

March 31, 2013 EASTER
The National Presbyterian Church

Riding the Elevator

Romans 6:1-12; 1 Corinthians 15:1-6a

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Imagine being one of Jesus' disciples at the time of his death and his resurrection. Life must have been quite a blur at that time, especially in the last week or two of Jesus' life. Everything was moving so quickly. They were just country boys. They'd come down to the big city from Galilee in the north where they lived. Relatively speaking, the north was sparsely populated, but now they were in the big city, and at festival time. Normally Jerusalem had a population of maybe twenty to thirty thousand people. But this was Passover, and another hundred to two hundred thousand people crammed into the city. There they were all in the city at that time. They were riding high!

Jesus had ridden into the city on a donkey. He had come into the city and he had taken on the religious leaders. They were in a tussle with each other and at least for a few moments it seemed as if Jesus was winning the tussle. Whenever they tried to trip him up or to trick him, Jesus had the final word.

At least until the Thursday of that last week when everything began to slip away and crumble. On that night it was as if darkness literal and spiritual descended. In the darkness, the guards came. They arrested Jesus. They took him away. They accused him unfairly. They tried him. They handed him over to the Roman authorities and the Romans hung him on a cross in a public place to die, as they always did when they crucified people, as if to say to anybody who passed by, "If you try to meddle with the power of Rome, this is what will happen to you too."

And they'd seen him die. Well, some had been there close enough to see, especially the women, including his mother, but most of them saw Jesus die from a distance because they were already running away. With his death, they saw, their own death as well: the death of their hopes that were now crushed. Their hopes for themselves, their hopes for the nation, their hopes for the world, the mission they'd been a part of for the past two or three years – these were now over, dead! Until all of a sudden everything changed. Yet again.

It was Sunday, the first day of the week, and those women went to the tomb and came back from the tomb saying that the tomb was empty and there were men there – angels there. And they were saying that Jesus was *not* there because he had been raised from the dead. Furthermore, the angels said that his friends could see him if they went to Galilee! They could see him alive, and in the days to come they did indeed see him. They saw him alive.

To begin with they might have thought that his appearances were merely hallucinations . . . until the one who doubted the most, Thomas, was invited by Jesus to place his hand in his side and to see Jesus' hands with the nail prints in them . . . until a crowd of five hundred people saw him alive at one time (1 Cor.15:6). If there were any lingering thoughts before these meetings with Jesus that his resurrection was merely hallucinatory, the more witnesses there were at one time, the less likely that the 'hallucination explanation' could be true.

And so, with this realization, that Jesus was indeed alive again, those disciples began to wipe the tears from their eyes, and began to ask questions about everything that had happened when Jesus was alive, and in particular to ask 'Easter questions' about the significance of Jesus' new life. If Jesus were alive again, what did it mean? And in particular if Jesus were alive again, what did it mean for their understanding of Jesus? And their understanding of everything that had happened in the past two or three years? And when they began to ask those questions, a number of issues began to focus for them in the midst of the blur. If Jesus is alive, then what?

His Claims: If Jesus were alive, then perhaps they needed to take Jesus' claims more seriously. They were *no longer patently absurd but possibly accurate*. He'd said that "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). He'd

claimed to be “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). He’d told a man that his sins had been forgiven and had immediately been accused of blasphemy, because “only God can forgive sins” (Mark 2:7). With his death, all of these words had turned into self serving absurdities. But now, with Jesus alive, perhaps they were on target, accurate after all?

His Death. And so, too, the meaning of his death also comes into view. His death – what seemed to be such a sad tragedy, because it seemed to have no purpose, no meaning – well, maybe now, maybe God had a meaning and a purpose even for his death. Their minds began to kick into gear and they begin to think about what Jesus had said about his death even when he was alive. They remembered that they didn’t want to hear him speak about his death while he was alive. They wanted nothing to do with such morbid thoughts: Jesus’ best friend, Simon Peter, bluntly told Jesus not to speak that way (Matthew 16:22-23). Jesus had turned to him and told him that he was speaking for the devil, from a very limited human perspective, but not for God! For Jesus, suffering was a critical part of his message – he spoke about it repeatedly, and now they remembered, and began to see his death in a new light – in the context of all of Israel’s history and all of Israel’s religion.

