

Children know and appreciate all the excitement and wonder that comes with Christmas. As adults, we know that the excitement is slightly diminished by all the fuss and behind the scenes preparation that can also come with our Christmas celebrations. Christmas day looms large in our consciousness, so it may come as quite a surprise to learn that historically Easter has been the pre-eminent and much larger church festival.

This raises questions about why the change in popularity has come about—at least in our culture. Part of the reason may be that Christmas has all the familiar associations with the romantic story of the birth of a unique and special baby. (Aren't all babies unique and special?) My point is that a story about birth is more readily accessible than a story about death and resurrection—death being a familiar but not attractive concept and resurrection being not only unfamiliar but also otherworldly and unknown in general. Even so, the yearly narration of the Easter story can bring some helpful new insights into this event that we may think of as unknown, strange and awesome.

The story from Matthew's gospel 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 all of our 21st century advances in medical science. There have been an increased number of situations in which people who would otherwise be left with a clinical pronouncement as “dead” who are able to continue their lives because of speedy and effective medical intervention. 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 the transformation of the body we have known in this life into a new body, essentially unknown until Jesus came, “*sown in dishonor and raised in glory; sown in weakness and raised in power,*” as Paul puts it—a body that lives an eternal existence with God.

The concept of resurrection is complex and confusing to many people, not to mention that the Bible story includes earthquakes and angel messengers, sealed tombs opening, and a man last seen dead and buried now seen alive again in a new and wonderful way, all of which begs rational explanations. The rational mind has some difficulty accepting these commonly unknown things. There is no denying that the story offers a strange mixture of *fear* and *joy*, along with an equally strange mixture of heavenly 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: “*He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee*” (v. 7). And this precise geographic detail is repeated when Jesus himself meets the women and tells them: “*Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me*” (v. 10).

Are you noticing that even in the resurrection story *fear* plays a central role? Again, we see Jesus offering reassurance, and freeing the women at the tomb from the fear they are experiencing. *The fear the women*

*are experiencing is understandable, after all, because they are talking to a dead man!!* This is the fear of the unknown. The women have no way to understand or comprehend what they are experiencing, so they are filled with fear. Jesus understands this and speaks peace into their very real fear. He also reassures them with his presence, physically, as they clasp his feet and worship him.

But once again, as we saw throughout each Sunday in Lent, Jesus not only speaks peace into their fear, he gives them a mission. *He actually sends them out into the unknown!* Jesus' followers are always on a mission. Jesus appoints the women to be tellers of the good news to the other disciples.

In Matthew's telling of the story Jesus doesn't appear to the disciples in Jerusalem, or in the 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 of the life and ministry of Jesus.

In an overview of the Gospels, it was a reversal of expectations that the birth of the Savior would take place in a humble stable. It was a visible reversal of expectations that Jesus entered Jerusalem, humbly, riding on a donkey. It was another overt reversal of expectations that the Teacher and Master took on the role of servant in washing his disciples' feet. And now, with the great reversal of victory over death, the risen Christ gives priority to out-of-the-way Galilee.

Galilee was home territory to Jesus, but Galilee was not viewed as important in his day, especially when compared to the power and prestige of the capital city, Jerusalem. Galilee was seen as a backwater kind of place, and Galileans were thought of as country bumpkins (kind of like where I grew up). The story of Peter's denial of ever knowing Jesus begins with Peter being identified as a Galilean (Ch. 26). 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 unknown*. To those at the perceived center of power and influence in Jerusalem, Galilee was distant, strange, and honestly unimportant.

This strangeness was heightened by the fact that many Gentiles lived in that region. It was a trade route and crossroads area populated by Greeks, Phoenicians, Syrians, and other non-Jewish people, worshippers of other gods, aligned with the Roman Empire, the occupier and oppressor. And yet, Jesus tells his disciples to go to Galilee to meet him. Galilee is where he gives them the Great Commission to go and "*make disciples of all nations*" (Matt. 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 their *paralyzing fear* and hiding behind closed doors. By going to Galilee they moved away from any speculation and second-guessing of their situation. 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 club of "first disciples," but they drew that circle of awareness wide enough to include "*all nations*."

Friends: Matthew's Gospel reminds and reassures us that Jesus goes ahead of us and will meet us in whatever is our equivalent of Galilee, so we never have to be afraid of the unknown. 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 an incomprehensible abstract theological concept. We can go to whatever is home and known, or to someplace completely unknown that is 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 that happened some 2000 years ago, but something that happens to us here and now. Christ makes us new creatures, and with God's help we overcome every fear, make new friends, let go of old hurts and prejudices, enter new relationships, and learn new ways of faithful living.

Which one of your fears is Jesus speaking peace into today? The fear of inadequacy, the fear of circumstances, the fear of death, the fear of the unexplainable, the fear of hell, the fear of the unexpected, the fear of the unknown? He can and he will free you from fear if you ask him.

On Easter Day, and every day, this is what we can know without a doubt: That we are invited, we are loved, we are forgiven, we are accepted, and we are sent into Christ's ongoing ministry. In that awareness we are given new life as we go out into the known and the unknown, with Jesus, to invite, to love, to forgive, to accept, and to send, as Jesus did. Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed.*