

Dying to Death, Embracing Life

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Matthew 28: 1-10

Having been to Galilee twenty-two years ago, I can understand why it is that the angel and later the risen Jesus said that the disciples are to go back there, and “there (they) will see him.” The beauty of the place is moving. Green fields of alfalfa waving gently in the warm breezes. The sound of the Sea of Galilee gently lapping at the shoreline, and the hills surrounding it on all sides. Bougainvillea in bloom and fields of wild red poppies. And then, of course, that beautiful place was home. It was where their work was. It was where their families were. In short, it was where their life was.

So yes, I can understand how it would be the place where they would see and hear and experience the risen Lord of Life. Even so, we know that that doesn't imply that life in a beautiful place will always be happy and beautiful. The history of that place in the Middle East belies that notion, as would the history of Ireland, and lots of other very beautiful places. Hard, scary things happen everywhere in families and in communities, at work. Everywhere. We know that, and yet we are here today to hear this message along with the two Marys that even so, we don't need to fear, Christ has been raised, and if we just go back to life we'll see him. Look, from the outset in this story, even an angel come to announce the resurrection of Jesus was a scary thing! There's fear all through this story.

If we think that first Easter morning was just all about joy, a great earthquake and an angel whose appearance was like lightning put that notion to bed. The guards were so afraid they shook with fear, “and became like dead men.” And the two Marys are afraid, too. So, the first words that the angel speaks are: “Do not be afraid.” And even after getting the full message of Jesus resurrection and the instructions for the disciples, they don't just joyfully run to tell the disciples, you remember. They run with joy and with *fear*. And when the risen Jesus meets them, he speaks to their fear, too. Fear is all through the story. Have you ever thought of the resurrection as scary? That's how Matthew tells it. Even an angel come to announce Jesus' resurrection is a scary thing. I think we can understand that. Life, and as John's Gospel reminds us, Life is what has come into being through Jesus, life can be scary.

Craig Barnes is a Presbyterian minister who teaches in seminary now. But when he was a pastor in Washington D.C., he was talking once with a couple in pre-marital counseling. They were desperately in love. Plans were coming together beautifully. And then, all of a sudden, the groom-to-be blurted out, “I just have to say that I am so scared of this!” His fiancée got a horrified look on her face, and he tried to explain that what he was afraid of was not marrying her, but losing her. “When my mother died, the grief was just overwhelming, and I love you even more. I just don't know how I can ever go on if something happens to you.” Dr. Barnes wisely reminded him that 100 percent of all marriages come to an end, some prematurely through divorce or early death, but all, eventually, one way or another. The best scenario, he told them, is that they will grow more in love over the course of their lifetime together, and then it will hurt even more when the end comes. Cheery fellow, Dr. Barnes.

Life is scary. We know that. It is finally why human cultures are built around trying to deny death. Dr. Sondra Wheeler in our Lenten Video study was pointing out what we all know at least in the back of our head, about advertising. She pointed out that what the advertisers are finally all trying to sell us is bliss. Endless (because there's always a “new” product to buy) bliss. She talked about the SUV commercials that, of course, don't just show us the big, bright shiny new SUV, but they drive it up in front of the huge house, and out come the happy wife and the joyous kids. And everyone's all excited and in this blissful state together. And it's all built on the need to deny the reality of death, because in fact we know we can lose the things

we most deeply love in an instant. That need to deny death couldn't be clearer than with SUVs , could it? Especially those really big ones. I mean, they sit so high above everyone else on the road, and are built on heavy truck frames. People will tell you they buy them for the safety factor.

We will go to great lengths and expense to maintain our illusion that we won't have to die. And sometimes there's a sense in which we try to make this day, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus be about just that. Not having to die. Now, certainly, we do say that God being who we know God to be in Jesus even after physical death will raise us from that death, too to begin life anew in God again. That acknowledgment of who God is, is part of this celebration. But, the resurrection of Jesus isn't primarily meant to prove the existence of an afterlife. There are all kinds of thoughts about afterlife, and the resurrection of the *body*, when God brings the kingdom in fullness on the earth, the resurrection of the *body*, so that the dead can be here to enjoy that, is probably *not* our most widespread belief about that. But, that belief, which *is* what the belief in resurrection was about, *was* widespread during the time of Jesus.

