

Easter Sunday – April 9th, 2023 – Bloomingdale Mennonite Church

Sermon – We Will Find Him Ahead of Us

Today we hear the good news – Christ is Risen [He is Risen]. As we saw depicted for us today in our children’s Tableau, it was the Angel of the Lord’s words to the two Mary’s that changed their lives forever that day:

“Don’t be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He isn’t here, because he’s been raised from the dead, just as he said. ⁷ Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, ‘He’s been raised from the dead. He’s going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’”

Not only are the two Mary’s the first to hear the Good News on Easter morn, they also are charged with a mission – to proclaim that Good News to Jesus’ other disciples. “Listen up guys, Jesus is risen! An Angel of the Lord spoke to us at the tomb. His body was gone! Then, on our way to you, we saw him – it was really him! This is amazing!” Can you hear the incredulous responses from the grief-stricken disciples?:

What are you two talking about? Don’t be ridiculous. We saw him die, you know. Stop your idle tales.

Maybe some of the disciples sarcastically entertained the possibility:

Ok, then where are we to find him? Is he hiding behind your backs? Will he be showing up shortly for breakfast? Shall we prepare something?

The women, frustrated with these stubborn men, respond:

“He told us that he’s going on ahead of you to Galilee [and that] You will see him there.”

We don’t know how long it took before the disciples listened to the women who first proclaimed Jesus’ resurrection, but we know that some of them doubted, so it likely took some convincing before they went. Asking the disciples to head off to Galilee was no small request – Galilee was about 65km away. Were the disciples ready to leave Jerusalem, the place their Master and Lord had died? Maybe they weren’t quite ready to leave yet. Maybe some of them

didn't want to leave because they were still stricken by grief. Or, perhaps some were afraid that if they went out in public they would be recognized as disciples of the man who had been crucified and look like fools. Or, maybe they thought that if Jesus were to be raised, he would surely show himself with great power to all Jerusalem and take up his rightful place as King. Whatever the case might have been for how the disciples were feeling at this moment, the women's words likely met them in a place from which they were not yet ready to move. We can imagine the women repeating themselves:

“He told us that he’s going on ahead of you to Galilee [and that] You will see him there.”

I was struck, while reading Matthew's account, that the risen Jesus did not stay in Jerusalem where all the events of his trial and crucifixion had taken place but went instead to Galilee. He didn't even stop to see the disciples, to go to where they were holding up, grieving. Instead, as Matthew tells it, Jesus went to Galilee, to the region he had spent so much of his ministry preaching, teaching, healing the sick, casting out demons, and eating with outcasts and sinners.

“He’s going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.”

Reading further in Matthew we eventually find out that it is not just anywhere in Galilee that Jesus had gone ahead, but that it was to *a mountain* that he had gone and that he was there waiting for his disciples. Mountains were a favorite place of Jesus': he preached his most famous Sermon on a mountain in Galilee, he went to a mountain alone to pray in Galilee, and he healed the sick on a mountain in Galilee. And now, after the devastating events that took place in Jerusalem, now, after the surprising news from the two Marys, the disciples are told that Jesus has gone on ahead to Galilee. Did they know, given his love of mountains, that this is where they

would find him? I can imagine the discussion between the disciples on the way to Galilee from Jerusalem:

“Where do you think he will be waiting for us?” says James. Peter responds, “Maybe he went home to Nazareth! Let’s check there first.”

But then, as they enter the Galilee region, Matthew, directed as it were by a voice speaking in his head, pipes up:

“He’s not in Nazareth. I know where he is. Follow me.”

And Matthew proceeds to take them up a mountain. I like to imagine it was the same one Jesus gave his famous sermon from. On that mountain, they saw him there, the risen Jesus. The Marys had been telling the truth. The Angel’s instructions directed them where they needed to go to find Jesus – to the place where he had gone on ahead to wait for them.

There’s something to these simple words, “**He’s going on ahead of you,**” something beyond just simple statement of fact about where Jesus could be found. In fact, I think there is something of great spiritual significance in these words the Angel. I know that us preachers can read a whole lot into a few words, but dear family of God buried and now rising out of these words is a profound Easter truth: Jesus, the one who brings new birth, who is for us living water, who calls us to light and life and worship; *Jesus, this Jesus, has gone ahead of us, gone ahead of us through the reality of death but with this crucial difference: by going ahead of us in death he has charted a path of life for us now as we continue to live with the reality of death.* This is an especially comforting reality to contemplate at Easter, at time of the year that not only causes of joy and excitement, but also sorrow as we miss struggle with losses and as we remember those who have left us – those, too, who have gone ahead of us. It is Good News to remember, as we miss these precious ones, that before their death, Jesus went ahead of them too, and prepared a place for them.

But even more, we celebrate at Easter because the more sinister reality of death – death not just as a natural part of creaturely life, but death as an enemy of life, as that element of worldly terror that wreaks havoc, that breeds war, that stimulates environmental degradation, that fosters hate – we celebrate at Easter because *the enemy called Death* has been defeated because Jesus has gone ahead of us through death to rob it of its power. There is this great and beautiful Christian doctrine, attested in New Testament texts like 1 Peter, called “The Harrowing of Hell.” The basic idea behind it is that after having died and before being raised from death, Jesus went to the place of the dead, preached the Gospel there too, broke open the bars holding people in the prison of death, and set them free. No wonder that folks like Paul could boldly state memorable sentences like: “O Death where is thy sting! O Grave, where is thy victory?” (1 Cor. 15:57) If death itself is not the realm void of God, but the place God has, in Jesus Christ, visited with Good News, then we do indeed have cause to hope in the face of death. *In going on ahead of us in death, Jesus has brought our whole humanity through death into the newness of life God has prepared for us at the end of the age. **Jesus has gone on ahead of us, and when we ourselves die, we will see him there.***

When Jesus went ahead to Galilee that first Easter morn, the disciples were able to go see him there on the mountain. This might leave us wondering today, on this Easter over 2000 years later, where will we see him? Now that we have heard the Good News, where can we go find him? The answer might be surprisingly simple: where is our Galilee? Where is the place we have already seen Jesus at work? Cause guess what, he’s still there – and *we will see him as we pursue him in those places of our daily life – at work, at home, in our community, in the face of strangers, and in the poor.* Might it be best to say this morning, then, if we want to stick with our

theme, that Jesus is not here! He's gone ahead of us. In fact, turn to your neighbor right now and say it: "Jesus has gone ahead of us!"

Jesus has gone ahead of us, so now, let's go! Let's walk the path ahead, and find him in our *living*, at home, and at work in our towns. Let's go! Let's walk the path ahead and find him in our *dying*, in the dying that happens when we let go of the sin that holds us back and yes, even in the dying that happens to all of us human beings as we fade like grass, for Jesus has gone ahead of us in death too! Let's go! Let's walk the path ahead and find him *raising us up to new life*, resurrection life at work in those places within us which seem locked behind cold, heavy stone. Let's go.

For Christ has gone on ahead of us. Alleluia and Amen. Christ is Risen [He is Risen indeed].