THE LAND OF THE LIVING

We preachers tend to stretch things a bit to prove our points, have you ever noticed? Sometimes our illustrations betray us! A young neophyte preacher was conducting a funeral for a leading citizen of a community, and while he was extolling the virtues of the man, he gestured toward the coffin and said, “What we have here is only the shell — the nut is gone.” Oh my goodness! Do you think the man’s family ever forgave the preacher?

Sometimes our illustrations of Christian truth come unexpectedly from surprising sources.

   Michael Faraday, an English chemist and physicist in the 1800’s was a devout Christian. Faraday discovered the principle of electromagnetic induction which is the basis for the electric generator and the electric motor.

   One day a workman who was helping Faraday knocked a silver cup into a jar of strong acid. The cup was quickly destroyed. It disintegrated and disappeared! But Faraday put some chemicals into the jar and in a moment the silver which had disintegrated settled to the bottom in a big blob. Faraday retrieved it and he sent the shapeless mass of silver to a silversmith, who recreated the cup as shining, beautiful, and bright as ever.

   Faraday asked if the silversmith can do that to a dissolved silver cup, cannot our great God give us a new body on the resurrection morning? (Fowler).

One more illustration. Joseph Jeter shares this account about Charles Goff, the author of a little book tiled Anyone for Calvary? When Goff was in seminary, he used to ride a train from Evanston to his student pastorate in North Harvey, Illinois. The train would stop on signal at a little station outside the city limits of North Harvey, the place was called Calvary because the most prominent thing about the area was Calvary Cemetery. Always as the train approached the station, the trainman would come into the car and call out, “Calvary next! Anyone for Calvary?” Occasionally someone would get off to visit a grave during the day, but never at night, because it was a desolate place at night.

   Then, one night, an interesting thing happened. It was during the cold of winter and when the door at the end of the train opened, snow blew in on the swirling wind. The train man came in and called out, as he had some many times before, “Calvary next! Anyone for Calvary?” A man got up. He turned up his coat collar, picked up a package, and walked out into the snow. Turning, Goff looked out the window at the man standing in the winter night. And then Goff noticed something he had not seen before. Not far from the tracks was an apartment building. In a window there a light went on and Goff could see a woman and two small children standing in the warm apartment. The man who had left the train waved to them and began to walk toward the light, the light that shone across the darkness of Calvary.
Beyond the darkness there is light; beyond the despair there is hope; beyond the cemetery there is life – all because Christ is risen! (Jeter, 112)

It was still dark when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb (20:1). Mary was in darkness, even in the dark night of the soul – as we explored in our Soul Keeping small group study. The dark night of the soul is when you can’t understand what is happening …or why …or what comes next.

Mary stood at the cross while Jesus was dying. The disciples ran away, but she stayed; stayed at that awful scene, crying and praying for God to intervene. But God did not stop Jesus’ crucifixion. She stayed until he was dead and buried.

Now she comes to the grave in the darkness of the “the first day of the week.” “The first day of the week” is the beginning of the Jewish work week, the day when everyone is trying to get back to normal after a bloody weekend. Little did Mary or anyone else know that nothing would return to normal ever again, because the resurrection disrupted business as usual.

Mary is literally and figuratively in the dark of the tomb. She who devotedly stayed at the cross now cannot stay away from the tomb. She didn’t know what to expect, but she went. She finds the tomb empty and assumes that the body has been stolen (20:2). Her assumption is the first in a series of wrong assumptions and wrong conclusions by the disciples. They have a hard time understanding what has happened in the darkness.

Mary went to the tomb looking for the familiar, for the expected, for death. She was looking for Jesus, but he wasn’t there. So, like us when we can’t find something, she went back and looked again. And like us, when she still couldn’t find it, she went and got some help. She got Peter and John. They ran back to the tomb with her. They looked inside the tomb but didn’t see anything Mary hadn’t seen. Peter and John both saw the linen wrappings, the folded grave clothes.

John 20, verse 8, says that John “saw and believed” (20:8), but what he “believed” is ambiguous: did he believe that Jesus was raised from the dead or did he believe, agree, that the body had been stolen? because verse 9 says that “they did not understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead” (20:9).

Verse 10, “Then the disciples returned to their homes.” Went back to their homes. They “believe” but go back to the familiar; back to trying to figure it out, trying to make sense of it all, trying to make peace with their dashed hopes and expectations.

**But Mary stayed, and she stooped to look in the tomb.** Mary is grieving, yes, but she dares to linger; and still hoping, she stoops, looks, and sees two angels. The angels have no direct message for her, only a question about her grief. “Woman, why are you weeping?” Notice, these angels don’t proclaim the resurrection…they prepare Mary for an encounter with the risen Christ!
Turning around, Mary sees someone she does not recognize standing there. Seeing is not yet believing until the stranger speaks to her. Even when Jesus speaks to her, she does not yet know. She thinks the speaker is the gardener. Then Jesus calls her by her name, “Mary.” That is all he says. He does not explain his resurrection, he simply calls her. But in hearing, she sees, she understands. She gets it! She comprehends Jesus, because two verses later she tells the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” (20:18).