No, what was and is so significant and startling about what we celebrate today is that this Jesus who lived so vulnerably and so forgivingly and so lovingly, and who died in such shame and utter human weakness is the first one raised! He is affirmed as God's Son. *He* is the beginning of what God's kingdom looks like on earth! His resurrection is the affirmation of the sacredness of this limited, creaturely life. It's meant to enable the courageous living of it after the manner of Jesus, vulnerable, without need to protect ourselves, without need to deny death, able to forgive, as Don Henley wrote, "even if you don't love me anymore." In the resurrection of Jesus, we die to our need to separate the physical from the spiritual, and the secular from the sacred. All of that is shown to be false. That's the meaning of the resurrection of the "body," ... that tenet of faith many of us are most likely to skip over.

As Michael Hardin has written, it means that "Jesus' flesh, our flesh (human flesh) rises to the eternal." That's why his resurrection "is the hope of all creation, the hope of every bird, every plant and tree, every stone and river, every animal, every drop of water, every flame of fire, every breath of air." As Paul wrote: "The creation groans in travail awaiting the unveiling of the children of God." He's talking about the resurrection. So, to deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus is to give up hope for creaturely life, ours and that of all creation. It's to say instead that what *really* matters are our *ideas* and ideals. *They're* what's sacred, not this flesh which is, after all what is given by God. But, our faith says, doesn't it, that it's this one who lived fully humanly, by living fully vulnerable and fully loving who is raised to new life in and for this earth.

Listen to the story. That's why the word is, over and over, "do not be afraid, he has been raised," even as they are afraid. Here's the difference between living a life of fear that results in trying to deny death, and a life that can *embrace* the fearful things and go on living and loving. It's in hearing over and over again this assurance that this vulnerable One is raised, and so you don't have to fear. See, in Matthew's story, it's those trying to keep life controlled, the guards, who become "like dead men," and so they don't get to hear this message the angel brings. They're comatose or catatonic, or something. The women, on the other hand, come open to their grief, and so open to life in spite of their fears, and so *they* hear the message, *they* get the assurance, this creaturely life as scary as they have known it to be is *holy* and is to be lived like Jesus did.

I think that's why he would go ahead of them and meet them in Galilee, too. Because the resurrection of Jesus is not about how mighty and powerful he now is, but about how humble and loving, and open and vulnerable and forgiving he still is, just as he was, just as they had known him before in Galilee. This Jesus is risen. You can live your life, this creaturely, sometimes scary life, unafraid. You can die to the power of death and embrace life. Just go

back home, go back to the land you know and love, the people you know and love and who sometimes drive you crazy and you'll see him there. Friends we too have "seen" him, in all of our own "Galilees."

Think about where you have known true bliss, where your life has felt full and whole. We did this exercise in the Lenten study last Wednesday night where we were asked to close our eyes and think about a time of sweetness in our lives, a time when life felt complete and full. We were asked to try to reconstruct that time as fully as we could in our mind's eye. And, as we were to be talking about our consumer culture and trying to sort through all the false promises it makes us, we were asked to try to see what, if any, *objects*, what *things* were necessary for that moment we were imagining. And then we shared those with one or two others. Well, I know what types of pictures came to my mind and those with whom I shared. And I would venture to guess that I would be on really solid ground were I to say that to a person, those pictures that came to our minds all involved being with a person or persons you love or loved, and experiencing together something deep and beautiful. The holy gifts of this creaturely life. And those holy gifts keep on being given in spite of and past all the deaths we ever die, all the grief we ever feel, all the hurt we ever experience. That's resurrection.

It's what Craig Barnes was trying to tell that couple in pre-marital counseling. You can either go through life fearing that any day now you will lose the one you love, lose the life you love, in which case you will not be living at all. You'll be slowly dying. Or, you can die to the notion that you will somehow be able to hold onto your beloved forever, to keep him or her safe, and to keep your life 'just so,' and so embrace this limited creaturely life, scary as it is, in which case you are free to seize the day and embrace the love as a holy gift from the Giver of life. That's cross and resurrection. Dying to death, embracing life. That's living a *fully* human life, after the manner of our risen Lord. That's what we celebrate this day, isn't it? He is risen. Do not be afraid. And so, you say after me: He is risen!

Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.