

“BEYOND THE EMPTY TOMB”

Mark 17:1-8 (proclamation of the resurrection); Acts 10:34-43

Easter Sunday, April 8, 2007

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Off and on over the past two weeks, I toyed with titling my sermon for this morning “Christian weirdos,” but in the end I chickened out and settled on the more sedate title you see in your bulletins. As I thought about that decision, it appeared to me emblematic of the major problem with Christianity as a whole, or at least most Christians. Now there are some who say that the problem with Christians is that too many of them are bigots and that’s sometimes true. There are others who would point with disdain to the history of Christianity—the crusades, forced conversions, misogyny and that’s true, too. But I believe the worst sin or condition or problem with Christians as a whole is that we just aren’t weird enough. We look and act way too much like other people. We don’t stand out. As William Sloane Coffin used to say of us, “As people of the resurrection, we don’t walk around looking and acting redeemed enough.”

Here we are on Easter morning with flowers and brass and timpani, the resurrection gospel, and “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.” We proclaim that in the resurrection our God has transformed suffering and sorrow into joy, and death to life, that the essential act of the redemption of the world has been accomplished. So now what? How has that changed us? What will we do when we leave this place? The truth is that most of us will go out from the church and blend in innocuously with all the non-Christians around us.

That wasn’t true for the early Christians. The women left the empty tomb and went back to the others, told them their Lord was alive again, and after a short time of fear and dismay, they all changed. Their lives changed dramatically. And those new lives were so startling, so compelling that they stood out. Some people around these new Christians were so intrigued by the Christ followers’ daily witness that they joined them; others just considered them oddballs and rabble-rousers, thoroughly suspicious characters.

We don’t have a lot of “outside” information about the early Christian church. What we find is mainly contained in letters from one mid-level Roman bureaucrat to another. And what those government functionaries observed about Christians in their jurisdictions was that they were a consistently strange group of people, disconcerting in their words and actions. They did not observe social distinctions at all. They held their possessions in common. They went out into the streets and gave food and comfort to the poor. They met behind closed doors, called each other brother and sister, and performed strange rituals of body and blood that smacked of cannibalism to the uninitiated. They didn’t show the proper respect for religious pluralism, denying the reality of all gods but their own. Even in the world of the Roman Empire, accustomed to diversity and wide margins of tolerance, the Christians fell beyond the pale of socially acceptable.

Have you ever wondered why Christians were persecuted? It was because in times of trouble, they stood out as a strange and unassimilated people, therefore easy scapegoats when something went wrong. And, we are told, when they were arrested and thrown in

jail, they would laugh and sing and shout encouragement to each other from cell to cell. They would treat their jailors politely. On their way into the arena to be mauled or killed by wild animals, they would go not just saying their prayers, but pausing to say a word of kindness or forgiveness to their torturers. They were, in short, a bizarre and confounding people.

Who says that about us? Maybe we should give the world more occasion to call us strange and difficult to understand. If we truly believe that we are the inheritors of the redemption of the world, maybe we should, in Coffin's words, go about looking and acting more redeemed.

Let me give you some examples of contemporary oddball Christian behavior from which we might want to take a lesson. One of the Christians I most admire is Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister, social psychologist and theologian. She writes and lectures widely on the interface between Christians and the world. One of her forums is a seminar she gives regularly for Christians of substantial wealth, inviting them to be creatively faithful with their money. One of Sr Joan's strategies: what she calls a "reverse tithe," living on 10% of annual income, giving the rest to God's work divided between straight out gifts, and what she calls "gospel investing": investing in small locally-owned inner-city businesses, investing in alternative energy sources and other green technologies, investing in third-world worker cooperatives, water and land reclamation projects investing, where the realized gain on your investment is measured not primarily in money but by its positive impact on God's earth and the lives of God's people. I know one person who took Sr Joan's seminar and has taken the reverse tithe to heart. My friend has never felt more fully alive or faithful. Instead of guilt, her money is now a source of joy but most of her old friends think she's totally nuts.

When I lived in Duluth in the 1980s, it was economic hard times for that part of the world 20% unemployment in our county, 50% up on the Iron Range. The churches got together and decided to start a soup kitchen, not particularly startling; but the vision for this soup kitchen was that it would be truly a community soup kitchen, not just another place where the poor would be segregated, but a simple and welcoming place where everyone would be invited to come and eat downtown business people, hospital workers (we served much better food than the hospital cafeteria) church committee meetings, folks just out for an afternoon's shopping. Overly idealistic, unrealistic, crazy, wrongheaded, wasteful those were just a few of the judgments leveled at the steering committee, but foolish Christians that they were, they persisted, and their small dream of transformation became reality.

In New Haven, Connecticut, the downtown cooperative ministry decided to use some community development money to start a worker-owned taxi company, the Alleluia Cab Company that would serve even the inner-city population. In the state permitting process, these nice church folks found themselves battling the Teamsters' Union because most taxi drivers were organized under the Teamsters. The conventional wisdom was that the ministry was crazy to even try to go up against the union. But they did. The score that day was Lions 1, Christians 0. Being strange for Christ doesn't always guarantee success-

Jesus could tell us that but those weird Christians just picked themselves up and plotted another development project.

A doctor I knew in Seattle a good Baptist actually told me 20 years ago that he believed in a “life tithe,” that he planned to retire early and give 7-8 years of his life to God. Well, we all talk about things we’re going to do “later.” I didn’t give his words much credence. But he retired a year ago at 59, and after a year of short trips with Mercy Corps and Physicians without Borders, he and his wife are on their way to Paraguay for two years to work in a rural clinic and teach in the medical school. It will be rugged for them, dangerous even, but when I saw them a month ago, they were excited. Their neighbors, however, have a hard time understanding why he would prefer Third World poverty to golf and gardening.

“For God so loved the world that God gave the Only begotten Son to the end that all who believe in him should not perish,, ,” but live life abundantly. Christ is risen today, and to the extent that we really believe that, we will come to love this world as God loves it, and so delight to give ourselves to God’s world and to God’s people. Delight in giving ourselves to God’s world and God’s people. That’s not mainstream living, not even close. If we are to become people of the resurrection, then we all just have to get stranger, outrageous in our love, unfathomable in our compassion, truly bizarre maybe even confounding to the IRS—in our generosity.

Now don’t worry too much. I don’t think most of us can become truly weird Christians overnight. But that’s our goal. To grow into it step by step. What is one thing you can do this day, this week, this year that goes beyond what is reasonable, what is practical, what is prudent, and marks you as a fool for God? Next year we can try maybe two or three things. And we go on from there, until on some blessed day, our friends and neighbors and work colleagues shake their heads and feel they have to explain us. “Oh yes, that’s just Sue, or Bill, or Joe out there hanging out at the homeless shelter, giving too much money away, spending way too much time on volunteer work, trying every day to change the world. But what can you expect of them. They’re Christians after all.” Then will Christ truly be raised from the dead. Thanks be to God. Amen.