

Risen Indeed

Psalm 118:14-24

Crossroads Christian Church

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015

On a hot summer evening, the Monday of a Labor Day weekend 1960, I was called to the telephone. I had just arrived on campus at Culver Stockton College a few days before for freshman orientation. We didn't have phones in our rooms, just one phone to serve the whole hallway in the men's dorm. It was my parents, with tragic news. My mom's parents, my grandparents, the ones who had helped raise me when my Dad was away in World War II, the ones whose house was always our home base for holidays and family gatherings, had been killed in a traffic accident in Wisconsin. My grandfather had suffered a heart attack while driving, they thought, and had run off the road killing both of them.

It was my first experience of losing people I loved, and I was overwhelmed by grief. I had to sit down because I felt like I was swirling in a black whirlpool. Back in my room, I opened my Bible for comfort and found these words in the first chapter of John's Gospel. "In him was life, and his life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." So there was light, and I tried to open my soul to it. Then I had a profound experience of the presence of God. I didn't hear words per se, but I received assurance that God's love is so strong, so eternal, that God would not let them go. I knew that God's promise for eternal life was real. I knew then, and I know now, the meaning of Paul's joyous cry in Romans 8 that nothing—not death nor life—nothing—will ever separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. Through my life and ministry, through the deaths of our parents and other people dear to us, I have no doubt in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and no doubt that through that resurrection, God has granted us eternal life in his presence. And it isn't just one-on-one. God created and redeemed us in love, and connects us in love to one another, so we will experience God's eternal life in community, in joyous fellowship with one another and with God.

Each year that I prepare to preach on Easter, using John's Gospel, I remember that experience, and touch base with that blessed assurance.

When we heard the Gospel lesson read today, we looked over the shoulder of Mary, a woman of the village of Magdala, at just such a moment—a life-transforming moment when life and death, joy and sorrow, fear and promise, all came crashing in on her at once. Some say that Mary was a woman of a bad reputation, a woman of the streets, although the scriptures never tell us that. We do know that Jesus had healed her from some demons that had tormented her, and that she followed Jesus faithfully after that. We also know that she was one of several women of financial means who helped support Jesus and his followers. We know that she had been at the cross when the male disciples ran away. We know that not even Jesus' humiliating death as a common criminal could not sway her

allegiance. We know that she went to the grave, seeking to do what she could, seeking to honor the body of the one she had loved. She went in the dark, in the pre-dawn hour. (Recall how John uses the light and the dark as images of good and evil, hope and hopelessness? How the very first part of the gospel tells us that the light of Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it?) Anyway, she came to the tomb in the darkness, so she could not see clearly that the tomb was open, that the stone was rolled away, until she got to the scene. She must have been filled with anger and sorrow. Those who had desecrated Jesus' body on the cross must have come back to desecrate the tomb. She ran to tell Peter and John the distressing news. "The tomb is empty, and we don't know where they have taken him."

They followed her back, but soon passed her, running. It was a little brighter then, but they still entered the shadowy tomb, not knowing what to expect. They didn't expect to see grave cloths neatly folded, and no body there. They went away believing, but not sure what they were believing. They didn't really understand what this resurrection business was all about. It was an entirely new situation.

When they left, trying to sort things out, Mary stayed, outside the tomb, weeping. Then something made her look inside, where she saw two figures dressed in white.

"Woman, why are you crying?" they asked.

"They've taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they put him!" she cried out in despair and frustration. Then she turned around and saw another figure, outside the tomb. So she assumed he was the gardener and pleaded with him.

And the stranger in the half-light of the garden said "Mary," and she knew. Everything changed in that moment. He was alive. He had conquered death. And for her, life was again worth living. And not only for her, but for the disciples, and for you, and for me. There came a time when everything changed. God, through Jesus Christ, had taken a curse and made it a blessing. God, through Jesus Christ, had taken bitter hatred and conquered it with love. God, through Jesus Christ, had taken death and replaced it with life.

One of the oldest Christian traditions on Easter came down to us and to many other nations from the Greeks. After the Easter Vigil, when the light first breaks, they greet one another with *Christos Anasti*—Christ is Risen! And respond to the greeting, *Anasti Alethos*—He is risen indeed! I heard a story that during the time when the Communists ruled Russia, a government official gathered citizens of one town to give them a long lecture on how religion is the opiate of the people, and it was foolish to believe in God or Christ anymore. He really was into his job, and thought that he was getting through to the people. But he didn't realize that it was Easter Sunday. At the

end of the talk, an old man stood and said simply, Christ is Risen. And almost everybody in the audience said, Christ is risen indeed.

A friend of mine, Ron Stair, the minister who followed me at Fredericktown, had a neat story in his newsletter—I don't know the source. It goes like this: A story is told about Albert Einstein, the brilliant physicist who taught at Princeton in the early 20th century. Einstein was traveling from Princeton on a train. When the conductor came down the aisle to punch his ticket, Einstein couldn't find it. Well known for his absent-mindedness, the conductor patiently waited while Mr. Einstein looked in his vest pockets. Not finding it, he began to shuffle through his pants pockets, and then pulled out his briefcase, all to no avail. He could not locate his ticket.

The conductor was very gracious: "Don't worry Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are, and I'm sure you bought a ticket." With that, the conductor moved down the aisle taking tickets from the other passengers. A few minutes later, he looked back and noticed that the professor was on his hands and knees, searching under the seat for his ticket.

The conductor smiled and returned up the aisle to Mr. Einstein. "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry please. I know who you are and you don't need the ticket. I'm sure you bought one. It will be alright."

Dr. Einstein rose and replied to the conductor, "Young man, you know who I am, they know who I am, and I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I am going."ⁱ

Here is the good news of Easter: we do know where we are going. We might not always know what lies ahead of us between now and then, but the empty tomb assures of God's gift of new life after death. Christ has conquered death, and we receive the promise of new life after this finite earthly existence.

Life may get confusing and frustrating, even frightening. We find ourselves in places that we don't want to be. Our destination is assured. Jesus Christ purchased our ticket and we are on the train to the Promised Land. This is the promise of Easter. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

ⁱ Fredericktown Christian Church Messenger, April 2015. Original source unknown.