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Questions Every Christian Asks?

7. Is There Hope?

Matthew 28:1-10 NRSV After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

2 Peter 3:9 New Century Version The Lord is not slow in doing what he promised—the way some people understand slowness. But God is being patient with you. God does not want anyone to be lost, but wants all people to change their hearts and lives.

It was about twenty-five years ago. I was an Associate Regional Minister with the Disciples of Christ in Indiana, a job which meant that I got to drive all over northern Indiana checking in with the pastors and churches that were part of my ministry. On one of those trips to a little town in northern Indiana, I took our then-four-year-old daughter with me. It was winter and the sun set early; it was dark by the time we arrived in the little town that was our destination and I was having trouble finding the motel where I'd made a reservation. In this pre-Siri, pre-"Hey Google," pre-GPS day, I had to pull over and look at a paper map in the hopes that it might tell me something. I then announced, in what I thought was a humorous voice, "Well, daughter, I think we're lost." She got a very serious look on her face, sat up straighter in her seat, looked all around outside, and then said "Well, I hope I can find us some reckons, then." Reckons? I said to her, "What do you mean?" And with that look of infinite patience on

her face that children reserve for their dim-witted parents, she sighed and said, “You know, if I can reckon-ize something, maybe I can help find the motel.”

It wasn't a winter's evening when Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother Mary went to the tomb, but it was dark, the sun still a few minutes away from lighting the eastern horizon. Jesus had been murdered by the power of Roman imperial authority on Friday afternoon, but as good and faithful Jews like their rabbi Jesus, Mary and Mary could not attend to Jesus' body until after Shabat, the Sabbath. So, Sunday morning they came just as early as they could. They too were lost, but in a way that was infinitely more profound than being temporarily unable to locate a motel. No, Mary's son and Mary Magdalene's friend had been cruelly and viciously tortured and then executed, and he left this life with so little that now he laid in a borrowed tomb hewn out of the rock, and they had had to silently and oh-so-sadly wait almost a day-and-a-half before they could offer that final act of devotion for him, the cleaning and anointing of his body as an act of love and respect. After the whirlwind three years of Jesus' ministry, moving among the people, inspiring them, teaching them, pointing them to a new relationship with God, now Mary and Mary could barely “reckon-ize” anything on that cold dark morning, not just because it wasn't yet fully light but because all that they had known, all that had become familiar was, in the space of a few days, taken from them.

But what they found, of course, was entirely, utterly different from what they had been expecting. Instead of a shattered body to be cleansed, they found an empty tomb and an angel who announced with the very same words that the angel Gabriel had spoken to Mary concerning Jesus' conception: “Do not be afraid.” The angel told them that Jesus was yet alive, risen, and on his way Galilee. Can you even begin to imagine? They came in despondency and left in delight. They came with hope reborn where it seemed that hope might never again live. Hope. It's the subject for this the final in our sermon series on “Questions Every Christian Asks,” and, indeed, this

sermon's title "What About Hope?" is an apt one for this day. For you see, I think the Easter story teaches us three profound things about hope.

First lesson: it's very hard to hope alone. I suspect that if either Mary had made that lonely pre-dawn walk to the cemetery, she might have faltered, she might have been unable to complete the task, she might have been unable to summon the courage to see and attend to what she expected to be the bruised and battered body. But neither one of them went alone; they went together. It's hard to hope all by yourself. You need others to help you do so.

Second lesson: Make your hope big enough. Let me give you an example. I was once consulting with a congregation that wanted to work on revitalization; they had fallen on some hard times and weren't entirely sure how to move forward. They invited me to come and help them reflect about their assets, their liabilities, their opportunities. After quite a bit of discussion, I turned the conversation to the topic of hope, and asked them what they hoped for their congregation. They more or less stared blankly at me, until one man said "Well, I hope this month's offerings are enough to cover our electricity bill." All around him, people nodded in agreement. *I* had hoped that **they** could imagine a much bigger hope for their future! Did you hear the angel's words to the Mary's when he oh-so-gently reminded them that they should have had reason for a much, much bigger hope than simply anointing a body? "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, **as he said.**" "*As he said.*" Three little words that reminded them that Jesus had forcefully told them and His followers that despite all the evidence that might seem to be to the contrary, God would prove even stronger than death itself. What about you? How big are your hopes? Have they become shriveled? Have they become the equivalent of next's month's utilities bill? If so, God is inviting you this Easter morning, this morning of new life, to discern and discover the bigger hopes for your life that God has for you.

Lesson Three: Our hope should always be pulling us toward the future, not the past. I have occasionally wondered why the resurrected Jesus didn't return to lord it over (pun intended) Pilate and Herod? I don't think I could have resisted confronting Pilate and dramatically telling him, "So you think you washed your hands of me?!?" I would have wanted to terrify Herod as he had sought to terrorize me and so many others. But notice: that would be to turn hope backwards. Do you know what I mean? You receive a compliment and all you can think of is the time that you messed up. Something nice happens to you and all you can worry about is whether or not you really deserve it. A good thing comes your way and you find yourself remembering the bad things that have happened to you. Hope that is not pointed toward the future is, at best, just nostalgia, and at worst a kind of corrosive regret. Hope pointed in the wrong direction doesn't energize, but dispirits.

No, Jesus was wiser than I. The angel told both Mary's that Jesus was headed to Galilee, not back into Jerusalem, not re-visiting the place of what had been, but the place of what could yet be. Now, Galilee is in northern Israel. It's where Jesus spent his boyhood and did most of his ministry. Galilee was composed, as one commentator puts it, of "strangely mingled elements – Aramaean, Iturean, Phoenician and Greek."¹ It was the area where anger at Roman mistreatment burned the hottest and hope for a messiah was the strongest. But the area was looked down upon by the city folks in Jerusalem; Galileans, according to them, were uncouth, country bumpkins, hicks, the poor and the ne'er-do-wells. Yet this is the place, these are the people where Jesus is going, the place, the people where he will not only declare but show that not even torture, cruelty, and death can deter or defeat the love of God.

We too are called by Jesus to follow him into the future with hope to those places which are in need. We are called to follow Him into the streets to witness to hope

¹Cf. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/galilee/>

where too many of our homeless brothers and sisters must live, many of whom are there because they had one financial emergency too many. We are called to follow him in witnessing in hope to far too many women who have been beaten and battered because of those who distort Christianity into an ugly thing. We are called to witness in hope to those of our brothers and sisters who, as the poet Emma Lazarus put it, words on the Statue of Liberty, are only “yearning to be free” and not to say to them “*you don’t matter because we are safe.*” We are called to witness in hope to those all around us who think that Christianity is a religion of bigotry against those who are “different” and who are not aware of the life-giving knowledge of a God of unconditional love and grace.

It’s hard to hope alone. Make sure your hope is big enough. Genuine hope always pulls us into the future. Now, make no mistake, it will be a risky future. Our God promises us joy, not safety. There will be times when we witness in hope to the least of these that we will be unsure of the way to go, how best to help. There will be times when we too will continue to feel lost. But my friends, the Good News of Easter morning is this: just like our daughter with her hope to find some “reckons” to show the way, we too have been shown the way, and our “reckon,” the thing that we should always recognize and give thanks for can be found in our second reading this morning, for it surely sums up the good news that Jesus went ahead to Galilee and into all the world to spread: *“God does not want anyone to be lost, but wants all people to change their hearts and lives.”*

Our Christ is out there ahead of us in hope, on His way to Galilee. If you squint your eyes just right, you can see Him, beckoning you to “reckon-ize” Him and to catch up to him and go with him - joyfully and expectantly - in the way that He is going. Shall we? Shall we?