

Sunday of Church Year: EASTER SUNDAY

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 25:6-9

Epistle Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:16-26

Gospel: Mark 16:1-8

JUST AS HE TOLD YOU

I. Just As He Told You, He Has Risen

Generally speaking, you don't buy a casket unless someone has passed away. I mean, if people came over and saw a casket sitting in your garage or storage closet, what would they say?

The women of our reading were carrying a first-century Jewish casket. By that I mean, they were expecting to lay someone to rest. In their time and place, many people were not buried in the ground, but placed in a tomb carved into solid rock. Instead of placing the body in a casket, the body of the deceased would be placed on a rock ledge in that tomb, and then nature would take its course. Usually there would be a burial cloth and spices to hide the gruesome details: the burial cloth to hide the visual and the spices to hide the smell. So "when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body" (1). These women were carrying the casket for Jesus. You don't buy a casket unless you expect to put a body in it.

For these women, their state of mind must have been close to nervous breakdown. Remember that this happened in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was not their home. They had been on a religious pilgrimage. All had gone well, and suddenly their leader was arrested, rushed through the courts and gruesomely executed. Imagine that: taking a vacation with a group of friends to Pennsylvania or Wisconsin or Oklahoma or wherever. And suddenly that happens to the leader of your group. No way to get the body back, the authorities on your trail, you have to quickly bury the body in a foreign land. These women had witnessed Jesus' death, and likely feared for their own lives. PTSD is an epidemic in some professions, and I do not doubt that these women would have had something like that going on. The sense of shock and sorrow and horror and fear and everything else must have been overwhelming. Frankly, I'm surprised they were able to carry this out! What devotion to Jesus they showed, even in these events!

But when they reached the Jesus' tomb, there was another surprise. As if the shock were not enough already, here in the dawning light of the first day of the workweek, in a cave, they find a smartly dressed young man. As if reading their thoughts he says, "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus..., who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here!" (6). Nothing is making sense. These ladies had just put the body here 36 hours earlier. No body? He has risen? Perhaps in your time of sorrow you have heard well-intentioned people accidentally say unhelpful things. Is that what is happening here?

Death is death. It is final. All have been there with death. Whether grandparents or children. Or even the other week as we watched the Flight for Life helicopter touch down just over by McDonalds after a car crash. Brushing close to death hushes the laughter. Saying silly things like "He has risen" is worse than bad taste.

The Old Testament reading used this picture: “the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations.” Death is the great enemy common to all times and places. It might come in different forms: malaria and AIDS in Africa, most commonly heart disease and cancer in America, the violence of war in Iraq. But the result is the same. It is the shroud that covers all people.

But no. The angel’s words were not a bad joke or poor taste. His words were not lies or deception. There was no body. Some of the women who brought the spices for burial and found nothing were the same ones who had laid his body in the tomb. That is why Mark names. People of his day could go to the same people and ask about it. He is risen indeed!

To me, the most interesting words of the angel were the last: “just as he told you.” The angel says that these women should not have come with the casket, the spices. They should have known that there would be no corpse to bury or anoint. You mean, all these bizarre and strange happening were just like Jesus had said?

Yes. Even to those who did not believe in him, Jesus had hinted at it, “As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Mt 12:40). To his own disciples, Jesus explained it plainly, and repeatedly (Mk 8:31; 9:12; 10:33; 14:28; etc.). Jesus had pointed all this out beforehand. He had told the disciples and other followers. He had even laid down the timeline for it. What had they done with those words? I think they just dismissed it as ‘crazy talk’. However much we love and respect someone, when they start talking repeatedly about their death, we get concerned. But if that person starts talking about coming back to life after three days, we just smile politely and hope he will change the subject.

Jesus’ purpose had always been that they would know why he had come to this world. He had plainly said that he did not “come to be served, but to give his life as a ransom.” He kept telling them, “I am going to be arrested, put on trial, suffer, die and rise again.” He was trying to get them to understand his mission. By rising from the dead, he was telling them that he really had defeated death that sin had been completely paid for. By rising from the dead, and later that day showing himself to his followers, Jesus was proving that heaven was open for all believers.

II. Just As He Told You, You Will Rise

Jesus’ words prophesying his death and resurrection were meant for us as well. When that angel said, “He has risen... just as he told you” he also speaks to us. What adult has not been to a funeral? There is the old proverb which says, “There are only two things for certain in this life: death and taxes.” But we know that some people even manage to avoid taxes. There is really only one certainty in life. Jesus’ words about his own death and life were meant to assure us in the face of that one certainty. In fact, we should never talk at any length about death without talking about the life that Jesus promises.

This is how we usually think: the natural conclusion of life is death. It’s like some sort of morbid math equation. Jesus would have us add a function to that equation. AND the natural conclusion of death is eternal life for all who believe in him.

Just as Jesus said, he rose to life. Just as Jesus said, believers will also rise to life.

