

RESURRECTION: THE SOURCE OF PASSION FOR MINISTRY
MATTHEW 28:1-10
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We've been preaching through Lent about the disciple-making congregation. What does it mean to be a church that recruits, trains and sends disciples into the world?

It means paying the cost of discipleship; finding security and purpose in God; having and being a spiritual mentor; belonging to a small group of spiritual peers. Today, I want to explore the source of passion for going into the world.

Colleague tells of serving a little church in eastern Tennessee, just outside Oak Ridge. Overnight the town grew with the atomic energy center. People came from everywhere. Trailer parks sprouted like mushrooms for those who needed temporary housing, and came to help build the growing town. The church was old, hand hewn pews, kerosene lamps. Quaint. The pastor had a vision. Proposed reaching out to the new folks in town. Called a meeting to share his vision with the elders.

When the idea of inviting the trailer park folks came up someone said, "I don't think so. I don't think they'll fit in here. They're just temporary. They'll be leaving soon anyway." Others nodded in agreement. Someone made a motion, "I move," he said, "that in order to be a member of this church you have to own property in the county."

Motion seconded. Passed. Preacher voted against it. Folks reminded him he was just a kid pastor. Years later he was in the area with his wife. They looked for the little church.

Wasn't easy. An interstate now went through that part of the county. But he remembered the back roads. Wending his way to the church he and his wife came up to the old building. The parking lot was full of pickup trucks and motor-cycles. A big sign proclaimed: "Barbecue, all you can eat." It was a restaurant. They went in. Pews were gone. Plastic tables and chairs filled the room. People were eating ribs, wings, pork. Recounting his battle for diversity and the scene when St. Paul preached to the gentiles on Pentecost the pastor mused to himself, "Parthians, Medes, Elamites and dwellers of Mesopotamia." He turned and said to his wife, "It's a good thing this isn't a church anymore, otherwise these people couldn't be in here."¹

What is it that motivates some to create a club instead of a church and others to make a church instead of a club? The answer to that question, I believe, lies at the heart of the Easter festival, lies in the good news we receive and celebrate today: Resurrection.

But first we have to let go of thinking of Matthew's account of Resurrection as subject to the scrutiny of a scientific investigation. We are listening to a testimony of faith not a lab report.

Moby Dick is a so-so whaling manual but it is a great novel. Matthew's story of Jesus is a mediocre biography but it is a fabulous account of the power of God at work in Jesus' life, transforming the tragedy of Good Friday into the joy of Easter.

It all depends on how you see things. If you're not after proof but on the look out for a sign you just might encounter the risen Christ. Like the class that was asked to list what they thought were the seven wonders of the world. The usual items were named. The Pyramids; the Taj Mahal; Grand Canyon; the Great Wall of China.

One little girl had not turned in her paper. She admitted to the teacher she was having a problem. "I think the seven wonders of the world are to see, to taste, to touch, to hear, to feel, to laugh and to love," she said.ⁱⁱ

The class sat in stunned silence. They knew they had been touched by truth. What makes a child speak with such wisdom and clarity? It has to do with what we are willing and open to see. Seeing Resurrection with the eyes of a child isn't a bad place to start.

We're exploring the source of passion for ministry, for going into the world and sharing God's good news. We said Resurrection is at the core of that passion. But to grasp Resurrection we said we can't approach it as proof of anything. It isn't proof.

It is a sign of God's power at work in human lives. Like reading a great novel for its facts rather than its beauty or thinking of ballet as just aerobic exercise and not an artistry of grace. Resurrection doesn't prove, it bestows life, hope, peace, joy.

Spring is here. Soft air on your face. The light, changed from the 40 watt bulb of winter, even at noon, to an open window, sun beaming in. Bird sounds, green grass beneath the snow. God's signs of life after winter.

Apparently, there was controversy about Jesus' Resurrection swirling in the early church when Matthew wrote his Gospel. Various explanations for why the tomb was empty were given: the women went to the wrong place; the disciples stole the body; Jesus revived from only apparent death and wandered off on his own.

But in that time, as now, the empty tomb proved nothing. Followers of Jesus, then and now, appeal to his appearances, reports of his appearances and to the growth of the church to support the power of Resurrection.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Gospel tells us that the appearances of the risen Christ were reported by those who already knew or believed in Jesus – even if only with the faith of a mustard seed. What Resurrection signals is that God's Kingdom has already broken into human history. An event reserved for the end of history has happened in the midst of human history. So we look today not for proof of a doctrine, but for signs of God's power loose in the world.

If you're not pursuing proof but on the look out for a sign you just might encounter the risen Christ. But sometimes our old way of seeing things dies hard.

Fellow pastor tells how it was his mother who took him and his siblings to church. Father didn't attend. The father always complained of Sunday dinner being late when she came home with the children. Sometimes the preacher would call. The father would say, "I know what he wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge."

