

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Make Up Your Bed

(Christ is Risen!)

Resurrection Texts from Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20, and Matthew 28

Russ Dean, April 16, 2006



The home in which I was raised was built in the early 1900's. In Greek Revival architecture the two-story structure is impressive with its elevated entrance, brick quoins, and double front columns opening into a magnificent foyer. A picturesque staircase fills this foyer. At the top of eleven steps a landing branches right and left to three more steps. Those landings each make another ninety-degree turn, and at the top of five more steps, a semi-circular balcony connects these two routes to the second floor. It was a beautiful house to call home; but my clearest memory of living there is my mother's voice.

With bedrooms on the second floor, and three teenagers securing free room and board atop these 19 steps, my mother had ample reason to learn to communicate to us from the foyer. Standing in the alcove adjacent to the stairway and looking back toward that balcony, my mother could raise the dead: "Ruuuuuss... Phillip?... (and, our personal favorite) Adaaaaaiiir! (She could stretch "Adair" into more syllables than you can imagine.) It's time to get up. And don't forget: Make Up Your Bed!" My mother's morning greetings, approaching the genteel quality of a southern hog-calling contest, was not at all becoming of the elegance of that home. But it worked! And, if I heard "make up your bed" once, I heard it 10,000 times before I left home, though it never made sense. I would argue, "I'm just going to get right back in it in about 16 hours... Why does it matter?"

Fast-forward two decades: Amy's mother obviously had neither a Greek-inspired staircase nor a hog-caller's voice, because if Amy is the last one out of the bed. The bed will not be made. Period! But now, when I arrive home (and it matters not how late), I make the bed – even if I immediately turn down the covers and crawl right back in. My mama taught me well. It's what we do. It's part of the routine.

Today is Easter Sunday. The pinnacle of the Christian year. Around the globe more than a billion worshipers celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, that sine qua non (the “can't-do-without-it”) fact of our faith. Bells ring. Choirs sing. People go to church, even if the last time they were there they also sang “Christ the Lord is Risen Today!” (And if you're here for the first time since last Easter, we are sincerely glad to have you!)

But the truth is, I'm not sure we know what to do with Easter. Christmas, we have figured out – the decorations and the carols and the gifts seem to help. But what do we do with this, our most important holiday? In one of his sermons the great educator of the last century, Horace Bushnell, noted: “The great days of the year are few, and when they come, they seldom bring anything great to us.”¹ Exactly! Oh, the Church makes a big deal over Easter, of course. We've encouraged you to prepare for forty days. But my sense is, for the average member of this (as with most) congregations, Lent is little more

¹ Horace Bushnell, “Living to God in Small Things”: “Even as the world judges, small things constitute almost the whole of life. The great days of the year, for example, are few, and when they come, they seldom bring anything great to us. And the matter of all common days is made up of little things, or ordinary and stale transactions. Scarcely once in a year does anything really remarkable befall us. But three hundred and sixty five such days make up a year, and a year is a twentieth, fiftieth, or seventieth part of your life. And thus, with the exception of some few striking passages or great and critical occasions, perhaps not more than five or six in all, your life is made up of common, and as humans are wont to judge, unimportant things. But yet, at the end, you have done up an amazing work, and fixed an amazing result. You stand at the bar of God, and look back on a life made up of small things – but yet a life, how momentous, for good or evil.” Quoted in “Weavings,” May/June 1987, p.25.

than something the ministers talk about. And Easter, itself, is no more than an hour of fanfare. Maybe you still buy a new tie or dress, but when lunch comes. It's over. "That was nice."

The truth is, I don't quite know what to do with this day, either. We do a lot of talking about it. We print a different bulletin. Add brass. Ask Katie to sing.² Extend our litanies, to capture the joyful message. But is that enough? If Easter is what we say it is, will a little extra worship, and a new tie really do justice to the event behind our celebration? How should we celebrate?

Before I give you my own answer, let me affirm for you that I believe Easter is what we say it is. Paul says without the resurrection of Jesus, our faith is in vain. I think he is right.³ Jesus was an inspiring teacher. A powerful healer. One of those charismatic, mystical, and visionary leaders through whom lives are transformed. But countless teachers, healers, and leaders have gone before us, without changing the world as Jesus did. As powerful as was his life, then, his life, alone, did not inspire a new religion. As instructive and theologically ripe as his death has become, then, the crucifixion of a first-century Jewish rabbi, is not the reason millions still gather in his name.

Standing on the edge of that mile-deep gorge which is America's "Grand Canyon," a young boy peered over the edge and said, "Something happened here." Yes. I don't know what it was, exactly. I cannot explain it in terms that do justice to our intellect, our world-view, our experience, or even to our faith, but two thousand years ago

² Katie Oates is a glorious soprano, who sang during this service G.F. Handel's "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth."

³ "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain" (1 Corinthians 15.12-14).

after a short, itinerant ministry was ended by just another of the daily brutalities of Rome's occupying force ... something happened. The disciples of Jesus call it Resurrection. It is a power that still changes the world.

