

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
April 12, 2009 Easter Sunday
Rev. Bob Garrard
Worship Theme:

What's Behind the Resurrection?

Acts 10: 34-43, I Corinthians 15: 1-11, John 20: 1-18

To quote the Apostle Paul, "Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news...." This is why we are here today, isn't it? We have gathered in this place of worship on this resurrection Sunday to hear again the good news. The good news is this: that God raised his son, the once crucified and buried Jesus, from the dead so that whoever believes in him will also be raised from the dead unto everlasting life by God. In these days of uncertainty, with all the economic struggles, extra stresses on families, individuals, governments and churches, raging wars, tragic earthquakes and climate change, we need good news. We need good news that is not susceptible to bankruptcy, CEO corruption or government controls. We need good news that though the earth shakes, buildings fall, forests burn, glaciers melt and oceans rise nothing can take this good news away. To quote the Apostle Paul, "Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news...."

Even though most of us have heard the fabulous resurrection story many times over, some of us might want to know what is behind it. Or to put it in the often used phrases in today's financial world; who is backing this resurrection story and what kind of evidence do we have that they are solvent? I mean, if I am going to invest my faith, my heart, mind and soul—my everlasting life in the story and the person of the risen Lord Jesus, how can I trust that his promise of this everlasting life will pay off? Even the Apostle Paul raised this question later in his letter to the Corinthians. Yet as Paul wrote, God did indeed raise Jesus from the dead.

So, what makes the resurrection of Jesus, the promise of our resurrection and our faith in God in Jesus Christ always viable—always solvent? God's grace does. God's unconditional and everlasting love is the source of the funding of our faith and our hope of the resurrection. The Old Testament calls it "God's steadfast love." This grace of God cannot be stopped by sin, evil or death. The resurrection is proof of this. Jesus, the risen Lord, is the embodiment of this saving grace, this viable and eternal solvency of the resurrection.

To further research the viable solvency of God's grace that is behind the good news of the resurrection and consider any investment in it on our part, I think we need to look into the portfolio of God and his risen Son, Jesus. It is called the Bible. The Apostle Paul referred to this Biblical portfolio as the source of the good news when he wrote: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures... Yes, in the Old Testament which was the only Bible Paul had then, there are such references. Isaiah 53 speaks of the suffering servant of God dying for our sins and Hosea 6: 1-2 speaks of God resurrecting us for it reads "Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who

has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.”

As people of the resurrection, we have many more scriptures in our modern Bible in the New Testament that proclaim the evidence of God’s grace being behind the resurrection. Three of the best scriptures were read today.

First, look with me at the story in John of Mary Magdalene’s experience of the resurrection. “Mary is the crucial character in this first part of John’s Easter account. Our passage begins and ends with her. In a day and culture when the word of a woman was perhaps more lightly regarded, John’s narrative choice to emphasize Mary is quite remarkable. It is God’s grace at work. It is, in fact, its own sort of evidence of the resurrection. After all, if John were fabricating the account, he would have put a more credible character in the witness chair. Mary’s personal devotion to Jesus is exhibited in her arrival at the tomb ‘while it was still dark.’ We recall that hers was a world without streetlights.” Only the Sabbath regulations that forbade her from going to Jesus’ tomb on the Saturday after Jesus died “were strong enough to have held her back from where she wanted to be. And so, still in the darkness of that Sunday morning, she hurried to where her grieving heart needed to go.”

“Her grief was only compounded, however, when she discovered that the body of Jesus was missing. For many of us, the body of a departed loved one is very important. Many people need closure with the body. Many folks like to be able to show their love by caring for or adorning the body in some way. But now even that had been taken from Mary. She reported what she had found to Peter and the beloved disciple – probably John. They ran to see for themselves, and John perceived the good news that Mary evidently had not. The men returned to the places where they were staying, while Mary remained at the grave, weeping.

“Then she looked into the empty tomb again. Why? Why do we look again in a place where we have looked once already? This time, however, the tomb was not empty—she saw two angels, and they spoke to her. It is perhaps an indicator of the depth of Mary’s grief that she was able to speak with the angels, apparently unfazed. The customary response to angels is awe and fear, yet Mary converses with them rather matter-of-factly. Then she turns around and sees –but does not recognize –Jesus. It is a beautiful detail that she evidently does not recognize his appearance or his voice, but she only recognizes him when he calls her by name”—“Mary.” “Such is the personal nature of our Lord—to call us by name, and such is the personal quality of our walk with him.” Such is the grace of God that comes to us through the risen Jesus.

