

Easter Sunday - B
Grace St. Paul's
4/5/15

Resurrection Happens, Even for Men

In the name of the Christ who rises beyond sensual reality to the most profound truth the world has ever known. Amen.

Those of you who know a little about the Grace St. Paul's community are aware that we have a reputation for having some of the best adult spiritual formation and education opportunities in all of Tucson. A couple months ago, we added a new weekly class to the list of choices. It was a simple Bible study class. Now it is true that we Episcopalians are famous for finding something to argue about when it would seem impossible to disagree, but you would think if there was ever a class that would cause zero controversy in a religious setting, it would be a bible study. But moments after I announced that the class was beginning, a series of groans and boos rivaling a Philadelphia Eagle football crowd were launched from these very pews. More than one sports commentator has suggested that Philadelphia fans would boo their own grandmother if she struck out with the bases loaded. Now at first, I thought this negativity was directed at the play-on-words name of the class, Coffee, Bagels, and B.S. The B.S., as I am sure all of you immediately realized, stands for Bible Stuff. But the hostile reaction had nothing to do with BS at all. It came because the class was...are you ready?...for men only. Imagine. How dare the Rector of a progressive, inclusive, open-hearted congregation like Grace St. Paul's allow a segregated group to form? It was downright repulsive, contrary to our mission statement, maybe even heretical.

It is absolutely true that GSP goes to great lengths to avoid even the slightest hint of exclusiveness in any form. But the truth is, we were desperate. You see, we have this little issue here. As I count, we have 56 different ministries at GSP. 43 of them, 77%, are lead by women. 73% of our staff are women. 89% of our Sunday school teachers are women. Take a look at this group behind me. When we do responsorial prayers, we start with the women because the men might be embarrassed by their barely audible tones compared with the multitude of angelic female voices. Often in our liturgy meetings when The Rev. Steve Kelsey is gone, there are ten of us, nine women and me. The truth is, when our Junior Warden Bill Moore came to me with the idea of a male bible study, I leaped with joy at the thought of males responding with the same energy as our females to our sacred text.

Now it would be easy for me to take all of this personally. What is it that I am doing that causes only women to get the message? Why, I might ask, can I not reach my own gender?

But anyone who knows the history of Grace St. Paul's is aware that this situation existed long before me. If it had not been for the women of this parish, this place would have dried up and blown away a long time ago. In addition, this phenomenon is hardly unique to us. In fact, it has been the same in every parish I have ever attended. Women always outnumber men. This is also not a peculiarity of our generation. Check the historical records of any Christian church and you will find that for hundreds of years, men may appear in the most conspicuous roles, but invariably, it is women who have made up the substantial percentage of the worshipers. And it is not just the fact that women come to church more often. What has become increasingly obvious to me

over the years is that, on the average, women have displayed a more fervent faith than their male counterparts. Many women seem to have an intuitive awareness of the presence of God in their lives, while many men feel no such connection.

The Gospel that our Deacon Nancy just read for us from Mark is the most important story in the history of Christianity. But if we were to have her now read to us the same accounts of the empty tomb from the other three canonical Gospels, we would have difficulty believing they were all describing the same event. Each story differs on who and how many people come to the tomb. Some discover angels, some hear only a voice, and some actually see the risen Christ. Each evangelistic account of the resurrection disagrees on all of the details, save for one thing. The one common element in each is women. One says one, another two and the one we hear today says three. But all of them agree that it is only women. Women are the first to discover, the first to believe, and the first to proclaim the risen Christ. And where are the men when Easter begins? Where are the men when the event that changes the world occurs? The same place they were when Jesus was crucified. Hiding. Women were there with Jesus on the road to the cross and when he died, while the men all ran away. The one exception is Peter, who remains long enough to deny he knows Jesus three times. Then he runs away too.

The phenomena of women being the ones who carry the faith then, is not just something that occurs at Grace St. Paul's, or just in the past generation, or even just in the past couple hundred years. It's always been this way, from the day it all began. It is how our church started, and it is at the root of the very meaning of Christianity.

This fact often goes unnoticed, because frankly, male church leaders don't talk about it. But if we think the prominent role of women in the church is embarrassing now, imagine what it was like in the first century. Did you know that in the Middle East of that day women were not allowed to testify in court? They were considered unreliable witnesses. Beloved, we have based our entire faith on the words of a group of people whom judges could not trust. What kind of way is that to begin a religious movement?