Jesus' entire ministry is peppered with this theme. He kept coming back to life after death, again and again. Whether it was at a funeral like Lazarus' in John chapter 11; or parables about weeds and wheat in Matthew chapter 13; or when mockers asked foolish questions about eternal life in Luke chapter 20; or simply talking about his own work in John chapter 5 (and I could give you many more references.)

When Jesus did all that teaching and preaching about eternal life, there was something he always brought out. He stated definitively that some will be raised to punishment for their sin, and others for eternal happiness. The dividing line will be Jesus. Those who trust in him as their Savior will be saved. That is a certainty.

III. Just as He Told You, He Wants To Meet With You

I think that Jesus had another more down-to-earth reason for prophesying his death and resurrection before they happened. Jesus wanted to save his followers some heart-ache. He did not want these women coming to the tomb to complete a burial. He wanted them to come, expecting to find a living Jesus.

But I am a realist when I say that. It isn't as if life is all rainbows and butterflies for people who believe in Jesus. Even with complete certainty that Jesus would rise from the dead, the events of Good Friday would have been traumatic in the extreme for these women. If only they had listened to Jesus they would have known the final outcome; there would have been hope, rather than despair.

If someone asks me if I really think that – that Jesus had predicted his death partially so that his followers would not be so anxious and frightened, I say, yes. Let us go to the second part of the angel's message: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'" A special angel from heaven was sent not just with life-changing news for all people. That angel was sent with a message for his few disciples, even for one specific, disheartened disciple.

Here is a true mystery of the infinite God. How many really close friends do you have? Most people can only have one or two really, really close friends. Even a mother can only keep so close to more than a handful of children! We just are not capable of more than that. But God is different. He is intimately concerned with every single one of us. And so in our reading, Jesus assures those disciples that he is going to take time with them up in their homeland. He tells them to go back to Galilee where it had all begun, where they had first heard and hoped for the Savior in Jesus. And in the angel's words there was even a special concern for one of those disciples. That disciple had done something really, really bad.

On Good Friday evening, while Jesus was on trial and being ushered off to execution, one of Jesus' closest friends, Peter, denied Jesus three times. Jesus could even hear it. Ever heard a friend do that? The bottom drops out of your heart. Those were the last words Jesus heard from Peter before his death. But even to that one, the Jesus risen from the dead had a special message – "I want to see all of my disciples up in Galilee, and that includes you Peter!" Do you ever feel like that – like you have made such a big mistake that you can never live it down? Take heart in Jesus' words. No one can ever think that Jesus will turn them back. As it says elsewhere in the Bible, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, and a bruised reed he will not break. He receives and renews all who come to him in faith!

Are we not happy to go to Galilee? Is time with Jesus not treasured fellowship? Jesus' work is completed. That frees us to think about something else. No longer do we have to worry about our standing with God, or what lies beyond death. Jesus solved those two questions on Good Friday and Easter. Now we consider what this means in the lives that we live. And we can live that life for God, a life of thankfulness for all Jesus did when he died and rose from the dead.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? And the answer came back, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.'" (John 11:25-27). May God give you faith to give that confident answer? Amen.

Jesus told them to go back the three days' journey to their homeland, to the place they had started, to Galilee by the lake. Go back to the place where all the happy and earnest and best moments of their time together, and there he would explain to them what it all meant. Now it wasn't that Jesus hadn't explained it all before. It's just that it was like we said earlier in the sermon – they weren't listening. But now, having seen Jesus die and rise from the dead, they would begin to understand what he was trying to tell him.

Like a disease which is 100% treatable, if treated, so is death. We cannot prevent death from happening. But its worst result of death, punishment for our sin, has been removed. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26).

So Jesus rose. And so it was that Jesus would soon meet with his followers. It would be to establish that which men have suspected since the beginning of time, there is something on the other side of the grave. And Jesus rose from the dead to point out that he is the way to that blessed life.

Well, what if I have lived my life in rebellion against God? Can I still find that way to God? Yes. Yes. So it was that Good Friday and Easter were next to each other in God's plan. He put Easter here to let us know that there is something beyond the grave, and that it can be a great blessing. He put Good Friday next to Easter to say, "And here is how you get the wonderful blessing. Not through your work, not through your striving, but through Jesus who died for you, who paid for you."

This is the fact and hope which comforts the survivors of every Christian. When a loved one has gone before us, we remember the words Jesus spoke, "Because I live, you also will live." (John 14:19) And I have seen people who do remember the words of Jesus at the time of death. I have seen people I expect to be crying at funerals, not crying. It is not denial, but rather faith in Jesus' own promise. A promise that he proved in himself. He rose from the dead. He was witnessed by hundreds.

What if we listened to all that Jesus said?

And so were his disciples. The Bible records parts of the ministry of some of Jesus' followers. That is in the fifth book of the New Testament. Every single one of their speeches and sermons brings up the resurrection. Truly, as Paul said in our reading today, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." (1 Cor 15:19) Life after death is a cornerstone of the Christian faith. Without it, you do not have a Christian faith.

