

“Good News In Unexpected Places”
Mark 16:1-8
The Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore
Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006

A graveyard is not a place we go to hear good news. Neither is a tomb! Yet the Easter story is a story about good news found in an unexpected place, an empty tomb and this good news is the basis of the Christian faith. Easter is about good news in unexpected places!

Three women set out at the break of day to go to Jesus’ tomb to anoint his body, and on the way, they are worried about something: “Who will roll away the huge stone for them from the entrance to the tomb?” Perhaps they should have anticipated this problem a little earlier. But they were in a hurry, and they didn’t want to be seen as friends of Jesus. Indeed, after the crucifixion, Jesus’ disciples had scattered fearing for their own lives. They thought that as friends of Jesus, they too might be killed. So these women went in secret, just at dawn, hoping no one would see them to anoint Jesus. But how would they roll away the huge stone at the entrance to the tomb; whom could they trust. Yet, this problem didn’t stop the women from going to do what they had to do. They went to the tomb and there they found good news in an unexpected place.

The first lesson from this text is don’t let obstacles keep you from the resurrection. Most of us can recall times in our lives when we were called into a future knowing that ahead of us were some huge obstacles. Perhaps it was starting a new job, or losing the one we had. Maybe it was having to move or facing a surgery with unknown results. Life presents us with many huge obstacles, and we just don’t know how we’re going to roll those stones away. These obstacles may terrify us. They may incapacitate us. They often discourage us from trying.

The obstacles life presents may feel like a tomb. But sometimes there are people, some who we may never know, who like angels go ahead of us and roll away the stones so that when we get to the dark, damp, tomb of despair we experience good news; not death but resurrection. The young man told the women: “Christ is not dead; he is risen!” So lesson number one is, don’t let obstacles, like big stones, keep you from what God is calling you to do. If God wants you to go and do something, then someone will be there to roll away the stone.

The second lesson for today is that the empty tomb, which we now know to be good news, was first experienced with great alarm by these women on that first Easter morning. A young man, dressed in a white robe, says to them: “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus. He has been raised; he is not here. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

This phrase: “tell his disciples and Peter” is odd. Wouldn’t “tell his disciples” naturally include Peter? Why didn’t the young man just say, “tell his disciples.” Looking backwards in the story, we know that Peter was the one disciple who emphatically denies knowing Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times. So to say “tell his disciples and Peter” seems to underline the importance that Peter be told that Jesus is risen and waits for him in Galilee.

It must have been bad enough to live with Peter's guilt but then to how hard to have to face Jesus after doing the very thing Peter says he will not ever do! Peter had learned the hard way to never say never! This part of the story seems to hint that Jesus in particular wanted to be reconciled with the one person who most strongly denied him in his darkest hour. So the second lesson we learn from the Easter story is that resurrection and reconciliation go together.

We human beings know the pain of alienation, the agony of our guilt. We experience it in personal relationships and often we long to be reconciled. Reconciliation brings resurrection in our personal relationships and also in our world. Today we are hoping and praying that out of death and destruction that we've witnessed since last Easter, tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, wars, a resurrection may happen.

There was a story in the LA Times a couple of years ago about a program called "Pennies for Peace." In just ten years a young man named Greg Mortenson built 28 schools for children in a remote area on the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It began when Mortenson, a former U.S. Army medic, went there to climb the second highest peak in the world, K2. After 78 days he became so weak he was forced to descend and along the way he was befriended by two men who took him back to their village and nursed him back to health. During the days that he spent recovering, Mortenson noticed that there were no schools in the village but that the children were eager to learn. When he recovered enough to return home, he committed himself to raising money for a teacher's endowment for this remote village of the world.

He started by writing to nearly 600 celebrities. His only reply was from Tom Brokaw who sent him \$100. He submitted 16 grant proposals that were all rejected. He sold everything he could do without, but raised only \$2000. Finally, a group of elementary school children in Wisconsin donated \$623 in pennies; and once the children got on board, the adults began to take him seriously.

Mortenson says, "If we try to resolve terrorism with military might and nothing else, then we will be no safer than we were before 9/11. In the long-term, we have to help feed and clothe people [in the very places] where terrorists are recruiting volunteers. "And we have to educate them--especially the girls. We have to prove to them that the world can be a better place. If we truly want a legacy of peace for our children, we need to understand that this is a war that will ultimately be won with books, not with bombs." This was one man's way of sharing good news in a very remote and unexpected place. It's up to those of us who have received the good news to go out into the world remembering that resurrection and reconciliation are inextricably linked. The third lesson from the Easter story is that resurrection is met with "terror and amazement."

The women who found the empty tomb were seized with terror and amazement. Their first impulse was to run away. Resurrection is such good news why would anyone be afraid? And yet, sometimes we are so fearful of what resurrection will mean that we try to avoid it. Instead of embracing new life, we dwell on the injustices of the old, the dead, the by-gones. It takes courage to open ourselves to a new future even if that future brings with it resurrection. Sometimes I find it's easier to think about all the things that shouldn't have happened in the past rather than open myself to a new future God so eagerly waits to give me.

New beginnings are often linked with both terror and amazement. Before we can experience the amazement of a new beginning, we must force ourselves to face the empty tomb. We must peer into the darkness and see that death is no more, and there is life. The body isn't there. Christ is risen. And we like Christ are raised to newness of life.

Jesus spent his whole life telling us that the resurrection is both now and in the future. We live our lives at the apex of the old and new, the dead and the resurrected. Our future holds a great deal of mystery, and that mystery makes us both afraid and amazed. But the good news is that it is a future that God is calling us to. Again and again throughout our lives, we go to the tomb expecting one thing and being blessed with another. Good news in the most unexpected of places.

So today let us go forth in the joy of the resurrected Christ. May obstacles such as big stones not stop us. Let us remember that resurrection and reconciliation go together and if we want one we must work for the other. And may we go forward with courage knowing full well that good news comes to us in the most unexpected places. Resurrection beckons us to trust God rather than controlling everything ourselves. Yet, God keeps calling us into a future, and we trust and believe that that future is more glorious than anything we've ever known before. AMEN