

April 24, 2011 ~ EASTER ~ Acts 10: 34-43; Colossians 3: 1-4; Matthew 28: 1-10

CELEBRATING THE PROMISE!

After two thousand years of barnacle-like incrustations, institutional failures, grotesque betrayals, familiarity that breeds casual contempt, idiotic counterfeits, and watering down the astringent wine of the gospel, Easter calls us back to the full-throated message that God sends.

This is the Good News – the grave is empty, Christ is risen. HALLELUJAH!

This is the Good News – the light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never put it out. HALLELUJAH!

This is the Good News – once we were no people, now we are God’s people. HALLELUJAH!

The message that God sends is simple to describe but hard to explain. You can track some of the most brilliant minds ever, like Augustine and Aquinas, Pascal and Kierkegaard, and try to wrap your brain around this message but sooner or later you will have to resort to metaphor and mystery, poetry and praise.

God raised Jesus from the dead, and in so doing sin and death is vanquished by the divine.

The repercussions of this basic message are radical and comprehensive. Anticipation displaces dread. Regret gives way to composure. Cynicism vanishes before joy. Reconciliation overtakes estrangement. Death gives way to life, darkness to light, fear to confidence, and despair to hope.

The Easter message shatters and subverts conventional human wisdom.

Conventional human wisdom suggests that if you live in poverty – in a land devastated by flood and violence and cultural constraint – if you live in a land like this you should give up. Conventional human wisdom would lead you to believe that your chances are not just “not good” – they are bad to non-existent. Conventional human wisdom says, “Give up” – “don’t hope” – “don’t waste your breath even trying”. Conventional human wisdom would be surprised by what I witnessed in Pakistan.

When visiting one of the villages involved with the Mirpurkas Food Security Project in the southern Pakistan province of Sindh I spoke for some time with the women. The Food Security Project is development work we are doing in concert with Canadian Food Grains Bank. It includes training in farm practices, establishment of seed banks, organic fertilizers, vegetable kitchen gardens, food preservation practices, self-help groups for women and irrigation ponds. Although this area was affected by the flooding in Pakistan last year it is a dry place – a desert. Irrigation is the only way that land can be reclaimed for farming – the only way that food can be produced. Irrigation is critical to the problem of food security here.

As I spent time with the women we began to connect – they started to open up and gradually – graciously – invited me into the joys and sorrows of their lives. I asked them to tell me about celebrations in their community. They laughed and talked with one another for a time before sharing through the interpreter what had happened when the irrigation pond was dug in their community.

The women all pitched in so that they could buy a sweet for everyone in the village. Such a small thing. Such a joyous and lighthearted celebration in a life that is generally austere, practical and restrained. So contrary to conventional human wisdom. They were celebrating the potential of the irrigation pond – not yet its fruit – expressing hope as they purchased and shared their treat – celebrating the promise of food security which means improved general health and nutrition as well as increased opportunity for education, independence from landlords, freedom from debt – a future of promise. Repercussions of resurrection resound in this simple community response of joy and hope.

I'm not sure I can capture for you what their story meant for me – I can only witness to it.

Think about the Easter message in the gospel of Matthew – the earthquake that shakes the whole world – the descending angel – the improbable rolling away of the stone – the fear of the guards – the composure of the women. Has Matthew captured the essence of the story? Has he explained it all or does resurrection explain us?

Easter is about God. It is not about the resuscitation of a dead body. It's not about the "immortality of the soul" – some divine spark that endures after the end. That's Plato, not Jesus. Easter is about God – not God as an empathetic but ineffective good friend, or some inner experience, but God who creates a way when there is no way – God who raises Jesus to remind us that the creator is still in charge here.

God did on Easter in invading the tomb what God did on Christmas in a young woman's womb – made a way when there was no way – took charge. On the cross, the world did all it could to Jesus. At Easter, God did all God could for the world. And the earth shook.

You don't explain that. You witness it.

The women go to the tomb with the confidence of disciples going to *see* – *to know*. They seem unconcerned about the stone or the Jewish guards placed at the tomb to keep the disciples from stealing Jesus' body and making wild claims of resurrection. The women come out of respect – out of love – and they get shaken up as the earth moves and the stone is rolled away to let them in.

The women meet Jesus and grab his feet – he is flesh not spirit. Despite his physical reality, Jesus is raised and leaves the tomb before the stone is moved.

Easter rolls the stone door of the tomb away for the women and for us so that we might penetrate the mystery of death. It makes the tomb a tunnel – a tunnel into the heart of the eternal and shows us that the holy heart of God is love and life. God rolls the door of the tomb away not to let Jesus out – but to let us in – to allow us to see that Christ's promises are true – to witness hope in the world.

The stone is rolled away from the tomb – death is not the end. It is a new beginning – a beginning that proclaims the victory of life over death, and which allows us to turn to face our future with faith and hope, confident that all of God’s promises will indeed bear fruit.

A belief in Easter is a decision of the mind and the heart. It is a choice – you either choose to have faith, or you don’t. But the decision you make about Easter will profoundly affect the way you live and other choices you make in all your life. As we choose to walk in an Easter light and to live by an Easter faith, we know it brings abundant life and makes intuitive sense even in the midst of death, hatred, and darkness.

When the earth heaves and the angel appears and the stone is rolled away, the soldiers shake and become like the dead. The women listen with fear and great joy – they respond with immediate action – they meet Jesus and they worship him. Their worship is a new thing.

What matters most about Easter is what we do tomorrow. If we return to our homes and don’t think about Easter again until next year, then we’ve entirely missed the point. If we don’t let what we hear and see in the gospel sink into our hearts and souls and minds, we needn’t have bothered to come today. Because the good news of resurrection has meaning only as we participate in it – only when the message is believed, told, shared, and lived. Today, we can be in awe, we can be still, we can be amazed – but tomorrow – tomorrow we must be Mary, recognizing the one who is our teacher. We must be Peter or the other apostles, who begin to share with anyone who will listen. We must be the people in a spare, poor village in Pakistan who celebrate the promise of water for crops – the hope of food security. We must be disciples – witnessing to the hope that God proclaims in resurrection.

And as we go forward to proclaim the good news we remember that Jesus promised the disciples before his death that he would go ahead of them. He goes ahead of us also – to lead us into the world – into a transformative way of life that testifies to the power of resurrection no matter who we are. Jesus is not going away – Jesus is going ahead.

The empty tomb does not signify absence but presence – Jesus is with us on the journey. Rather than going up to heaven – out of sight and out of mind – Jesus is at hand enabling us to experience resurrection not only in the scripture or in the sanctuary but in the peaceful abundance of Victoria and in the challenging scarcity of a village in Pakistan – on all the roads of our lives. Jesus – the living, risen Christ – goes ahead of us, opening a future for us. The stone has been rolled away – celebrate the promise of God’s presence! **Amen**