

# Let's Move On!

A sermon based on Matthew 28:1-10

by Don Friesen  
April 4, 1999

In 1968, the remains of a young man were found in a cemetery near Jerusalem. Archaeological evidence indicated that the man had been crucified nearly 2000 years ago, was about 30 years of age when he died, and that his name was Johanan Ben Haqgol. The death of this young man was totally forgotten until, by accident, his tomb was found. (Victor G. Spencer, Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, Republic of South Africa)

The ancient historian, Josephus, records that at the time that Jerusalem was under siege by the Roman emperor, Titus, 500 or more Jews were crucified every day! In among the gory details, Josephus writes, "...the soldiers ... nailed those they caught, one after one..., and another after another, to the crosses... ...their multitude was so great, that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies." (Antiquities of the Jews, Book V, chapter 11)

Jesus' crucifixion was not unique, but it is remembered, and it's remembered because Jesus did not stay in the tomb only for his body to be discovered some 2,000 years later. Luke tells us that the "message spread throughout Judea" (Acts 10:37) that after his death "...God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear... to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." (Acts 10:40-41)

The resurrection was God's stamp of approval on a life that lived according to the will of God. It also ensured that his memory and spirit live forever in the hearts of Christian believers.

## Don't Linger at the Tomb

When Mary and Mary Magdalene came to Christ's tomb on that first Sunday after Christ's crucifixion, however, they had no idea that henceforth Christians would gather every Sunday to celebrate his resurrection. They were greeted at the tomb by an angel who said to them, "Don't be afraid! I know you are looking for Jesus... He isn't here! Come, see the place where his body was lying." (Matthew 28:5-6, CEV) And the women hardly have enough time to catch a glimpse of the tomb than the angel whisks them off, saying, "Now hurry! Tell his disciples that he has been raised to life and is on his way to Galilee. Go there, and you will see him." (Matthew 28:7, CEV)

Somewhat bewildered, Mary and Mary Magdalene "hurried from the tomb," Matthew tells us, "and ran to tell his disciples." (Matthew 28:8, CEV) Along the way Jesus met them, and, repeating the angel's message, he told them, "Don't be afraid! Tell my followers to go to Galilee. They will see me there." (Matthew 28:10, CEV)

I find this emphasis on Galilee rather curious. It's true that Jesus had told them earlier, "...after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee" (Matthew 26:32), but why not just meet at the tomb? The disciples were still in the city, and it would be a convenient meeting place. It would also be a symbolic meeting place; why not meet with the Risen

Christ at the very site that was supposed to seal his demise? Or, why not meet in Jerusalem, on the steps of the Temple, a symbolic comeuppance for those who had engineered his crucifixion? I don't know why Jesus chose Galilee, other than that it was his home, but I do find it rather striking that there is no loitering at Jesus' tomb. The angel invites the women to see it, but they don't have much time to linger before the angel chases them off to Galilee!

I'm not certain of the full meaning of this rush to get away, but it's a detail in the Easter story that is very much in character with the Easter message, indeed, the gospel itself, which often prompts us to move on! It reminds me of what Paul told the Philippian Christians, when he wrote, in his letter to them, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.... Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own.... ...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:10, 12-14)

Now, the curious onlookers who were witnesses to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem were no doubt also curious about his tomb. It would naturally be of some interest, not to only to curious spectators, but also to his followers. This was, after all, where Jesus died. It should be marked in some way. Others might like to see it; the local Chamber of Commerce or the Jerusalem Heritage Committee might like to erect a monument or a plaque. In modern times the tomb would be a great tourist stop, and indeed, it is -- both of them!

The gist of our gospel lesson, however, seems to be: Don't get stuck in Good Friday; it's Easter! Let's move on! It's a good lesson for those of us prone to linger at the tombs of our dreams. It may be that we're lingering at the tomb of a dead-end career instead of seeking out new possibilities. Perhaps we're carrying on an extended funeral service for our failures and frustrations instead of moving on to cultivate some aspirations. It may be that we're sixty-something still trying to act like a forty-something, and find ourselves resisting moving on to more age-appropriate activities. It may be that we're a teenager overwhelmed with teenage anxieties and concerns, unaware that it might be helpful to realize that within but a few years we'll be moving on to a new set of opportunities.

