

MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Seven Miracles of Jesus: 7. The Other Resurrection

John 11:38-44

While standing in an aisle of a bookstore last week a buddy from high school said hello. We caught up in fast doses of life experiences and then he asked about how things were going in the preaching business and if I was ready for Easter. Judging himself not to be very knowledgeable about the Bible he said, *"The point of Easter...you know what does it for me? It's that part of the story where an angel or somebody says to Mary who is lurking around the tomb. 'Who are you looking for? He is not here.'"*

Imagine that, when it comes to a smorgasbord of how the bedrock moment of our faith was preached, taught, dramatized, or whatever over the course of my friend's lifetime what "did it for him" was the passage from Luke you heard earlier describing Mary's encounter with two mysterious men saying "Who are you looking for? He's not here."

The fact that you might be an infrequent worship celebrant as my friend admits or a regular really doesn't make much difference. What's important...what makes all the difference is finding that "this is what does it for me" moment. So on this Easter morning we'll take a slightly different tack, one that may approach the idea of resurrection in a way we've never considered before. Through the Lenten season we've been looking at the seven miracles of Jesus that the writer of John's Gospel uses to affirm, confirm, and give credibility to the messiah-ship of Christ. Today we're highlighting the greatest, the most telling, and most compelling...**the other resurrection.**

It's not farfetched to think that Jesus had a few favorite acquaintances and friends. As an itinerant preacher-teacher-healer we know he visited some towns and villages more than once. Some were probably traveled through frequently as stopping points for the night while on the way to somewhere else. One of these villages was Bethany where it seems Jesus had cultivated a close relationship with two sisters: Mary and Martha and their brother named Lazarus. Like good friends they kept in touch and when Lazarus became seriously ill the sisters sent word to Jesus, *"The one you love is very sick."*

According to the story, when Jesus gets the message he still stays where he is for two more days and during that time Lazarus dies. By the time he reaches Bethany he has missed the funeral and burial by four days. Martha meets him and says with the emotion and inflection in her voice you can only imagine, *"If you'd been here my brother*

would not have died." But Jesus gives a powerful response, one that is considered among the best of his sayings. "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." John 11:25-26

When Jesus gets to their house Mary is there and overcome with emotion she too says, "If you'd been here my brother would not have died." The scripture passage I'm using this morning continues the story.

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. [39] Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." [40] Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" [41] So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. [42] I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." [43] When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" [44] The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

The other resurrection somehow doesn't get much of a reaction beyond the typical "and the crowds marveled" response. But it wasn't caught on tape and couldn't be broadcast over the evening news so it wasn't long before the skepticism arose and the conspiracy theories began to circulate. The crowds were duped, some said. Lazarus was a con man in league with Jesus, said others. The priceless reaction so consistent with our time was the fear of the Pharisees. They were determined to destroy Jesus' credibility because they feared that if the Romans found out what had happened they'd be out of a job - washed up religious figures.

One of the intriguing sidebars of this story is that the two sisters use the same wording when they first see Jesus. It's as if they've talked about their disappointment together and are singing the same tune. "If you'd been here my brother would not have died." It's possible they were aware that he'd put off coming to them for two days. It would not have been the kind of behavior that set well. And what Jesus did in that case isn't so different from what we do or experience from time to time.

"If you'd have been here this would not have happened" eventually finds its way into the marriage lexicon. Wives say it to husbands, husbands say it to wives, and parents say it to children. It's used in the aftermath of everything from burning dinner to missing a movie to disappointing a child to losing health, home, and love. "If you'd have been here!" It's the kind of disappointment that can lead to doubt and even the disintegration of respect and relationships.

It's been hard not to hear the reports of the sentencing hearing for 9/11 collaborator Zacarias Moussaouri. The jury has been listening to tapes and phone conversations from passengers of the high-jacked airplanes. A few transcripts have been made public. One in particular relates a son on board with his wife and small child calling his father and saying, "We think they plan to fly into a building. Don't worry, it will be quick." A few minutes later their plane slams into one of the twin towers. My initial thought was "Well then do something. Don't just sit there and let it happen! If you'd been there who knows what other outcome might have been possible."

On the other end Hamilton Peterson whose father and step-mother were on United Flight 93 that crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania was interviewed on NPR. He along with other people who lost loved ones was invited to listen to the log of cell phone calls. When asked, "*What did you hear?*" Peterson responded, "*What it told me personally was that some very ordinary citizens in a matter of minutes had risen to the challenge and foiled and thwarted an elaborate criminal conspiracy and it told me that but for their actions it is likely that the U.S. Capital or the White House would have been in flames.*" Some of the passengers had been there, you see, and Peterson was so appreciative.

I wonder if the dynamics of what I've discussed has some similarity with how we view our relationship with God. When it comes to the trying times and our deepest fears there can be an inclination in us to think of God, "*Don't just sit there do something!*" And if Mary and Martha can approach Jesus with the words, "*If you'd have been here this would not have happened*" so too can we.

But remember what Jesus does with the emotional plea of the sisters? His heart melts and greatly disturbed or shaken he comes to the tomb and says, "*Take away the stone...Lazarus come out!*" His emotional connection to Lazarus prods him to use his God-given abilities. He brings Lazarus back to life...a miracle. It's what any of us would do if we had that God-given capability. And so we do, using whatever powers we possess...powers like compassion and love.

During his interview Hamilton Peterson shared something else that was hopeful. In a voice strained with emotion he said, "*The courage of some of the men and women calling family members is astounding. Average people tying up personal effects, final issues, what I would call house keeping...it's the little things where you hear those communications that hit you.*"

It made me realize that the son on the plane calling his father wasn't just sitting after all. He was calling his Dad, using what powers he possessed to express his love. "*Don't worry Dad, it will be quick.*" Whether we are storming a cockpit or calling our family and friends we all respond to challenging times in different ways. To the charge "If you'd have been there" we have often been there after all.

The same can be said of God. Just as the heart of Jesus melts for the sisters so too does God's heart melt for us. To the fear of death and our grief over the loss of those we love God has his own expression of "Taking away the stone." He has heard our plea and has been there all along.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

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