

“Meet Me in Galilee”
Matthew 28: 1-10

In one of my favorite Tumbleweeds comic strips, the “less than bright” deputy approaches the blustery judge saying, “I didn’t get a single Easter egg in my stocking this morning.” The judge exclaims impatiently: “You nincompoop!” Christmas is for hanging stockings. You celebrate Easter by hunting for Easter eggs to put in your Easter basket.” As the deputy departs dragging his stocking behind him, the judge says to himself: “Gad. That boy’s grasp of theology is pathetic!”

Well as you know, “Easter” is not about theology at all, because that name comes from an ancient Saxon festival in honor of the pagan goddess of spring and fertility, Easter. When missionaries brought Christianity to the Saxons in the second century, they wedded their new religious rites to local habits in an attempt to minimize persecution. When after the ruler, Constantine, was converted to Christianity and declared that, hereafter, the “Christian Easter” should be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox, no one saw the irony. The one enduring reminder of the pagan origins of the festival is an endearing one, for the goddess, Easter’s, terrestrial symbol was the hare –yes, the loveable, cuddly Easter bunny. So you might say the goddess, Easter, takes her revenge on the usurper to this day for the bunny is an awfully cute symbol with which to compete, and in our hemisphere, at least, we associate Easter with Spring, which is natural and is anticipated and expected. By contrast, in the Bible, resurrection is totally unexpected.

Who among us has not made a trip to the cemetery to pay our final respects to a loved one, so we can identify with the women, who according to Matthew, set out as the first pale fingers of dawn touch the sky. Their steps are slow and halting; they are worn out from weeping; and they are expecting nothing. Did you notice that Matthew says “After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning...” This was the equivalent of our Monday—what’s more, early Monday morning! Sunday, of course, became the Christian day of worship in response to the resurrection, but the resurrection happened on Monday morning before coffee!! Talk about when you least expect it!

They certainly don’t expect to encounter the living Christ who says simply, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” To us, “Galilee” sounds like some sanctified place in the holy land, somewhere. But to the women and the other disciples; it would have been rich with meaning. Galilee was their home. Galilee was where it all started.

Galilee was where they had first met this itinerant teacher with the infectious smile who called them to leave their fishing boats and tax tables and follow him. Galilee was where they had learned from him how to heal the sick and feed the hungry and care for the poor. And, yes, Galilee was where they first misunderstood him and failed him. Galilee was where they interrupted him at prayer; tried to silence beggars who called out to him; and turned away parents who brought young children for him to bless. And still he loved them; and His resurrection means that they have another chance! For Galilee is where we experience not only His resurrection; but our resurrection to abundant life, as well. For you to experience resurrection is to experience not only Christ's resurrection, but your resurrection. As the great resurrection hymn has it, "Made like him, like him we rise; ours the cross, the grave, the skies."

When H.L. Mencken was told that Calvin Coolidge was dead, he responded, "How can we tell?" As unfair as that may be to Mr. Coolidge, it hints at the New Testament understanding of "death". In the New Testament, death is not limited to physical death – to when we stop breathing. Physical death is taken seriously in the Bible, but the resurrection removes its "sting". The "sting" of death is the fear of death; and Christ over comes our fear. Notice that the first thing the Resurrected Christ says, according to Matthew, is "Do not be afraid!" I remember the great preacher, George Buttrick, telling of a parishioner shaking his hand at the door following an Easter sermon when he had preached a little longer than he intended. She said, "Dr. Buttrick, after that sermon, no one needs to be afraid of death!" Because Jesus has gone before us to the Galilee of death, we can say with the Apostle, "Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory?" "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord; so, then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." Or as a modern-day Apostle has it: "Death is only a horizon, and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight."

I love E.B. White's description of his wife, Katherine as she sat outside on a nice day in the last autumn of her life, developing the chart that would be used to plant the bulbs in her garden. She is under hospice care and knows that she will not be there to see the spring flowers which the bulbs will produce. White writes: "There is something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance...the small hunched-over figure...oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection."

I believe that there was in Jesus of Nazareth a quality of being over which death had no dominion. And the real "evidence" of the resurrection is not the stories of the empty tomb, but the changed lives of the disciples. The fellowship with the living Christ changed the cowardly into the courageous; doubters into believers; and the despairing into the hopeful. Death in the Biblical sense is not limited to the grave. Death appears in all its ugly forms whenever there is alienation and separation and oppression. Whenever

one derives one's sense of worth from demeaning others, there death prevails. Whenever profits come before persons, there death does it's work. Life that is crippled by fear of living, already knows death. Life that knows no loyalty greater than self-aggrandizement already knows death. But, thank God, resurrection also happens this side of the grave. Easter happens whenever brokenness is healed; whenever love transforms lives; whenever reconciliation surges across the gaps of alienation and rejection to make life whole and deep and full once again. The poet G. Manly Hopkins uses the intriguing phrase, "Let Christ Easter In You". My prayer for you is that Christ may Easter in you. "New lives for old!" That's the only real proof of the Resurrection!

In my experience, that happens whenever we know ourselves as being loved and accepted for who we are. I'm so appreciative of the children worshipping with us today, and I would like to conclude with a children's story which I used to read to my own children when they were small. It's by Wendie and Harry Devlin and is entitled, "How Fletcher was Hatched."

"First-rate hound dog though he was, Fletcher felt rejected when his nine year old owner, Alexandra, was so taken with the fluffy little chicks that came for Easter. He soon noticed that his water dish wasn't filled and he hadn't had his ears scratched in days. When Alexandra "shushed" him quiet so he wouldn't disturb the sleeping chicks, it was more than Fletcher could take and he went off down to tell his troubles to his friends, Beaver and Otter. Since they couldn't make Fletcher small, fluffy and yellow, they decided that the only solution was to have him hatch out of an egg like the chicks that had won Alexandra's heart. So using sticks and clay, they built a giant egg around Fletcher. They closed it up with Fletcher inside and painted it pink with brown spots. While Fletcher slept in the egg overnight, Alexandra lay awake crying into her pillow because Fletcher was gone and she didn't know what had happened to him. The next morning Beaver and Otter rolled the giant egg up near the school where it was discovered and a crowd gathered. Amid much speculation at what kind of egg it could possibly be, the science teacher ventured that it was a "Flat-Billed Prehistoric Scratchafratch." A University Professor summoned to the scene speculated more toward a "Web-footed Pickle-faced Dinaflyer". Suddenly, Fletcher from inside the egg could hear Alexandra outside crying. With a rising howl he fairly exploded out of the egg; and feeling that something was expected of him, croaked out a "Peep!" Alexandra grabbed Fletcher in her arms and hugged him while both laughing and crying. The school principle announced to the crowd, "Only in America could a hound dog hatch," but Alexandra and Fletcher didn't hear, for they were skipping off together with Alexandra occasionally stopping to hug her dog, and Fletcher thinking: "You don't have to hatch to be loved. You don't have to be yellow and peep. You can be a great hound dog with brown spots and be the most important creature in a little girl's life."

Christ is Risen; He is Risen, indeed!