

What Good News?

Mark 16:1-15

(Easter Sunday – March 23, 2008)

Fine! But what was the good news they were to proclaim? Was it merely to report that several badly traumatized, grief-stricken, demoralized followers were now reporting alive, one whose death a couple days earlier, destroyed their hope and paralyzed them with grief? That would be an interesting news item – could be a good case -- study on group grief. But by itself would such a report transform lives and change the world? What real difference would it make for the depressed, middle-aged tentmaker living over in Damascus or for a harried, young mother/homemaker up in Antioch or an ailing, retired winemaker over on Cyprus or an unhappy shepherd south of Jericho? Or change the inflection and ask ourselves the same question, “What good news?” Read the headlines about the economy, about civilian and American deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, about the Israeli-Palestinian mess, about political scandals, and we might also raise the question, “What good news?” We have our own grief’s to worry about.

Particularly in that time, there was a constant stream of rumors of magic, of the supernatural and of miracles of every sort. So why wouldn’t the story of someone coming back from his grave be received a little like the stuff we see on the front of those supermarket tabloids while waiting in the check-out line? Along with the picture of a housecat with six paws and of a camel whose owner claimed it spoke fluent Hebrew, might be the headline, “Galilean teacher survives Roman execution. See page five for details.” If the lines were long enough that there was time to read page five, he would discover that all the reports came from a small number of persons who were extremely close to the one they reported resurrected, and at that the details of the reports were somewhat varied. So our ancient tabloid reader shrugs it off, puts the tabloid back, pays for his groceries and moves on to more practical matters. Not that it wasn’t interesting enough if true, but still so what? What could it possibly have to do with him? And today, many on this Easter Sunday may be asking the same question, “What does it have to do with me?”

Considered that way, it leaves one wondering, “If it were important that there be this resurrection, wasn’t there a lot more that should have been accomplished with it and through it?”

Shouldn’t there, for example, at the very least have been an appearance of the risen Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple in front of the scores of worshippers? That would have rearranged a lot of religious thinking. Better yet, he could have presented himself alive in the middle of

downtown Jerusalem, leaving some of those who'd clamored for his death, shaking in their sandals. Would it not also have been a powerful thing to have him confront Pilate or Herod or Caiaphas or maybe all three of them, forever to shatter their smug arrogance? Resurrection appearances like THAT would have had a MAJOR impact on public opinion, wouldn't they? Even the most cynical would be forced to believe.

And even if, for some reason it were necessary that the resurrection be limited (as it was) to only close followers, then shouldn't the resurrected Jesus have taken time to carefully spell out what they (and we) were to make of it so they could have more easily preached it, proven it and promoted it? Did his resurrection mean, for example, that truly godly people could henceforth be resuscitated after dying? Might it reveal something new about the "spirit world" or maybe about reincarnation or might it possibly give them some practical information about that "kingdom of heaven" of which he had often spoken? Or if nothing else, wouldn't it have been an ideal time to reveal some of the specifics about the glories of heaven and/or the current temperature in hell? Wouldn't one expect that a return from the grave, for heaven's sake, would have been far more public, much more dramatic – something like the way Steven Spielberg would have put it together?

These followers of Jesus, so frightened, confused, chagrined and demoralized as of Friday, badly needed right now, public reassurance and vindication. They longed for an unmistakable sign that a big mistake had been made here; that God doesn't normally allow evil people to treat someone as marvelous as was Jesus with such malice, contempt, ridicule, torture and then to kill him in such a reprehensible way. Without a miraculous reversal, a public vindication, an indication of the wicked getting their comeuppance or some other major reassurance, God's credibility with them was quite low as of last Friday.

It's reflected in this modern story about the three doctors who died, went to heaven, and met St. Peter at the gates. St. Peter asked the first doctor why he thought he deserved to enter. "I was a doctor with the Christian Medical and Dental Society," the doctor replied. "Every year I went to the Southeast for 3 weeks and treated the poor Native Americans free of charge. "Welcome," said St. Peter, who then asked the second doctor, "And what did you do?" "I was a missionary in Africa for 11 years, and worked in a hospital helping the tribes there," she replied. "Enter into the joy of the Lord," St. Peter said. He turned to the third doctor and asked, "And what did you do?" "I was a doctor at an HMO." "Come on in," said St. Peter. "But you can only stay for three days."

If you've ever been at a similar point in your own experience, you know something of the feeling. When someone has gotten away with blatant exploitation of you, when you've been

subjected to deliberate cruelty, when you've been slandered or humiliated, when your efforts have been blocked because someone wanted you to fail, when your ideals, values or principles have been ridiculed and sneered at, doesn't it feel as if what really needs to happen before you can come back to life and hope again, is some public acknowledgement of the wrongness of it, some recompense, some kind of vindicating turnabout – something – ANYTHING that shows that you weren't a fool, or maybe that you weren't to blame, or that you were in the right. How can there be any further trust or hope or belief or concern or forgiveness from you without that? On those awful Easter Saturdays, doesn't it feel like that's part of God's job at such times, embarrassing the wicked, vindicating the faithful and putting things back the way they belong.

