

“Remember How He Told You” – Luke 24:1-12 – Easter Sunday

Ah ... Easter Sunday! Day of days in the Christian church; focal point of the Christian year. Once again we gather to celebrate, to listen to the resurrection story. But even as we do so people both in the world that surrounds the church and also even those within the church seem to be more and more confused about what Easter is, why we celebrate it, and what it means for us

If you think perhaps I'm exaggerating a bit you might take a peek at the 2,500-word essay by Douglas Todd in yesterday's Vancouver Sun. It is a large article, featured on the front page of the WeekendReview. Todd describes in one paragraph and a few other scattered references what Easter means to Christians, but the bulk of the article is devoted to how others have similar experiences or beliefs with respect to life-after-death.

I suppose it's natural enough that people are confused about Easter, and that even Christians are confused about Easter. We can note that even the close associates of Jesus started out confused. Mark's gospel is brutally frank about how the disciples of Jesus simply didn't get it all through their experiences with him throughout Galilee and Judea. Luke, as is Matthew, is much kinder to those close associates of Jesus, but even in our reading from his gospel this morning – the discovery of the empty tomb – opens with great misunderstandings.

“While [the women who had come to the tomb] were perplexed about this ...” the text tells us. Perplexed? I guess so! I would argue that those women were accustomed to hard work, but I'm not sure how they expected to roll the stone away. Their first confusion began when they discovered that the huge stone had already been removed. The questions must have started right then ... who would have done this? “Who beat us to it?” would be the next logical question running through their minds. And then to discover that the body was missing ... Wait a minute! What's going on here?! Oh yes, they were perplexed.

The text tells us they did get an answer, but that answer surely raised more questions, not the least of which centered around the two men “in dazzling clothes” that appeared beside them. Where did they come from? Who are they? What are they? Why are they here? (We'll leave aside for now other questions, such as why does Matthew and Mark have only one of these angelic characters, and Luke has two?)

Questions are normal. Questions – and answers – are the mechanisms that we use to explore our world, our universe, and really important questions like the meaning of life. Todd's article points out that virtually all religions, and non-religious religions as well, ask very similar questions about life, and while they vary in the details pretty much everyone agrees that life is important and that there is more to life than what we know. Questions are normal. Questions are even good, and sometimes I wish more Christians would be really curious about what's in the bible, and read it, and ask questions of it. If that were to happen, if people who claim that “the bible says this ...” and “the bible says that ...” were actually to read it with open ears and hearts and minds they just might discover that much of what we think we know about the Christian faith in general and Easter in particular is not quite what's in the text.

Now I know I'm running the risk of sounding a bit like a crusty, grumpy old guy here. If that's the case, please bear with me, for that's not what I'm trying to accomplish. But I do think that if there is only one day of the year that we really, really should concentrate on what the real Easter story is, it's today. Now I like bunnies, they're cute and cuddly – right up until they bite you or scratch you or ravage your garden. I like eggs, and while I appreciate the effort that goes into the really fancy decorated eggs I have to admit I prefer “over easy.” And while I am able to resist raiding Elizabeth's stash, I really, really like chocolate! But perhaps for just this one hour

we can set aside egg-laying bunnies, beautiful butterflies, and even – gasp! – chocolate, and remind ourselves of what is the central and foundational event of our faith.

As I said a moment ago, questions are good, and the two angelic characters begin with a question to the women who have come to tenderly care for the body of their beloved friend. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” they ask them, a question that prompts a million more, and in so doing opens a glimpse into a future that is completely different from the past. And yet this new future is still connected with the past. To provide affirmation for their declaration “he is not here, but has risen” the two angelic beings ask a most profound question of the women, and of all who would like them seek Jesus. “Remember how he told you ...?” they ask, not only invoking memories of his words that moved masses of people but also linking his rising from death with the prophetic foreshadowing in Hebrew scriptures.

That question, “remember how he told you” is the pivotal point in the Christ event, the moment when all that the disciples and the other followers of Jesus began to understand that all he had said and done led up to this moment, this incredible outpouring of God’s grace onto a hurt and suffering world.

And the women remembered, and understood that when Jesus said things like “tear down this temple and in three days I will raise it up again” he was referring to this historic moment. They believed, and returned to tell the others, who naturally enough had questions, questions that began to be answered through seeing the empty tomb with their own eyes, seeing the marks in his hands and side with their own eyes, eating and drinking with him on the shore like before, but not like before. Those who encountered the risen Christ did indeed remember how he had told them that he had come to give them new life, abundant life, and that he would not leave them alone.

You might think that this story would get a bit ‘old’, a bit ‘stale’ hearing it over and over again. But it doesn’t, at least not for me. This is the most exciting story in scripture, and each year there seems to be a different emphasis, a different understanding. Not substantially different, because the foundation of the story remains the same, indeed we usually read the same version of the story every year. This year we’re working with a slightly different version, the one from Luke’s gospel. The emphasis here is the link between the risen Christ and the fulfillment of what he had to say during the three exciting years just ended, and in particular with the pieces of Hebrew scripture that he had quoted. We are reminded to remember what Jesus had said about how he would rise again, and acknowledge along with the women and the disciples how he had brought these prophetic utterances to pass.

This is a wondrous drama that we could watch a hundred times or more, and be moved by it each and every time. But it is not a story merely to be heard, a play simply to be watched and enjoyed. This is a story about Christ among the living, and we are to live this story. We die with Christ in our baptism, the apostle Paul tells us, and we live as one with Christ in his body, the church. By the waters of baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit God claims us and calls each one by name. God unites us to Christ in his death and resurrection and also grafts us into the body of Christ as members of the church. This story is about Christ living among the living, and this resurrection story calls us to remember how we came into that new life.

We are – in our turn – the living among whom Christ lives. Live this story. As you watch the resurrection story move from darkness into light, remember the times you were sunk in your own despair, feeling cut off from all that was important to you, and remember also how encountering the risen Christ has brought you back into light, and life. I’m sure we can recall the many times we were confused, adrift and questioning, seeking to find faith even as Christ stood right beside us. Blessed are you if you can identify and remember that moment when you heard

Christ call you by name, and so much came clear, and God's grace flooded into your life. Blessed are we all as we realize the wondrous gift of new life in Christ, freely offered to us.

And just as this magnificent and divine story didn't end there at the tomb, but went on as the women went and told the others, who came to see and believe, and with Thomas and the others who came to see and believe, and with the men on the road to Emmaus who came to see and believe. As the witness to the risen Christ spread throughout Judea, and Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth people far and wide encountered the risen Christ in their own faith and lives. The story continues also for us as we live it. We are also called to proclaim by our very lives the joy that we have found in encountering the risen Christ. Like Mary Magdalene and the other women, and the other disciples, we will at times be perplexed – there will be times when it seems like hard slogging, just as it was for them as they continued to spread the message of God's redeeming love sealed in the new covenant of Christ's blood to the whole world. Some days we find it grueling to do that just in our little corner of the kingdom. But the message is about new life and living, about living in and with the risen Christ. It is Christ's presence with us, supporting and uplifting us with his Holy Spirit, that gives us not just the strength but also the joy to continue going and telling the others.

On this glorious Easter Sunday morning, hear once again the marvelous story of the resurrection, the rising again from death of Jesus as the Christ. Remember how he told us that he would rise again. Be reminded yet again that this is the story of God's grace, God's forgiveness. This is not a story of revenge, of punishment, of death. This is a story about life and living. This is a marvelous affirmation of redemption, of new and abundant and rich and joyous life shared with Christ who lives among us. This is a story of the grace of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to whom we give all thanks and honour and praise.