So, if Easter is what we say it is, will a little extra worship and a new tie really do justice to the event behind our celebration? How should we celebrate?

Looking for an answer, I turned to the gospels, again, to see what we might learn from the original disciples. I was astonished at what I found, reading these four accounts back to back. Because I do believe "something happened here," something astonishing, something strange and extraordinary, I would have expected this to be reported with banner headlines and shouts of joy, with the kind of proclamations of God's power that accompany most Easter messages today. But this is, as you just heard, decidedly, not what is reported.

After I had read once, I went back and re-read several times, each time more amazed and more amused at the incredible ambiguity that is presented in the accounts. No gospel writer reports the same thing. There is not a single duplicate resurrection appearance. And in no account does the writer say anything that approaches the kind of joyful celebration that we seek on Easter Sundays. There is not a single report that says, in effect, "And the disciples saw the empty tomb (or the risen Lord), and they went home praising God and telling everyone the good news!" Not a single one.⁴

Mark ends his gospel saying, "*they told no one for they were afraid.*" End of story. (Really? He is risen, from the dead – and they told no one!?) Matthew, who comes as close to celebration as any, ends his story with the disciples on the mountain (symbolic

⁴ I added here something to this effect: "These are the reports of honest, real, live people, of honest, real life events."

of an enlightened spiritual experience), but even there, seeing the resurrected Christ, he tells us, “...*some doubted.*” Incredible! (It’s one thing for 21st century believers to question the resurrection, but don’t you think if they were standing there looking at him, they all could have believed?)

Our scripture is an amazing collection of literature, written in such a way to make clear that what is important is never the “factuality” of what has been reported. If a fact called “bodily resurrection” were at stake, either the stories would tell this, naturally, or the writers would have collaborated to edit out any ambiguity. But as Clarence Jordan once said:

The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit filled fellowship; not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church.

The gospels make clear that what is important about the resurrection is the experiential quality of it. The resurrection was something different to everyone. Then, as now, it is a matter of faith and not just cold, hard facts. The risen Christ who was accessible to the first disciples is just as accessible to you and me. If we can see.

Luke and John both make the ironic statements that after their experience, the disciples “*went home.*” (They didn’t “go home praising God!!” They simply “*went home.*”) John finds Peter a few days later, fishing. He didn’t even buy a new tie!

Incredible.

But how else could we really celebrate something this life-changing? Staying on the mountain or remaining in the sanctuary trying to fill our lives with religious ecstasy would be the opposite of what Jesus called his followers to do. Jesus’ disciples saw. And

they believed. Or they didn't. But when they had experienced whatever they had experienced of Easter, they "*went home.*" Because you and I are here, however, still worshipping in the name of a Resurrected Christ, makes clear that they went home changed.

Jean Prevallet understands something of our Easter dilemma. She says:

I know my own tendency to wish for an experience of God, to long for some experience that would assure me... that I am on the right track. So I can identify with [those] who seek a sign. I have to keep distinguishing my desire for God from my desire for an experience of God.⁵

The experience of God may be on the mountain. In the sanctuary. Standing before the resurrected Christ. Some disciples have this experience.⁶ But that is not where our desire for God is most clearly met.

John says when Peter came to the tomb, *He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.* To read, literally, we have to imagine Jesus, after lying dead three days, waking to the glorious experience of new life and at least one more day to live it. Maybe it was his mother's voice that raised him from that sleep: "Jesus. It's time to get up. And don't forget: Make Up Your Bed!" For before he left that tomb, to go into all the world changing our lives with his living presence, he stooped over those bed linens, and

⁵ Quoted in "Weavings," January/February 1995, p.17.

⁶ In some of my reading for this sermon I was introduced to this insight: some of Jesus' disciples experience the risen Christ. But, some do not. ("*When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted*" Matthew 28.17.) As the pastor of a congregation of modern and post-modern Christians, some who doubt "the resurrection experience," this was an important insight. If even standing in front of a risen Christ, some disciples could doubt, then, does not standing away from him a span of 20 centuries make a doubting faith even more understandable? I also find it interesting that Matthew says, upon seeing him "they worshiped – but some doubted." (As if even the doubters could worship.) This has been my experience as the pastor of this congregation. Some of our biggest "doubters" are our very best "worshippers."

wrapped them neatly, as a sign to us that God is to be found, most clearly, in the ordinariness of every day.⁷

So when we have seen the risen Lord, or when we come at Easter to hear what others have seen,⁸ if we want to be faithful to Jesus, the only way to celebrate and worship adequately is to turn and go back home.

There we will find an ordinary life that life is no longer ordinary.

Make Up Your Bed. Christ is Risen, indeed!

May it be so!

⁷ Even those who cannot see the risen Christ in an ecstatic theophany, can experience the risen presence in the ordinariness of every day life.

⁸ Again, this is the experience of the first disciples.