Of course Mary wants to abandon all formality and hug him. “Mysteriously Jesus prohibits Mary from touching him. Yet, it appears that this appearance to Mary is a personal favor “or grace “by Jesus to her—earlier than perhaps any such resurrection appearances were intended.”

“By now, surely, the sun is up. The dark and sorrow in which Mary had first hurried to the tomb has been changed to light and joy as she hurries away from it. She becomes the first person to bear the good news to others that Christ is risen.” This remarkable story of grace was made a part of God’s and Jesus’ portfolio. It has been there for nearly two thousand years. “Emphasis,” March/April 2009, Kalas

Secondly, we have the 2000 year-old testimony of Peter. Remember he is one of the first witnesses to the empty tomb. It was in the evening of that resurrection day that he actually saw and talked to the risen Jesus. But his testimony in Acts is not just about the resurrection story. It is about the difference the resurrection of Jesus and the grace of God make in our world. "The first thing out of his mouth could have been measured on a seismograph. 'I truly understand,' Peter declared, 'that God shows no partiality.' What a thing for a first-century Jewish man to say. Because we live in a country that prides itself on being a melting pot, and because most of our congregations are primarily (or even exclusively) Gentile, we may not have an immediate appreciation for the magnitude of Peter's statement."

In the early part of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, God told Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, and so God was understood to be an inclusive God. "That global vision was largely lost by later generations of Israelites, however, as they taught and practiced a deliberate separatism from 'the nations' or Gentiles. Yet, because of his experience of the resurrection of Jesus "here is Jewish Peter, a guest in a Gentile home, preaching to a Gentile family," the family of an enemy Roman soldier, no less. His message is not that they need to become Jewish, or circumcised, or some such. Rather, he begins with a kind of conversion of his own: that he now understands the truth 'that God shows no partiality.'" This is God's grace at work.

"Affirming God's gracious embrace of the Gentiles, Peter preaches the gospel, the good news of the resurrection of Jesus to Cornelius and his household. In Peter's conclusion about Christ, he emphasizes that the risen Jesus "is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead." The resurrection of Jesus and grace of God have the power to change a person as we see in Peter. They have the power to change human attitudes toward one another for the resurrection is also a statement by God that there is no basis for prejudice of any kind. If God is not partial, neither should we be! You see the purpose of the grace of God as seen in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus is to change and save the whole world and everyone in it. *Emphasis,*" March/April 2009,

Kalas

The third story in God's and Jesus' portfolio comes from the Apostle Paul. Not only does he state that the resurrection has a basis in scripture, but he also lists the names and numbers of witnesses. Jesus appeared to Cephas, better known as Peter, then to the other disciples. "Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, Jesus' brother, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me, wrote Paul." When the risen Jesus appeared to Paul, Paul was known as Saul, the killer of Christians. The risen Jesus completely changed Paul in name, heart and behavior. Paul became the greatest missionary ever in Christian history. He proclaimed this good news to all of the Mediterranean area. In fact, he wrote 13 of the letters in the Bible or God's and Jesus' portfolio. Stunning!! Paul attributed his conversion and energy to work for God to the grace of God. "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain."

As Paul pointed out, this good news of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, this everlasting grace, this steadfast love of God is the unbreakable foundation upon which these early Christians stood. It is what brought them salvation. It is always viable and

solvent. This is the same good news that brings us salvation and upon which we stand today as Christians. This is the same crucified and risen Lord Jesus who comes to us morning, noon and night at the empty tombs of our lives and calls us by name. Yes, he knows our names. He knows our fears, our prejudices, what we grieve, what need changed in us and how much we need the everlasting viability and solvency of his grace poured into our lives.

If you have invested your faith, heart, mind and soul—your everlasting life in the grace and the person of the risen Lord Jesus, you trust that his promise of everlasting life will pay off. You have your own exciting experience of the resurrection to add to God's and Jesus' portfolio.

If you have not yet done so, the crucified and risen Jesus himself invites you invested your faith, heart, mind and soul—your everlasting life in his grace and in his person, now. Mary Magdalene, Peter, Paul, James, the other apostles, five hundred witnesses and billions of Christians including those present here today will vouch for the crucified and risen Jesus and his saving grace.

Now my brothers and sisters, on this day of the celebration of the resurrection we have been reminded of the good news... how shall we respond?