What dampens our interest in this subject is that our modern life is so comfortable that we cannot imagine wanting anything better than what we have. How often it has proven true that people in their troubles come to God. They truly trust and believe him. But how often do the pleasures and wealth of this world choke out that view of life after death. We have seen it often. It is not so much a change of belief about the word of God as it is simply an unconcernedness with things eternal.

Mark 16:1-8; Is 25:6-9; 1 Cor. 15:16-26

I say that to tell you how much the women of our reading expected to find a corpse at the end of their early morning walk to the tomb. They had “bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body.” Those spices were their equivalent of a casket. They had bought Jesus’ “casket” and intended that he be laid to rest in a proper manner.

If people had any money at all, they made sure they were not buried, but put in a tomb. And so when Jesus had died, a wealthy follower insisted that Jesus’ body be placed in his family’s tomb. So it was, that while Jesus died on Friday on his body was laid in a tomb, they could still hope to give him a decent burial. They went with the spices.

When they reached the tomb, they were welcomed inside by a young man dressed in a long fancy white robe – hardly the place you would expect such a person early in the morning on the first day of the work-week. Quite strange, actually.

That man, hardly even greeting them, lays bare that which was at the bottom of their hearts, “Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’” (6-7). He doesn’t let them say anything.

Good news. Great news! Jesus is not dead. But that is not possible. And yet they knew that there was no body in that tomb, so they left in a hurry, worried and shaking with fear. So many bad and strange things had happened in the last week. Does not compute! They ran out of the tomb confused, shaking, and afraid.

To me – and someone else might disagree – but to me, the most striking words of the angel were those words, “just as he told you.” All of this, the betrayal, the trial, the crucifixion, the burial and now no body in the tomb – “Just as he told you”? Yes. Jesus had said it often. But the disciples and these women who followed him had brushed it off as crazy talk.

Hidden in those words, “just as he told you” is the implication that things would have been different if only they had listened to what he had said. Like what? What would have been different?

Well, if these followers had listened to Jesus, they would not have brought a casket to the tomb, would they have? They would not have come as a burial detail looking for a corpse to embalm.

And if they had only listened to the words of Jesus, it would probably not have been only the women who came to the tomb that Sunday morning. Preparing a body for burial was the sort of job that got relegated to women in that place and time. But if they would have just listened to what Jesus said, you can be certain that the disciples would have been there to welcome their Teacher back.

And if they had listened to Jesus, their attitude would have been quite different in coming to the tomb. It would perhaps have been something more like an Easter egg hunt – let's find the treasure. Instead they came to the tomb shedding tears as they remembered how Jesus had cruelly died. PTSD is an epidemic among soldiers, and I do not doubt that these women would have had something like that going on after they had watched their friend be crucified. But if they had only listened, and believed, how different their thoughts would have been. They would have been able to understand the meaning in some small way. Now it was all meaningless injustice.

And if they had listened to Jesus and what he said, they would have eagerly crowded around him asking, "What does it all mean? You suffered, you died, and you rose. What does it mean for us?"

If only they had listened. That is what the angel meant when he said, "Just as Jesus told you." If they had listened they would have

But some things would have been the same.

Good Friday would have still been there, and so would have Jesus' crucifixion. Our sin needed to be paid for, no matter what anyone did or said.

And Jesus' body would have been placed in the same tomb, and Jesus would have risen.

You see, no matter what we believe or think or say, God would have done exactly the same thing. He would have saved us and given us

They weren't the only ones. Jesus' enemies had stood there at his cross, right up to the end of his six-hour crucifixion, to be sure that he had died.

At the time, it was all a religious pilgrimage gone terribly wrong. Jesus' closest disciples, a dozen men and several women, had gone up to Jerusalem as they had the two previous years. But during that week-long celebration, things went south and Jesus found himself on the wrong side of the powers that be.

The first Easter morning dawned on a funeral procession. A small band of women were on their way to a tomb to do women's work, to

Angels could only say what God had put into their mouths. With these words, we have a reminder that Jesus

Hey Ma, happy anniversary! I bought you and Dad caskets so that when one of you passes away, the other one won't have to worry about picking one out. I figure we could keep them out in the shed. Plenty of room. Got a discount buying two of them, don't you know.

We don't buy caskets before someone is dead. Maybe a site at a cemetery, but not a casket. These ladies were bringing the Jewish equivalent of a casket – the spices. You see, the better off people

were not buried in the ground, but placed in a tomb. The body was placed on a rock ledge, and nature would take its course. Usually there would be a burial cloth and

Jesus was telling them that the most important thing a God could give them was not a little more food on the table, not a couple extra years of good health. Jesus did those things in his miracles, but those were all second tier issues. The most important thing was to save people so they could enjoy eternal life with him.