Once or twice the pastor sent a guest evangelist, 'There he is. Maybe you can win this man over.' But every time, the father said, "just another name, just another pledge." But one day he didn't say that.

He was in the Veteran's Hospital, down to seventy three pounds. They took out his throat, and said, "It's too late." They put in a metal tube, X rays burned him to pieces.

The son flew in to see his father who couldn't speak or eat. He looked around the room. Potted plants, cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep by his bed. A beautiful flower on the nightstand. Every card and blossom in that room was from persons or groups back at the family church.

The father saw the son reading a card. Couldn't speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written that line, his son says, his father's story would not be known.

On the box he wrote: "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story." "What is your story Daddy?" The father wrote, "I was wrong."

Proof of Resurrection? No. The sign of God at work in a human life? Yes.

Passion for ministry comes from stories like that in others' lives, in our lives. Stories that depict a power and presence bigger than we are. A power and presence that made itself visible in a moment of human grace or courage or honesty.

What gives these stories luster is their humanity. Real people dealing with real pain, real fear, real sorrow – touched, liberated, made hopeful again by the God of Easter Resurrection. This is news too good to keep to yourself.

I used to look with a jaundiced eye on such stories. Like the woman who said after her husband died she had trouble sleeping. But one night he appeared to her, she said, sitting on her bed. Three in the morning. Wide awake. Felt the bed give under his weight. Didn't say a word. Looked at each other. Then he was gone. She felt warm, peaceful, not alone anymore

I am not saying if you haven't had such experiences you haven't seen the risen Christ. I am saying that there are myriad ways God's power not just resuscitates but raises what was dead in us or someone else back to life – if we're open to seeing it.

One person who was open, who saw things differently, perhaps with the eyes of a child or from the perspective of his own pain transformed was Rembrandt.

There is an exhibition now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, entitled, "Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits."

There is a difference in these portraits. You can see it in the patina of the face, the depth of life in the eyes, the radiant aura that glows on the canvas. It's what made him great, say the critics, the tilt of a head or position of the hands.

Not everyone would want to be painted by Rembrandt, launched into posterity in an eloquent brown fog, bearing the weight of the world on your shoulders as his subjects so often did. Watery-eyed and wrinkled.

Rembrandt's passion was for painting people who struggled. People who'd received the test results and heard the false optimism in the doctor's voice; people who'd been to the supervisor's office, told their service was appreciated but times were tough and cuts had to be made; people who'd got a call in the middle of the night from the emergency room 'it's about your daughter.' People who knew life's pitfalls and pain but who'd been transformed by Resurrection light beaming into their darkness.

Rembrandt's portraits are not triumphant. They are transformed. Every Dutch burgher became a saint in his hands. He might be one of the best theologians of his time, says Michael Kimmelman. His painting is about the supremacy of grace over law. Which explains his fascination with St. Paul as a subject. His 1657 portrait, entitled, *The Apostle Paul*, may be the greatest of them all.

The flawed saint, his mysterious, life-long thorn in the flesh, yet saved by God's grace. Rembrandt reveals the power of God that enabled the great Apostle to endure every hardship and still push forward. Rembrandt's subjects are nearly all casualties of life. What is so compelling is the victory they've won: freedom from the prison of death, release from the straightjacket of despair.

The way St. Paul in the 1657 work sits at his writing table, resting his forehead in his left hand. Eyes staring in the distance, quill in hand, pondering before he scribes another line.^{iv} What words was he reaching for to describe the power of the risen Christ in his life? Somehow, somehow he had to tell them, in Corinth, in Ephesus, in Galatia, in Rome and Colossae and Thessalonica and Philippi.

"Grace to you and peace from our Lord Jesus Christ," he begins to scratch out on the parchment, "We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim the risen Christ...For we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...we do not lose heart, for we are being renewed day by day.

And we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

The question Easter asks of us is not, "Do we believe in the doctrine of resurrection or do we believe at all." The question Easter poses to each of us today is "have you encountered the risen Christ?"^v

If you have you'll be hard pressed to keep from telling others, whether they live in a trailer park or gated community.

The truth of the Resurrection – news too good to keep to ourselves – and our passion for ministry, is God's power to overcome death.

Every death you've had to date, and every death you'll have to come. Amen.

ⁱ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001) 14.

ⁱⁱ David McFarlane, "Good News from a Graveyard," sermon preached at The Presbyterian Church, Sewickley, PA.

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation – a bible commentary for teaching and preaching*, (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993) 329.

^{iv} Michael Kimmelman, "Humanity With Flaws Forgiven," *The New York Times*, Weekend Arts, Friday, January 28, 2005, B35

^v Craig Barnes, "Savior at large," *Christian Century*, March 13-20, 2002, 16.