So yes, the resurrection I'd want would have been one where the risen Jesus shows up in Herod's bedroom about 2:00 a.m., leaving Herod trembling like a leaf, soiling himself in fear, drooling in abject remorse and begging forgiveness. Yes, give me a resurrection after which Pilate calls a Jerusalem town meeting and announces that, having seen the risen Jesus, he is resigning as governor because he now knows what a spineless, morally bankrupt, insipid person he is. I need a resurrection that inspires and inflames the Jerusalemites to rise up and chase the entire, corrupt, religious bureaucracy out of town and across the county line.

Understandable and delicious as are such fantasies, that is NOT the Easter story – not at all in the nature of what happened. To the contrary, it seemed to work overtime to avoid being any kind of divine “grand slam.”

We discover, for example, that it is NOT true that we should expect that when God really wants to make a point with us, it will be through conspicuous, sensational, dazzling, delicious, or exhilarating means. At least this which we call Easter, was very quiet, very personal, very reserved. Only disciples and very close followers experienced it.

That leads right to the next crucial matter. Looked at carefully, Easter was at least as much about God bringing the disciples and followers back to life as it was about the resurrection of Jesus. It actually told us more about how you and I might come back to life than about how Jesus did. As you know, every disciple went, in a matter of hours, from cringing in anger, blind frustration, crippling grief and remorse, to unstoppable excitement, buoyancy, courage and confidence.

That seemed to have something to do with yet another part of it: the simple discovery that physical death wasn't what everyone had it cracked up to be, that while physical death rearranges things, it doesn't destroy or defeat anything Godly and good. So while yes, their

bodies would still wear out or be destroyed sometime, as of Easter, that was something they could live with – live with it rather than fear it, obsess over it and run from it.

Now they understood in a whole new way what REAL death was (and is): the death that is cynicism, for example, the death that takes the form of self-hatred, the death of bitterness and resentment, the death of petulance, the death of hard-heartedness and all the others that suck the life right out of a human being and leave only a brittle, empty shell walking around. That, you see, the bringing people back to life is the business God is in, and God does a lot of it all the time and in all kinds of ways.

You get a taste for it in what was the reply of a recovering alcoholic to a cynical friend who said to him, “I suppose now that you’re going to Alcoholics Anonymous, you believe all the religious stuff about Jesus walking on water, shutting down a windstorm, feeding thousands of people with a few pieces of bread and a couple of fish, turning water into wine.”

This recovering alcoholic paused for a moment and replied that he really hadn’t time to think about those miracle stories, because he was too busy watching God turn vodka into furniture, turn cheap wine into groceries, turn his wife’s fear of him into love, and turn his children’s repugnance of him into respect.

Exactly! You can begin to see, can’t you, that this actually could have something to do with that middle-aged tentmaker in Damascus and the homemaker in Antioch and the aging winemaker in Cyprus and the shepherd from Jericho. Or for that matter the Chicago taxi driver, the Detroit divorcee, the cancer patient from Phoenix and all the rest of us who live our lives in tension between hope and disillusionment, doubt and faith, caution and risk-taking, love and selfishness, principle and expediency, meaning and futility.

To our questionings and searchings as to whether there is a God, and IF there is, does that God know and care, the answer turned out to be a solid “Yes!” But it’s the restoring, renewing, re-creating God that we NEED rather than the show-off, big brother, bullying God that, in our worst moments, we sometimes fantasize.

What good news? Is any real life possible when what you’ve poured yourself into turned out empty, became a dead end? Is there any resurrection? Is there any real life, hope and meaning that can come back after the death of your wonderful husband or wife? Is there any return after having been completely buried in the grave of your divorce? Is God able to bring forth a “resurrected you” after that last child leaves home or after retirement? When you find out that your body isn’t going to last much longer, can it possibly be true, as this suggests, that it isn’t at all the end of your life?

To everything and everyone, who for all their sad little reasons, have come to believe that the answer to all of that is “no,” the answer in Jesus – his life, his death and his coming back to life -- was a quiet but firm “YES!”

God, it turned out, is quite competent to bring whatever transpires, ultimately to work together for good. That’s good news.

Our sins and mistakes – even the terrible ones – turn out NOT to be unforgivable – none of them. That’s good news.

Our devoted efforts and sacrificings are not wasted (even when it everything makes it appear that they have been), so love, principle, compassion and the like, are not futile or impossible. That’s extremely good news.

Evil, for all the attention it draws, does not turn out to have the “edge” in our world. There is tremendous reason for hope in that.

The future is open and there is no inevitability (except for those poor souls who believe in it). That’s exciting news.

Beyond and beneath all of that, though, is simply knowing that the world and life are not the mystery-proof, miracle-proof, one-dimensional, predetermined, cramped, little realm that the dullest or most arrogant of people make all this out to be. That too is great news!

That, briefly, is the practical version of the good news that blossomed forth from Easter, AND it still does blossom forth in the lives of those who are open to it.