

Matthew 28:1-10
April 24, 2011

South Plains
Easter

He Is Risen!

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. (Col 3:2)

My young friend Bob often had his mind set on things that are above. Only in Bob's case, his mind was often obsessed, fixated on ceiling fans. You see, Bob was different. We were all a little worried about what would happen when Bob, who grew up in the church, started participating in youth group. Sometimes you know, behaviors that can be accepted in a child, are not tolerated by teenagers. So, the youth director had been tipped off by Bob's parents that the boy needed to be told occasionally to stop staring at the fan or whatever had captured his mind, and pay attention to what the youth were doing. We were blessed with a good leader. Over time, Bob learned to focus his mind on the group activities.

Imagine how difficult it must have been for the two Marys to focus their minds on the resurrected Jesus. They came to the tomb just as the first day of the week was dawning to visit the bodily remains of their friend Jesus, a man whom they had come to call "Lord." Other gospels say they intended to anoint the body. In Matthew they simply "went to see the tomb," a hole in a rock that had been covered by another rock. One of the

rituals of grieving is to visit the grave of a loved one; and you will see fresh flowers in our own cemetery today as evidence of such visits. Cemeteries also attract genealogists looking to confirm dates engraved on the tombstones. They draw cultural historians curious about the inscriptions. They seem to be a magnet for young people who come at night seeking to commune with spirits, either the ghostly kind of spirit or the distilled spirits in a bottle. In any case, people come to a cemetery expecting anything but resurrection.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary walked into an earthquake. The quaking was caused by an angel of the Lord who had dropped down from heaven and rolled away the stone blocking the entrance of the tomb. You may remember that a wealthy follower of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, had prepared for himself a crypt in the rock which he generously donated for Jesus' final resting place. According to Matthew, the religious authorities who had stirred up the crowds against Jesus had posted guards at the tomb as insurance that no one would steal the body and claim that Jesus was not dead. The combination of earthquake and angel shook the guards up so much that they "became like dead men."

The women weren't in much better shape. "Do not be afraid," says the angel. "Jesus has been raised." Notice that despite the special effects, neither Matthew's gospel nor the other gospels attempt to describe how the resurrection happened. Unlike other miracles in scripture, this miracle, which is the key for understanding

Jesus' identity, this prime wonder that outclasses even the parting of the Red Sea, this resurrection comes about in secret. We only see the results: an empty tomb and a messenger from heaven. This miracle is God's doing, without human instruments. Jesus "is not here; for he has been raised."

The women must tear their minds away from grief and sadness in order to confront a living, breathing Jesus. "Wake up to the new reality, Mary. Jesus is alive. Death is not the same unconquerable enemy that you feared. Death can be overcome."

It is not easy to assimilate that reality. Certainly it's no easier for us than it was for the Marys. We spend a good bit of our energy fixated on death. The fitness clubs help us avoid it. Entertainment wants to hide it. Healthcare works to stave it off while homeland security works to fight it. And the funeral industry does their level best to sweeten and soften the blow when it comes. As worthy as all those endeavors are, nothing, nothing gives us an escape hatch away from the experience of dying.

The resurrection of Jesus does not deny the awfulness of death, but it does offer hope. The end of life as we know it is not the end. Jesus has been raised. Jesus lives. And we have been raised from our worries and anxieties over the shortness of life to a blessed hope with the risen Christ. The letter to Christians in Colossae encourages us with these words. "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where

Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory."

That's something to look forward to, but it's not the best news of Easter. The best news is that life with Christ begins right now. The hope that is ours because of the resurrection can change the way we experience life today. Even our suffering can be lifted from despair and transformed. I don't mean that suffering disappears. It's part of living in this world. Some people would go so far as to say that pain is the evidence we are alive. The persistent problem of pain is not how to make it disappear, but how to give it meaning. That's why Christianity does not divorce Jesus' death on the cross from his resurrection from the grave. The cross gives substance to the resurrection so it's not just fluffy clouds in a dream of some vague tomorrow. The resurrection gives direction to life and affirms the purpose of the cross, the meaningfulness of a life like Jesus' life. Because Jesus was raised, we know his life and teaching were indeed a life in God. Because Jesus was raised, we can be sure that our lives in God have meaning.

When I first learned to read real hardback books, I was fascinated by a series of volumes about American heroes such as George Washington and Daniel Boone. They had orange covers and filled a whole shelf in the library. Maybe you remember them. But, when my high

school English classes introduced me to Shakespeare's plays, I became confused. My teacher insisted on calling Julius Caesar, Romeo and Juliet all "heroes." You see, my problem was that my heroes as a little boy seldom if ever died in those wonderful books. I had to learn that heroism did not mean a life of happiness, excitement and fame forever. Sometimes, all too often in fact, real heroes are misunderstood and unhappy and undergo suffering. Real heroes make mistakes. Maturity comes to grip with the darker side of human existence and nevertheless finds meaning, hope and ultimately a purpose in life despite some suffering.

The other day I was standing in a crowd of people waiting for something. In front of me was a neatly dressed man wearing blue trousers with a strange white stripe across the back pocket. Eventually, someone whispered discreetly to him that he might want to remove the sticker that said, "This garment inspected and approved by J. Smith." The resurrection put God's stamp of approval on Jesus of Nazareth. Because of God's approval, Jesus is not only our example. We can hide our lives in Jesus Christ in God. We can identify ourselves with the resurrected one, and tear our attention away from the fear of death, the consuming anxiety of so much of life.

My friend Bob has needed help not only with youth group, but in school and in other social settings. His parents persevered. His church accommodated to his needs, but they also challenged him, gently and firmly, to

get with the program. The last I heard, Bob was taking college classes and moving toward a degree. He was learning to set his mind on the things that mattered in making a life.

That's the promise of Easter, that you and I can take into our minds and hearts the hope of resurrection life, life abundant. It's a hope that not even death can deny, a promise of real life that begins now.