At the heart of the religion, at the heart of the central symbol of their faith, the temple, there was sacrifice. There was ‘a death for sin,’ and as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (9:12-14, 26-28) would write in the years to come, picking up on the words of the great prophet Isaiah (53:4-6), this connection with Jesus’ death led them to see that Jesus’ death was *not just sad but significant*. It was a *sacrifice* for sin! In fact, it was a sacrifice that ended all sacrifices, a sacrifice that covered all kinds of sin – in the past and in the present and in the future. Indeed it covered or removed any obstacle, any barrier, between us and God – as if Jesus had carried it away forever so that we could live in fellowship with God.

His Mission. Jesus’ resurrection made his friends think about his claims and about his death and, further, about his mission. With Jesus’ death, they thought his mission was *over*. The two or three years they had been with him had been so powerful in their lives, and then it had all come crashing down so quickly. They thought it was over. But perhaps now, with Jesus alive, surely his mission was actually continuing, *ongoing*, in and through them: Jesus entrusting his mission to them, controlling the mission, yes, but *not* now from the battlefield, ‘on the ground,’ but from

behind the scenes, from 'back home' at headquarters. Jesus still running the show, still calling the shots, his mission *ongoing not over*, but directed from a different place, a different dimension.

But if this were true – then the ramifications for their lives were enormous. Instead of going back home, returning to fishing or tax collecting, heads hanging low, their adventure *over*, they had an *ongoing job to do*! They were now his missionaries. They now had the old message (his teaching and healing) and the new message to take with them. They were now his hands and feet, his presence (as they would come to see it: his visible body) here on earth, to do his will and his beckoning.

This new message? That Jesus' claims *no longer seemed arrogant but accurate*.

That his death *was not merely sad but significant*.

And that his resurrection, not only changed everything about their understanding of Jesus – but about their understanding of their own lives, what life was about: not only *how long life was (quantity!)*, but about the availability of power to live their lives right here and now in a completely new 'resurrection' way (*quality!*).

His Resurrection and Life Eternal TO COME. With Jesus' resurrection there was now tangible evidence that there was *more to life than meets the eye*: there was more of life beyond death. This was how it was for Jesus and this is how it would be for them too.

Billy Graham was once asked this question about the resurrection and about life after death: "*How do we know that there is life after death? I'd like to think there is but do we just have to wait until we die to find out?*"

Dr. Graham answered like this: "No. We don't have to wait until we die to find out that there is life after death. Tomorrow, Easter, Christians throughout the world will be celebrating the most important event in human history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. His enemies killed him in the cruelest way possible and to be sure no one would steal his body, they sent soldiers to guard his tomb. But on the third day, that tomb was empty. Jesus

had been raised from the dead by the power of God. The angel declared, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen.' So why is this the most important event in human history? One reason is because it proves to us that death has been defeated. It tells us also that our lives don't end with the grave. Ahead of us is eternity."

So part of the ongoing mission of Jesus' disciples, their ongoing proclamation was to let people know that through faith in Jesus Christ, we can share in his resurrection, in the future when we die.

His Resurrection and Life Eternal NOW. And yet they knew that was not all there was to it either. This message about Jesus' resurrection was not just about 'eternal life when we die, pie in the sky by and by' – as if what we need to do from now on is to sit and wait until our death and then we join Jesus in the resurrection. No! They also believed, and they also preached, and they did so powerfully, that the experience of the resurrection was for the present as well, that *Christ longed for his resurrection power to be something that we, his followers, know right here and now as well as later on*. Jesus' rising-from-the-dead power is what he wants to give to you and me, even as we live here in the present. He wants to raise us up too, they believed, morally and spiritually higher than we could ever go if we were simply to trust in our own strength and our own power.

This is in fact what the Bible is saying in that rather complicated passage we read from Romans, Chapter 6. The resurrection means something not just for our eternal future but it is supposed to mean something for the present, for this life that we live right here and now on earth, between now and then. Christ wants to renew our lives with this rising-from-the-dead power. Listen again to some of these verses in Romans 6. The apostle Paul is writing. He's writing maybe some twenty-five years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection and this is what he says.

