

“Unexpected Reversals”

Matthew 28:1-10

April 12, 2020

When I was a child, I thought that Christmas was the most important holiday - we got two weeks off of school, we would go down to the Eaton's store and marvel at the window decorations, we would gather as a large family for a really big feast and we got some Christmas presents (toys that our parents hoped would live up to the hype of the commercials).

But things changed when I became an adult. Children don't realize the amount of work that goes into the celebrations leading up to the 25 of December. The day and the season loom very large in our consciousness, so it may be a surprise to learn that historically, Easter in earlier times was the pre-eminent church festival. Why do you think this reversal occurred?

I'm thinking that part of the reason may be that Christmas has the familiar romantic story of the birth of a special baby. A story about a birth is filled with more hope and joy than a story about death and resurrection. Death, we are familiar with, - but its not an attractive concept, and resurrection is not only unfamiliar but also difficult to understand. Even so, each hearing of the Easter story can bring some helpful new insight or observation about this event - that we may think is strange but also awesome.

The story gives us the classic conflict of good versus evil, with the surprising declaration that death is defeated in the return to life of the good man, Jesus. And it is important to note that this is not resuscitation but resurrection.

Resuscitation has become more common with our 21st century advances in medical science. There have been an increased number of situations in which people who would otherwise be left with the determination of "dead" are able to continue their lives because of speedy and effective medical interventions. The first century situation of Jesus being raised from the dead, however, is more than simply being brought back to life. Resuscitated people will eventually die. Resurrection is about a transformation of the bodily life we know in this world, into a new, transformed, and eternal existence with God.

The concept of resurrection is complex and confusing to many people, and the way the biblical story develops, makes a rational explanation difficult - earthquakes and angel messengers, sealed tombs mysteriously opened, a man seen to be dead and buried now seen alive again in a new and wonderful way - the rational mind has difficulty accepting these things. There is no denying that the story offers a strange mixture of fear and joy, along with an equally strange mixture of broad promise and precise detail.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had gone to see the tomb where the body of Jesus had been placed. Their journey was interrupted by a sudden earthquake, and just as unexpectedly an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled back the stone covering the entrance to the tomb and sat on it. This dazzling creature spoke to them in precise detail about the amazing promise of the resurrected Jesus going ahead of them to Galilee. And this precise geographic detail is repeated as Jesus himself met them and tells them: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

In Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus doesn't appear to the disciples in Jerusalem, or in an Upper Room, or on the road to Emmaus. Jerusalem, the center of political and religious authority, is intentionally downplayed in what may be another example of the amazing reversals in the story and life and ministry of Jesus.

Today's meditation, I have entitled 'Unexpected Reversals'. From that title I would hope that you would understand that there are unexpected reversals happening in Christ's story:

- a king being born in a humble stable and not a royal palace
- a conquering hero returning to the capital city not on a white stallion but on a humble donkey

- the teacher washing the feet of his disciples and
- the greatest reversal of all – victory over death, as Christ gives precedence to the out of the way province of Galilee.

Galilee was home territory to Jesus, but Galilee was not seen as important in his day, especially when compared to the power and prestige of the capital city, Jerusalem. Galilee was seen as a backwater place, and Galileans were thought of as country bumpkins. The story (Mt 26:69-75) of Peter's denial of ever knowing Jesus begins with Peter being identified as a Galilean. His country "look" or accent must have given him away.

The name Galilee comes from the Hebrew *galil* which means "border," with the connotation of being a boundary area between the known and the unfamiliar. To those at the perceived center of power and influence - Jerusalem, Galilee was distant, strange, and unimportant – similar feelings that British Columbians feel in relation to Toronto or Ottawa.

This strangeness was heightened by the fact that many Gentiles lived in that region. It was a trade route and a crossroads populated by Greeks, Phoenicians, Syrians, and other non-Jewish people who worshipped other gods, and were more aligned with the Roman Empire, the occupier and oppressor. And yet, Jesus tells his disciples to go to Galilee to meet him there. Galilee is where he gives them the Great Commission to go and "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). How appropriate it is, that this new mission is initiated in Galilee, a Jewish place, but with people of many countries and nations.

In the midst of all that was strange and amazing about the events in Jerusalem, the risen Jesus took his disciples back to what was familiar to many of them, back to Galilee, in order to prepare them for something new and wonderful. This journey took them away from Jerusalem and the fear they had that resulted in them hiding behind closed doors. They went back to Galilee and were given work to do - important and world-changing work. They didn't isolate themselves in a closed, exclusive circle of "first disciples," but they drew that circle of awareness wide enough to include "all nations."

Matthew's Gospel reminds and reassures us that Jesus goes ahead of us and will meet us in whatever is our equivalent of Galilee. We don't have to go to some out-of-the-world place to encounter the risen Christ. We don't have to go into some hyper-spiritual zone or to accept some incomprehensible abstract theological concept. We can go to whatever is home and known or new and different and Jesus meets us there.

Part of the joy of celebrating Easter is the realization that resurrection is not just a strange and awesome event recorded as happening some 2000 years ago, but something that happens to us here and now and continually. Christ makes us new creatures, and with God's help we overcome despair, make new friends, let go of old hurts and prejudices, enter new relationships, and learn new ways of faithful living.

Again this Easter, and every day, we can know ourselves to be loved, forgiven, accepted, and included in Christ's ongoing ministry. In that awareness we are changed, and living this new life we go with Jesus to change the world by loving, forgiving, accepting, and including, just as Jesus did.