

Matthew 28:1-11
March 23, 2008

South Plains
Easter

Vindicated

I always considered my father a little old-fashioned, which he always took as a compliment. Today, his home remedies are being vindicated by the internet. He kept a little blue bottle of Vicks Vapor Rub nearby for whatever ailed him. Applied generously, it was the drug of choice for a chest cold. I thought it odd that he would stuff the ointment up his nose in order to unstop a head cold. And, whenever a sore throat threatened, he would scoop out a glob of this elixir and swallow it whole. Now, I learn from the internet that Vicks may be effective against nail fungus. Do you want to know my doctor's reaction? "Try it, and let me know if it works."

We have been anointing our bodies throughout human history not only as a ritual for health, but also as a religious ritual. Kings and priests of Israel were anointed with fragrant oils on the assumption of their office. The phrase "anointed one" designated a person set aside by the Lord. The Hebrew word for anointed in the New Testament is messias from which comes our word Messiah, or in English "Christ."

When Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, poured costly perfume over Jesus' head, she was anointing him for burial, but she was also celebrating his

title as the Messiah. She was identifying Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one of God. And, when God raised Jesus from the grave, God vindicated that designation: Jesus is the Christ.

I confess that when I first started reading the Bible seriously, I was confused about whether "Christ" was Jesus' last name or Jesus' title. Is he "Mr. Christ" or "The Christ?" Turns out I am not the only one confused. Among pious Jews of the first century, "Christ" would have been understood as a title for someone who was expected to lead God's people to days of glory and religious revival. But, when the gospel took root among Gentiles unfamiliar with scripture, the title "Christ" morphed into a name, Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus.

The resurrection cemented the title and the name together. First and foremost, Jesus' resurrection vindicated the claim that he is exactly who Peter said he was on the road to Caesarea Philippi: "the Christ, the Son of the living God." The resurrection puts a divine stamp of approval on Jesus' message that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. God invades that kingdom of sin and death that we know all too well as normal, and God takes it over, transforming death into new life and reversing sin with forgiveness.

The resurrection was not what the two Mary's expected to find as the faint rays of dawn lit their way to the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea had laid to rest the

body of Jesus. The women had watched at the cross while Jesus cried out the words of Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It was natural that they remained there on Golgotha until the very end. After all, they had provided for Jesus' earthly needs as he traveled around Palestine with his followers. And when the sun began to close down the horizon that Good Friday evening, and when Joseph came forward to claim the body, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary positioned themselves opposite the tomb. Everyone was hurrying the burial rites because the Sabbath started at sundown and there was just time enough to lay Jesus' body to rest. But 36 hours later, when the Sabbath was over and a new day dawned, the women came back.

Matthew tells us that in the meantime, the chief priests and Pharisees had persuaded Pilate to post a guard at the tomb. They did not want the disciples to steal the body and claim it had been raised from the dead. Thus, when the great stone was rolled away by an angel in the middle of an earthquake, not only the two women saw it happen, but the Roman guards also saw it. The angel ignores the soldiers, and addresses the women with a classic reassurance that we all need when we're confronted by a message from the beyond: "Do not be afraid."

It doesn't matter what wonders heaven may demonstrate. When it comes time for us to act down here on earth in the face of death, we have to weigh the risk against the benefits. Don't be afraid, the angel says.

Don't be afraid that you won't have the strength to move the stone or whatever obstacle is in your way. Don't be afraid of the soldiers with their weapons of destruction. Don't be afraid of religious authorities telling you that you are wrong. Don't even be afraid of death itself. Because Jesus has been raised.

Imagine the confusion those women experienced. The dead are supposed to stay in the grave. The guards were supposed to insure normality. First, an earthquake; then an angel; and finally, as they went "with fear and great joy" to tell the disciples, they ran into Jesus himself, alive.

What were they to think? How long did it take for the reality of the resurrection to sink in? More importantly, how much longer did it take to begin reshaping their lives in the light of Jesus' resurrection? That's the real question for us this morning. It's one thing to believe that Jesus was raised, to believe that the power of God can actually overcome death and all the life-denying powers of evil. It's something else to put that belief into action. To let go of our pessimism about the world and act with resurrection hope. How long did it take those women to make the good news of Easter the motto of their lives, "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed?"

When we say the Apostles Creed, we affirm "the resurrection of the dead." It's easy to say those words. It's not so easy to let that hope shape our citizenship in the midst of a war that has lasted over five years with

almost 3000 deaths. Pessimism is rampant. Against that tide, the Daily Progress carried the story last week of a local woman named Mary Ellen Wooten who supports between 100 and 200 soldiers stationed in Iraq by sending all sorts of gifts, everything from coffee pots to razors. She's affirming life.

It is especially difficult to let resurrection hope shape our lives when death moves beyond a threat to a reality. The two Mary's come to the tomb of Jesus believing in that resurrection of the body that will come in God's future. But, that future seems far off in the distance. Their present reality will permit only respectful remembrance: A few moments at the grave will help to recall his many good and wonderful deeds. Everyone who knew him loved him for his kindness. The stories he told, the comforting words he spoke, the brave way he died – all that will live in memory forever. And, the people he healed, the lives he changed will carry his message of love to another generation. We were blessed to be his friends.

All that was true. Nevertheless, Jesus had died. The open tomb and the lightning appearance of the angel testified that God had done something powerful. But what? The message of the angel confirmed that Jesus was not there. But, what did it mean that he was going ahead of them to Galilee and that they would see him there?

Before they could make the trip to Galilee, and even before they could tell the other disciples what they had seen, they received an answer to that question. Jesus meets them on the way and says, "Greetings!" Bible translators have stumbled over this word forever. Nothing in English quite expresses the emotion of that encounter. There's a note of joy in the Greek word that almost says, "I-am-so-glad-to-see-you-that-the-only-thing-I-can-think-to-say-is Hi."

I think it must have been the tone of his voice that releases their joy. They fall to the ground and hold his feet, worshipping him. Worship is the first response to Easter. Whether we understand anything about the resurrection, we can let the wonder of it lead us to worship. It is good that we're here together today.

But, God did not raise Jesus just so we can worship him. Jesus sends his friends back to Galilee where his work began because he wants to gather them to start a new life together. God's power to bring life out of death will send us further into the future. We have work to do. More important than the tasks themselves, however, is the life we live, the people we are becoming. The quality of the love we share.

Our generosity in the way we treat our enemies. It's courage we didn't know we had because it comes from beyond our own resources.

It's acting on that courage with hope, and speaking out for a kind of justice that has nothing to do with popular opinion.

Life in Christ means the resurrection life.

When you were baptized, that water anointed you with life and designated you as someone who belongs to the anointed one, the Christ. Go out in the power of the resurrection. Go out in joy!