Jesus says, “Do not hold on to me” (20:17). The Risen Christ is on the move, ascending, eluding our grasp, restless, with still more to accomplish. He is not to be held, even by us who love him. We must not, we cannot, we are not able to, restrain him, or limit his movements among us, and his movements beyond us, to find others, to reach others.

In what follows in the rest of John’s gospel, Jesus appears to the disciples, then to Thomas, and then, the other gospels tell us, Jesus found the crowds and appeared to them. And as Jesus met other people, their confusion vanished; their faith galvanized to resurrection truth and power!

Read the verses carefully - none of these people found Jesus that first Easter; Jesus found them. He found Mary Magdalene crying in the garden. He found his disciples hiding in the Upper Room, shutters closed, door locked. He found Thomas and invited Thomas to touch his wounds and believe. In the post-resurrection accounts, Jesus came to his old friends and found them, reclaimed them, rejuvenated them!

Even now Jesus finds us in the land of the dead, in the land of the doubtful, in the land of the fearful, in the land of the lost and confused and hurting, and he leads us to the new place, the Land of the Living.

Easter is not just about life after death, it is also about life here and now, life of hope and meaning and strength and courage and determination and power here and now in THIS life! And you need not be in the cemetery to encounter the risen Jesus. Jesus will find you whenever and wherever two or more are gathered in his name. Jesus will find you when you pray with and for each other. He’ll find you when you open your hymnbook and sing your faith. He’ll find you at church supper or you share a meal and conversation with a friend. He’ll find you when you read your Bible or devotional materials. He’ll find you when you listen to a friend at school or go to visit someone who is sick or homebound or lonely or in need. He’ll find you as you build homes for Habitat or serve at Loaves and Fishes. He’ll find you as you mentor a school child or teach an adult to read. He’ll find you as you make soup with others in Trinity’s kitchen and when you ring a doorbell to deliver that soup. He’ll find you in your small group meeting and in your daily devotional time. He’ll find you among your friends in youth fellowship group or at choir practice or during a staff meeting or a team meeting. He’ll find you when you text or email a friend your prayers, your support and encouragement.
He’ll find you when you hold someone’s hand or hug someone in the hallway.

When he finds you, you come into the land of the living. In that place, in that encounter, in that experience, Jesus finds you and gives you the faith to live differently:
- to live joyful in spite of difficult circumstances you face;
- to live hopeful in spite of tragedies that haunt our world;
- to live lovingly in spite of the hate abounds in our world,
- to live confidently in spite of the pride and ego and evil that still drive nails into the cross;
- to live courageously in spite of fear and doubt and mistrust that surround us.

Mary told the as-of-yet unseeing and unbelieving disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” Her witness prompts the disciples to RUN, SEE, and TELL. When Jesus comes and finds you, the same happens. Your pace quickens, your heart beats faster, you get involved because you can’t help it! Something wonderful has happened and it grips you! Easter is new life, new power, new hope, new sense of direction, new purpose! Jesus lives! And because he lives, we live too! We are in the Land of the living… Swept up in the joy we RUN and SEE and now we are to TELL the news “Jesus lives!” To tell it boldly far and wide because there are people all around us who still live in the land of death and doubt and despair and who do not know how to live.

Jesus Christ is risen today! You and I are resurrection people, the body of Christ raised up for the world! Jesus calls us and helps us to love one another and forgive one another, to support one another, to serve one another, to encourage one another, to help one another, to witness to one another!

I cannot preach Easter truth without inviting you to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Jesus stands at the door and knocks; if you will open the door he will come in to your heart and change your life for the better! Will you open the door and let him in to your heart? Do it! Do it now. Now is the day of truth. Now is the day of victory and new beginnings!

- If you already know and love Jesus as you Lord, bless you!
- If you’ve never accepted Christ before, or
- if you have accepted him but have ignored him, and so want to recommit your life to him and reaffirm your faith in him, this can be a time to thank God again for his love and grace that sustain you.

No matter your situation, I encourage you to commit yourself anew to God. Close your eyes and open your hearts, and let me pray for you.

Dear God, I need you. I have sinned and fallen short of your glory. I am sorry and I repent of my sins. Forgive me, please. I put my trust in Jesus Christ alone for my salvation. I accept your gift of forgiveness. And I celebrate today the glory of Easter – in my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Thank you, God!
Lord, enter the hearts of those who seek you now.
Grant them your peace, your love, your strength, your hope, your renewing grace.
Renew the vitality of faith grown stale.
Forgive us, save us, renew us, and go with us into this day, making new our world, our hope, and our witness! In Jesus' mighty name we pray.
ALLELUIA! AMEN!

“Jesus lives!” “I have seen the Lord!” “Hallelujah!” Amen!

Sources


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