



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: Easter, April 4, 2010

The Shining Lamp of Resurrection, Robert B. Culp

Luke 24:1-12

Interestingly, when Luke reveals that the women went to the tomb on the first day of the week, at early dawn, he is not just referring to the time of day it was. Rather, Luke is affirming the time it was in history – the beginning of time when something was let loose in the world which, ever since, no one has been able to nail down, confine, or get out of the world. Right here, at the very beginning of his resurrection narrative, Luke is saying what it is like to find out that Jesus, far more than a blessed memory, is a living presence.

But if we are to have any hope of knowing what Luke knows and feels, we can't just pick up the story at the point where the women come to the tomb. We have to start further back – all the way back with the appearance of Jesus whose chief concern had to do with bringing life in abundance to all in God's family.

Jesus taught people about abundant life, what it is and how to find it through the narrow gate of unselfish love. Abundant life, he insisted, has nothing to do with having or knowing or controlling things; rather, it has to do with the way we are and live in the world. Not many people believed that when they first heard it, and perhaps even fewer believe it today. But what he said was that abundant life has little to do with having, and much to do with being.

He himself had almost none of the things most people think are crucial to their happiness: he had no money, no permanent home, no family to speak of, and only a few friends – and rather fickle ones, at that. But what he had much of was the capacity for giving himself away. And this, he said, was the key to everything. “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus not only talked about abundant life, though, for he brought it with him and shared it with all kinds of people. The rich, like Zacchaeus; or the influential, like Nicodemus. Some of questionable reputation, like Mary Magdalene. Some hard-as-nails characters, like Matthew

the tax collector. Some were even repulsive or off-putting, like the lepers and beggars along the roadside. Most of those to whom he brought abundant life were on the fringes – like the fishermen, and the poor, and the women, and those the Pharisees referred to as “sinners.”

I suppose the primary way he brought this kind of life to people is that he made God real to them. He told them not about a distant God removed from their lives, but rather about a caring God intimately involved in their needs. He told them that God cares the same way a parent does when a child loses his way, the same way a shepherd cares when one of his sheep goes astray.

That God cares for us this way is hard to believe sometimes when you turn on the news and watch what’s going on in the world. But it was just as hard for people to believe then as it is now, what with the heel of the Roman conqueror on their necks. Whether they believed it or not, whether we believe it or not, Jesus taught about a God who stoops low to bind up our wounds, who searches us out when we’re lost, who embraces us with forgiveness and understanding when we’ve messed up big time.

And Jesus challenged those in his day who didn’t show such care. He lodged protests against political structures and especially the religious institutions, for they were neglecting their responsibilities as God’s chosen people to seek justice, and show mercy, and embody God’s life-giving and freeing acceptance.

It won’t surprise you, of course, to learn that he ran into opposition, because it happens all the time. The powers that be don’t take kindly to people who say and do the things Jesus said and did. Little by little, the opposition grew until, finally, the time and place seemed right, and the decision was made to get rid of him. So it was that he was arrested, given a trial of sorts, found guilty of a combination of political and religious misdeeds, and crucified on Golgotha.

As he was dying, Luke says, “the sun’s light failed,” and “there was darkness over the whole land.” Again, much like his comment about the “early dawn,” Luke’s statement is far more than a report on the state of the weather. For he is saying that darkness is the way the world is, the way life is, when Christ has gone out of it. “There was darkness over the whole land” because Jesus was leaving it. And so he died and was buried in a borrowed tomb.

This is the point at which we picked up the story earlier in Luke’s lesson this morning. While “dawn” had broken upon the world, it had not yet dawned upon the women’s broken hearts. In their hearts the world remained filled with the darkness of despair, desolation, and death. But then they heard the searching question that touched and mended their hearts: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” According to Luke, the women were the first to know. Jesus was back! The shining lamp of the resurrection was like the coming of the dawn! Jesus was back! The one who had been “crucified, dead, and buried” was alive. He lives! He reigns!

And this is what we are here today to celebrate.

But the question on many of our hearts, as I have shared before, is: Is it true? Karl Barth indicated that this is the question people are always asking when they come to church. They're asking it about almost everything that is said and done in the church's life and ministries. But never with more passionate interest, I suspect, than on Easter Day. Is it true?

In all honesty, the claim of Jesus' resurrection cannot be proved. It can be known, it can be experienced, it can be trusted. But it cannot be proved, and I'm not about to try. What I can do is to offer several thoughts that run through my mind in response to such an insistent question.

The first thing I think about is not the New Testament stories of the empty tomb, or the accounts of the appearances of a risen Christ. Instead, I think of those people I've known in whom the light, the overflowing life of Christ has been present. I think about those precious souls who've been able to forgive when they've been so badly hurt by others. I think about those who give themselves and a great many of their possessions away, and I'm able to see that these are the happiest people I know. I think about those who are bearing heavy burdens, without giving in to them and without giving up. I look at them and say to myself that they are like the apostle Paul, who said, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." And while these people who are suffering probably wouldn't say it just that way, they seem to know firsthand this special strength.

