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Resurrection Without Jesus

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Mag'dalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back—it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

It would seem that resurrection is not always good news. These women have spent the previous day sitting in grief, shock, and anguish, heartbroken over Jesus' torture and death and the crushing of their hopes and dreams.

Now they arrive at an empty tomb, with no corpse, to the news that their Saviour, their Messiah, has risen! Hallelujah!

Except no hallelujahs are sung. Instead, there is trembling, astonishment, silence, and fear. What?! The central event around which our faith pivots; the bedrock promise of our faith, that life shall rise out of death; the day we celebrate with trumpets and lilies and chocolate rabbits: this day when we rejoice inspires fear.

Interesting. Jesus, it would seem, proves as unpredictable and unconventional in resurrection as he did in life.

And what's *really* interesting is that this version of the resurrection is probably the oldest one written down. Later versions of Mark add extra bits; Luke adds the walk to Emmaus and the ascension; Matthew adds an earthquake; Luke, Matthew *and* John include the actual appearance of the risen Jesus, but Mark ends with women running away in fear and no Jesus.

Interesting. Somehow, this was good news for the first Christ-followers. This open-ended, unexpected, cliff-hanger ending was good news.

I think this says an awful lot about Jesus. I think this says an awful lot about *following* Jesus. And I think it prods us to take a good look at what we think we're about.

So: what does this say about Jesus? About the risen Christ, the one whom we believe is still with us?

It says he is unpredictable. He is not going to stay where we last put him. Resurrected life is not going to follow our expectations – it is going to take us by surprise and probably disturb us. He is following his own agenda, and we are going to scramble to keep up. We will look for him in places he was but isn't anymore, and our job is to keep seeking him out.

This also says that Jesus does not hang out at the centre of things, where all the noise and attention and glamour are happening. Jerusalem is a central hub, the city with the temple in it, but Jesus isn't sticking around there. Where's he gone? Galilee. What's Galilee? Nowhere-land.

Galilee, to quote an article I read, was "the crossroads to everywhere, the center of nowhere." You didn't go *to* Galilee; you went *through* Galilee. We've all known communities or regions like this; places we dismiss and disparage. No one goes to Galilee on purpose – except, apparently, the risen Messiah. He's going to the least and lowly; to the margins; to the places that those of us with enough money, privilege, and comfort choose not to be.

Not only that, but Judean Jews looked down on Galilean Jews. Galilee was full of Gentiles – that is, non-Jews – so Jews around Jerusalem looked on Jews from Galilee as impure, as contaminated. They weren't the *right sort*. And yet Jesus did his ministry in Galilee and went there once he was back in action.

So the risen Christ is on the move, unpredictable, and goes to the place that no one goes if they can help it. He goes ahead of us.

What does this mean for those of us who hope to follow Jesus? *Well*.

It means that we can't assume that Jesus is going to stay where we last saw him. It means we can't predict his next move. It means we can't declare with confidence that he'll wait for us. It means that no matter what container we put Jesus in, he'll bust on out and stride on ahead to some hinterland while we hang back, believing the world has ended.

It means that following Jesus will entail discomfort, surprise, astonishment, and being uprooted. It means that resurrected life will not be static. It probably means that we will never completely catch up.

I think it also poses some uncomfortable questions about grief. Not grief for our loved ones, but grief for a way of being. For us, in 21st-century Canada, I wonder if it challenges our grief for the way things used to be; for the way church used to be.

Now. There are losses worth grieving. I am sure that many of you have dedicated years of service to the church. You have sat on committees, washed who-knows-how-many teacups, mowed lawns, taught Sunday School, and given regularly. You have known the church as a

gathering place, a hub, a place of energy and community. It has been home. And today it looks very different. The young people are not replacing your former roles, if they're coming at all. Pews and halls that used to be full are empty. And the same few people are on all the committees, and getting tired.

It's the story of so many churches across the country. Many have shut their doors for good; many more are looking at the possibility. And it is a loss worth grieving.

But what this story tells us is that a life in Jesus does not hang out in the empty tomb, seeking after what was and is no longer. The resurrection story does include a period of mourning: Holy Saturday, the Jewish sabbath when the women sat at home, stunned and grieving. But the story does not *stay* there. Weeping endures for a night, and joy comes in the morning: the tomb is empty and the Messiah is on the move!

Anointing Jesus' body for burial would have been no joyful task, but it would have been a *comprehensible* one. It's why Good Friday sermons are way easier to write than Easter Sunday sermons: we are familiar with grief and loss. We know them all too well. We know how to follow that script.

But to discover that the corpse we meant to mourn is up and doing? To discover that unexpected, explosive life has burst the chains of death, rolled away the stone, and is already at work? What do we do with that?!

And so I think this story tells us: "Look, it is right and fitting to grieve what we think is the end of everything. But the time for that is limited, and then the risen Christ is going to call from Galilee, where he has gone ahead to proclaim the kingdom of God."

We do not get to hang out in grief. The Christian life is not about sitting around an empty tomb, weeping for the death of what we loved. It will ask things of us before we are ready; things we do not think are possible. It will call us to an impossible life.

Is the church *we* knew dying? Yes, in a lot of ways. Is the church itself *completely* dying? No, not by a long shot! The church has stuck around in various forms for 2,000 years, and it's going to take a lot to kill her now.

And sure, it might seem like the young people aren't coming to church, but let me tell you, I've got friends in their 30s and 40s who are in ministry and very clear that they are called to serve a living church. Enrolment at my seminary is steadily growing. Young people might not be coming to church in the way we want them to, but they *are coming*.

The United Church, in all but word, wanted to be the national church of Canada, but I believe that vision had to die. The alliance of church and state does not usually lead us closer to Jesus. I do not mourn the days when the Prime Minister of Canada came to our national meetings, because I see so much opportunity and possibility and hope in new ways of being church. I

cannot take it for granted that people will come to church, and so I know that those who come do so because they are looking for something. I have to think about the role of the church, about our calling and purpose, because if I don't, we will soon be uninteresting. This is exciting.

Take your Holy Saturdays. Grieve what you loved about the church you knew. But let us not seek Jesus in the tomb; let us not get comfortable in grief, because there is work to be done, a gospel to be preached, and hope to be lived. Maybe you can't follow all the way to Galilee, but never forget that when Jesus seems to have left us, he has merely gone ahead and is calling for us to join him.

Amen.