Over the centuries, theologians have been perplexed with this question. Why in the world would Christ choose a woman or a group of women to have the first encounter with him as the risen God when no one is going to believe them? It was obviously an embarrassment to everyone and remains so in some religious circles today. But as I have had the opportunity to share in the experience of so many women who have personally encountered God in their lives, I have come to understand the first Easter story very differently. Perhaps it is not that Christ chose a woman to experience the risen God at all. Perhaps everyone had the opportunity to experience the risen Christ, but it was only the women who were intuitive enough to be aware of Christ's presence.

That's why I have always found the debate around female clergy to be comical. As we just heard, our religion was not founded by Jesus. It was born when a woman or a group of women discovered the risen Christ. It continued because women got past their fear and did not keep this information to themselves. When they did so, they were ridiculed by the men who were all hiding out, but they did it anyway. If someone wants to make a biblical argument to exclude a gender from getting ordained, it is men that should be concerned about their suitability, not women.

Am I suggesting to all of you on this glorious Easter morning that women and perhaps gay and a few highly intuitive men have a better chance to experience the risen Christ and Easter than the rest of us? You bet that is what I am saying!

But today, I also bring Good News of great joy to those of us who do not fit any of those categories. If you, like me, are none of the above, I believe that we too can discover Easter. I believe that because even I have experienced it. We just need to take a back door into the resurrection. We need to analyze our way into the empty tomb.

So let's approach this story from the standpoint of a critical thinker like me, who when someone asks me what animal I see in the white puffy formation in the sky answers, "it's a cloud." Let us begin with what we have already acknowledged, that women were the ones who announced the resurrection. If it is true that women were not supposed to speak with men outside their own family, and that they could not even be witnesses in a trial, then who in their right mind would choose to have women announce the birth of Christianity? The only rational conclusion for me is that the authors of the Gospels, who were most likely male, must have become so convinced that these stories were true, that they were willing to repeat them just as they heard them, even though doing so would be embarrassing to them and harmful to the future of their religious movement.

No, we cannot prove from the Gospels that the resurrection is historical fact. But even for those of us who have never intuited anything, even for those of us have never been fortunate enough to have had a personal Easter experience like Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, we can say one more thing. Historians tell us

unequivocally that Jesus lived, and that Jesus was killed. Thousands of others have died like Jesus over the years, and all of them have disappeared into history. But this one time, the only time in recorded history that I am aware, something brought his followers, who were scared to death they too would be killed, out of hiding. Once they were together, something took their fear away and then, inexplicably, something made their numbers start growing exponentially, beyond any growth pattern the world has ever experienced. Something affected them so deeply that they had to share it with the world. Something so dramatic happened that people, even people of the male persuasion, became willing to die to get out the message. Obviously, something happened after Jesus' death that took away their fear and convinced them to carry the message of Jesus to others, even if it meant their own death. What we can say from a rational/critical/historical perspective is that something had to happen to cause all of this. We can't what happened or when it happened. It could have been days or years after Good Friday. But something monumental surely happened to bring all those folk out of hiding and suddenly be filled with immense courage and intense zeal. Beyond this, the rest is up to us. Resurrection, according to the Gospels, was not easy for any of the male disciples to accept. It remains just as difficult for us in 21st century America. Some will take those different accounts of the events and say, look, they don't even agree on what happened after Jesus died. These people will come to the conclusion, therefore that Easter never happened.

But for me, the straight, male analyst, the fact that the details from Gospel to Gospel are different suggests something else. Easter is not about an historical moment in time. Easter is about how each of us experiences resurrection. For some, like the

Marys and Salome, it is very personal, very vivid, very intuitive. For others, like Peter and the hiding disciples, rational facts need to be applied. For some of us, that resurrection experience is instantaneous. For others, it takes years of study and comprehensive analysis. I believe that the reason the Gospels describe the Easter experience so differently is because they are not depicting a single historical event at all. They are talking about what happened then and now. They are stories of what happened to a group of women 2000 years ago and to us today. Some hear the contradictions and say that Easter never happened. But others hear them, even those of us who must make a rational determination, and conclude that Easter always happens. The power of the Resurrection is that Christ can be experienced NOW, just like then, even if we are products of the rational world in which we live, and even if we are men.

So let us travel together, led by our Marys and our Salomes, female and male, gay and straight, intuitive and rational, into the heart of the Easter story. Some of us will feel Christ's presence with us in a real and palpable way. Others will rationally come to the same conclusion through study and prayer. But no matter how we get there, nothing can ever be the same for us again. Nothing ever will be the same for us again. Because you and I have experienced a story that is so beautiful that it just has to be true. He is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Amen.