I think of these people, and I know that the abundant, shining life they're living has its source in Jesus Christ. I know because of the tell-tale signs: their lack of self concern; their readiness, when there is a need, to pick up towel and basin; their care for the least of these; the trust that is written all over their faces, and that wipes away all tears, and every trace of anxiety or fear; their outlandish confidence in the face of adversity and death. I see these things, and I know in my heart of hearts that no dead Christ could get people to live like that. No dead Lord could bring people to live life in such ways.

But when I ask myself if Easter is true, while I start with the people I've known, I think, too, about what the New Testament does say. And I begin by recognizing that the resurrection theme permeates the whole of it. It's not just tacked onto the conclusion to make for a happy ending. It permeates the whole. And, indeed, without this belief in Jesus' resurrection, we wouldn't have the New Testament, or for that matter, the church either.

Yes, there are disagreements and even contradictions among the various resurrection accounts. But if all the reports were alike in every detail, anybody who read them would rightly suspect that the writers collaborated in writing them.. Yet, the core of the story strikes me as being authentic. I don't see any good reason why those who first told these stories would have made them up. And I certainly don't see why they would have risked their lives defending

them, and even dying to defend them, if they had known they were fabrications.

Somehow, in some mysterious and powerful way, the One who was crucified appeared again to his followers. These appearances were real. The disciples had no doubt whatsoever Jesus had come back to them, and they wondrously transformed. Indeed, the effect on them was nothing short of astonishing. They were reborn. They, too, were brought back to life.

While before they had acted cowardly, now they were unbelievably courageous. While before they had been anxious and concerned about many things, now they had only one concern which was to tell Jesus' story and invite all who drew near to trust him and follow him. While before they struggled in the darkness of disillusionment and despair, now they were veritably dancing in the shining light of the dawn. And I have no other explanation for this than the one they gave ... that Christ came back from the dead to raise them from the dead, and to fill them with undying love and overflowing life.

Finally, when I ask myself if Easter is true, I am led to reflect on my own life. I hesitate to talk about my own experience, and do so only because perhaps it may help you to reflect more deeply on your own. I can't say that I've ever met Christ in the sense that you meet somebody on the street, or in the dramatic way Paul met Christ on the Damascus Road. But I have had an experience such as E. Stanley Jones once described. In my own way, I have come to know Christ, and I have been forever spoiled for anything that was not like him.

I know that when I yield my life to his, I'm at my best. I don't always do it, but when I do yield to him, I'm at my most joyful. I've seen his light, the bright shining lamp of the resurrection, and I know it to be the light of the world. I hate to think what the world would come to if ever we would forget or neglect that light, especially these days when we are witnessing far too many Good Friday experiences.

Exactly what happened on that first Easter, I don't really know, and I don't trust those who say they do. But I can affirm that death had no dominion over Jesus. I know that he is alive today – not as you and I are, in the flesh, but alive in a higher way as truth and power, as light and love. And he is still offering his life to any who will receive him and follow his way.

Joanna Adams, a Presbyterian minister, tells about a young man she knew who volunteered regularly at a foot clinic that was part of a homeless shelter in Atlanta. He was an advertising executive on the rise in his profession, and he came every Tuesday night and sat on a low stool at the feet of the homeless men. Gently, he would place their feet in a basin of warm water. Then he would dry their feet and apply ointment to their sores. This ritual always ended with his giving a clean pair of white socks to each sheltered guest, who usually shed a tear or two because, "For many, it had been a long time since anyone had offered them any tenderness at all."

One night, Joanna asked the young man why he was involved in this ministry of compassion. He replied, “I just figured I have a better chance of running into Jesus here than almost anywhere else. Somewhere I’ve heard that if you’re looking for the risen Christ, you have to go to Galilee. And for me, this homeless shelter is my Galilee.”

Perhaps Albert Schweitzer had it right when he said of Jesus, “He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands, and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they will pass through in His Fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience, who He is.”

My friends, Easter marks the coming of the dawn. We won’t find Jesus by going to a tomb, or anywhere else where people have tried to confine him. He is not there. He is going ahead of us to Galilee. There we will see him and discover afresh his new and abundant life being offered to us all.

Let us pray: O dear God, teach us that the shining lamp of the resurrection doesn’t swing over some narrow, empty grave, but rather over the thick darkness that covers all too often the whole earth. But it’s a darkness you dispel time and again as we meet the risen Lord in our own Galilees, and follow him in the way of a love that overcomes even death, breathing new life, abundant life into us every single day, through Christ Jesus our risen Lord. Amen.