"Do you not know that all of who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (*Think of baptism not just as a washing away of sin but as a deluge, like the flood of Noah, coming over us and bringing death to our old life; death as the punishment for our sins, and death as an end to our old ways*). Therefore, we have been buried

with him by baptism into death, so that, just as (*in exactly the same way as*) Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might (*not just experience resurrection in the future but might*) walk (*now, in the present*) in newness of life. For if we've been united with him in a death like his, we will (*that is, in the eternal future*) certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. So you also must consider yourselves (*now, in the present you are new people*) dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies."

Right here and now there should be a moral change, a spiritual change within our lives, a change which is tangible which can be seen and felt and experienced, in which Christ's resurrection power is at work within us and through us and around us. In fact, the apostle Paul describes our lives in terms of the resurrection as being "inside" Christ's resurrection. Listen to verse 11 again:

"Consider yourselves dead to sin (the old life is over) but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (that is, 'inside' Christ Jesus).

To use modern terms, it is as if the apostle Paul thinks of Jesus as if Jesus were a vehicle that you could climb inside, and he says to us, "You need to climb inside this Jesus as he hangs on the cross, both in his death (you die with him), and as he rises from the dead as well." Think of Jesus as a vehicle that can carry you safely to your destination.

Some people do think of Jesus this way. They may not put it in explicit words but they hope that Jesus will take us to our destination immediately, 'just like that,' right here and now. "Whisk me off to heaven, Lord"-- right here and now, as if Jesus were a vehicle were rather like the transporter in Star Trek. ("Beam me up, Scotty"?!) And you get there straight away. "That's what I get from Jesus: a transporter machine that enables me to be with Jesus when I die, and the sooner the better."

This is not a bad desire (to be with Jesus in all his fullness; see Philippians 1:21) – but it obscures an important truth, and an important step or stage which Paul has in mind as he speaks to the Romans. Let me put it like this: I think it would be more accurate to think of Jesus as a vehicle that is more like an airplane or an elevator than the 'transporter'! ***Yes, we step inside him and, sure, he'll get us to our***

destination safely . . . but before we get there, there will be the ride of our lives. Using the power of God at work in his resurrection for US, he will take us higher, he will lift us higher, he will raise us up higher morally and spiritually along the way than we could ever go by ourselves. And Jesus says to those disciples, or at least this is how they understood him speaking through his resurrection, "Place your life within my hands, within my being, within my sphere. Surround yourself with me and I will lift you up now and forever." Isn't this what you want? Isn't this the kind of boost or lift what we all need? I know I do!

Because of that first Easter, because of that first resurrection, those disciples proclaimed a Jesus whose claims were *not just arrogant but accurate*.

Because of that first Easter, because of the resurrection, those first disciples proclaimed a Jesus who died but whose death was *not just sad but enormously significant* for our lives as a sacrifice eternally for our lives.

Because of that resurrection, those first disciples proclaimed a Jesus whose mission was *not over but ongoing . . .* and you and I have been called to participate in that mission.

Because of that first Easter, because of the resurrection, those disciples proclaimed a resurrection not just of Jesus but of you and me: your resurrection and mine!

Both for the future when we die, and also for the present as we live . . . empowering us, lifting us up higher than we could ever go by ourselves.

Jesus' rising, Jesus' life in us and around us, empowering us as we could never be empowered by ourselves.

So Jesus called those disciples to follow him not just before his death and resurrection but afterwards, and promised to free them from themselves, from their fears, from their sins, from their secrets, from everything that would trap them and limit them and that would lead them to a life which would end in a dead end.

“Climb on board,” says Jesus. “Climb into me. Live within the atmosphere of my presence” like an elevator, like an airplane. We do that easily with an airplane or an elevator don’t we?

Do you not know that is an enormous act of faith every time you step into an airplane? Or every time you step into an elevator?

Every time you do that, you are trusting that vehicle for your life, to carry you safely to your destination. And we do it repeatedly. Again and again, without thinking, we do it.

And Jesus says, in the same way, “Step into me. I’ve been through the worst than ever can happen. Step into me and let me take you where you want to go and where I want you to go. And let me take you on a ride that you will never regret that will lift you higher and higher and higher now morally, spiritually and forever.”

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