon others. As long as you remain less than declarative about what you believe why should you have any expectation that what you know to be true will be discovered and enjoyed by others. It is much like that favorite restaurant of today, that little bistro you've discovered. Your palate has been extended, perhaps even transformed and you want

that transforming experience to be enjoyed by others. So you recommend it to your friends. That is a pretty good definition of the church's transformational mission in the community. Or, as D. T. Niles used to say, "Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

We are all beggars before God but we are transformed beggars, servants of our risen Lord and master, deliverers of good news that is now out of the catacombs and out in the light of the morning, visible for all with eyes to see, and transformational for those with hearts of faith.

This is the beginning of something big. Commit yourself to something that has lasting, transformational effect: Following Christ in faith, leaving fear behind, joining him where he already is, "going on before us." It really doesn't get any better than that.

Thanks be to God.