

EASTER, NEW LIFE

Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Bayfield at
Good Shepherd Church, Pine Grove, Bluemont, VA 4/16/17

It is Easter, Jesus gives us new life. One day three men were walking and they came to a violently raging river. They had no idea how to cross the river and get to the other side. The first man prayed God saying, “Please God give me the strength to cross this river.” Poof, suddenly God gave the man strong arms and legs and he swam across the river in three hours. Seeing this, the second man prayed God, “Please God, give me the strength and ability to cross this river.” Poof, suddenly God gave the man a rowboat and he was able to row across the river in two hours. The third man, prayed God, “Please God, give me the strength, ability and intelligence to get across this river.” Poof, suddenly God changed the man into a woman. She looked at a map, saw the nearby bridge and walked across the river in fifteen minutes!

Humor aside, the prominence of women as the first people to experience the resurrection of Jesus and the power of Easter cannot be denied. “As the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb, suddenly there was a great earthquake, an angel appeared like lightning and said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He has risen! Go tell the disciples, Jesus has risen from the dead. Behold he is going before you into Galilee. There you will see Him.”¹

The two Mary’s were among the brave women who watched Jesus die his

¹The Holy Bible, RSV: Matthew 28:1-7, Collins, New York and Cleveland, 1971, page 31

entombed by Joseph of Arimathea in a grave that he gave for Jesus' body.² The legitimate question that must be raised is, Where were the men? Peter, James, and John were the leaders of the community. Where were the “Sons of thunder,” Thomas and Matthew? Where were Andrew and Philip? The pillars of the community were more like caterpillars creeping away.

After Gethsemane and Golgotha had all of the men scattered like frightened sheep? When Jesus needed them the most, had they left him completely? Jesus died the loneliest of deaths. He was erroneously convicted as a felon. He was silenced as a heretic. Jesus of Nazareth died in agony. Where were the disciples?

The noted German theologian, Hans Kung wrote: “Jesus suffered the insurmountable frontier death. He died, nailed to the cross. So what happened? The resurrection, unlike the crucifixion is never described in the Gospels. No one saw it. No one expected it. At best, the disciples were reluctant believers. The great German poet, playwright, novelist, philosopher and scientist Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) of the *Sturm und Drang* movement said “The highest cannot be spoken. This is true of the Easter movement. It breaks the bounds of human vocabulary.”³

The Easter resurrection is the paramount nature of God's love: *a'gape*, one of seven Greek words for love. God is revealed as God's Son in the resurrection of Jesus. *U'ios*, the Greek word for “son” designated the one who carried on the vocation of the

²The Holy Bible RSV: Luke 23:50-56 page 85

³Dictionary: Von Goethe, Wolfgang, (1749-1832) *Sturm und Drang*, Berlin, Germany

“father” in the world of affairs. God's Son is the Christ, a word that means “Saviour.” Jesus Christ is the Saviour of all humanity. Jesus carried on the personal work of His Heavenly Father in the world. This is the good news of Easter, the Gospel of Easter! Deserving the worst, the disciples are given the best. God raises up Jesus of Nazareth in the community of the disciples despite their cowardice and betrayal. Whereas in human relationships, desire is the cause of love; here in the resurrection, God's Love is the cause of desire. God's Love reigns to give all humanity new life. Jesus shows us there is new life beyond death.

The Jews believed it was the community of the righteous Israelites as a group that are resurrected. This does not mean the dead will be raised within history. For example when Jesus tells Martha and Mary that their brother Lazarus will rise again, Martha replies, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”⁴

There was no belief in an individual resurrection of a person. In the United States with our Protestant emphasis on individuals, people don't realize how unique and original was Jesus resurrection. It was and is a personal matter for individual people to gain new life through Jesus Christ.

Reginald Fuller, the late famous New Testament Professor from Cambridge University in England, the Virginia Seminary in Alexandria, and Union Seminary in Richmond, wrote: “Even the most skeptical critic must posit some mysterious X factor

⁴The Holy Bible, RSV: John 11:24 page 100

to get the Christian movement going. Think about it. How did any kind of beginning come out of such a disastrous end, let alone a beginning that would change the face of the world? How did this Jesus, executed as a heretic,.... come to be known as 'Lord?' How could a condemned criminal, a disowned prophet become revered as Savior? How could this blasphemer come to be called "the Son of God?" Lastly, how could such an utterly defeated group of hammerheads emerge proclaiming not only the Gospel of Jesus, but Jesus Himself as the Gospel,"⁵ the Good News? I would suggest that the X factor is faith. Faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who has come to save us all.

St. Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome summed up the meaning of Easter when he wrote:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness, or peril or sword? No in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁶

AMEN

HAPPY EASTER!

⁵*Synthesis*: Year A April 20, 2014, Boyds, MS Fuller, Reginald, quoted page 4.

⁶*The Book of Common Prayer*, Seabury Press, Greenwich, CT 1928 ed. Burial of the Dead, Romans 8:14ff. King James Version pages 330-331