There are times, to be sure, when the anxieties of the present overwhelm us. There are times when it's all we can do just to cope. And though I think the admonition to "stop living in denial" is much over-rated, walking away from our problems is no solution. The women at Jesus' tomb did not avoid the tomb; indeed, they were invited to see his tomb, but they also didn't tarry at the tomb.

It's understandable, given very adverse circumstances, if we struggle just to cope, but it's also a temptation to get stuck in that mentality. We can get into a rut, stuck in a negative response to life, and it can affect our spirituality. We pray, looking to God for strength, but really have little more in mind than surviving, or perhaps shaking our spiritual fatigue. We resemble the man who in 1830 resigned from the United States Patent Office because, as he noted in his letter of resignation, "There is no future in the Patent Office; all of the great inventions have been accomplished."

Similarly, we may be prone to dwelling on our spiritual past rather than upon our spiritual prospects. We shut ourselves up in tombs of our own creation, unaware that God's Spirit is eager to roll away the stones that keep us trapped in these tombs.

## **The Compelling Nature of the Gospel**

There is no doubt that we live in a Good Friday world, a world full of pain and problems, but the message of Easter is that you cannot find the power of the resurrection in the graveyards and nostalgia of the past. The Easter message compels us forward. The compelling nature of the gospel is clear in Jesus' stories. It's clear in the story of the peasant who, in discovering a valuable treasure, considers it so valuable that he sells everything he has in order to buy the field in which he found this treasure. In another story Jesus compares the gospel to a pearl, a pearl of exceptional value, so exceptional that the merchant who discovers it gladly surrenders his entire stock of pearls in order to acquire this one. It is this treasure, this pearl, of which Paul spoke when he wrote, "I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord." (Philippians 3:8, TEV)

God took Jesus from the tomb and raised him to life, not to deaden our spirit, but to animate them. God raised Jesus, not to subdue us, but to imbue us with his heavenly Spirit, a Spirit that compels and empowers us to do the exceptional, or, as Mother Teresa suggested, to do the ordinary with extraordinary love. The Spirit of Christ compels us to manifest a bold spirit, an imaginative spirit, a spirit less interested in the security of faith than in the possibilities of faith. Easter appeals to our imagination, and invites us to move on, in faith!

## **Conclusion**

The compelling nature of the Easter story brings to mind an Hasidic parable that I have told before, about one Eizik, son of Yekel, who lived in far-off Krakow. Eizik was a poor man whose family seldom ate their fill. One night in a dream he saw the distant city of Prague, noticing there a certain bridge over the river with a treasure buried beneath it. The dream was so vivid that he couldn't forget it, especially when it kept recurring every night for two weeks. So, finally he determined to walk all the way to Prague to see for himself.

After several days Eizik arrived in the city, recognizing it from his dream, found the bridge, and went underneath it to locate the treasure. Suddenly a soldier grabbed him by the back of the neck, and took him to prison for questioning. Asked what he was doing prowling around under the bridge, Eizik blurted out the truth; he said he was looking for treasure that he imagined in a dream. Impulsively, the soldier broke into laughter and scoffed, "You stupid fool! Don't you know that you can't trust what you see in your dreams? Why, for the last two weeks I myself have dreamt that far away in Krakow, in the house of one Eizik, son of Yekel, there is a treasure buried under the stove in his kitchen. But wouldn't it be the most idiotic thing in the world if I were to go all the way there to look for it? In a city where there must be a hundred Eiziks, sons of Yekel? Where one could waste a lifetime looking for a treasure that doesn't exist?" And, still laughing, the soldier gave him a kick and let him go.

Then Eizik, son of Yekel, walked back to Krakow, to his own home, where he moved the stove in his kitchen, found the treasure buried there, and lived to a ripe old age as a rich man.

The point of the story, of course, is that while the treasure was at home all along, the knowledge of it was in Prague. The presence of eternity is hidden within every present moment, but it only becomes clear as we move on in faith, in hope, and in daring, to the

future. The kingdom of God can be realized in the present, but only as we feel compelled by our vision of the kingdom's future. Lent is over. Good's Friday's done. Let's move on!

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.