

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

April 24, 2011

Acts 10.34-43

John 12.1-18

“Jesus is On the Loose!”

Pastor John Guthrie



Have you ever noticed in the resurrection accounts that there's a lot of running going on? In John's account, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and finds the stone rolled away. So she runs back to where the disciples are staying and reports to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved; that's the DWJL. Well, as you might expect, Peter and the DWJL immediately head out, running, for the tomb. We are told that the DWJL is faster than Peter, and he arrives at the tomb first. Then Peter comes running up behind him, puffing madly, we might imagine, and goes into the tomb to find it empty.

The text says that the DWJL follows Peter into the tomb and "believes." We are not sure exactly what he believes, because the very next phrase says that "they did not understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead." The two return to wherever it is that they are staying. I wonder if they ran back to that house in their excitement to report to the others?

Mary has an encounter with the risen Christ next, a rather strange encounter because she doesn't recognize him until he speaks to her. Jesus tells her to go and tell his brothers that he is ascending, quote, "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary goes to the disciples and tells them that she has seen the Lord. I wonder if she ran.

It is no surprise to anyone that church attendance increases markedly twice each year, at Christmas and Easter. The 20th century German theologian Karl Barth thought he knew why that happened, at least at Easter. He said people came on Easter Sunday with one question in mind: "Is it true?" Is it true that this first century prophet and teacher was actually raised from the dead? Is it true that he was, and is, more than that? Could it be, as he claims in John's gospel, "that he and the Father are one," that when you have seen him, you have seen the Father, that he is in the Father and the Father in him? Is it true?

Why are YOU here this morning?

All of the gospel resurrection accounts have some things that are unique about them. One of those unique pieces of John's account is the prevalence of the theme of Jesus ascending. Jesus says to

Mary Magdalene, “Do not hold onto me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” In none of the other three gospel resurrection accounts does this theme of ascension play such an important role.

It is not at all surprising that it appears prominently in John’s account, however, precisely because Jesus has been telling anyone who would listen, right from the very beginning, that he is one with his Father, and that he is going to be glorified. That glorification is three-fold: death, then resurrection, then ascension.

Remember the prologue to John’s gospel? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word WAS God. ---- The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” So grab onto this: The Word was with God. The Word is ascending to be with God again. But the Word never was apart from God, and never will be. I don’t know about you, but the mystery of all this is quite frankly beyond me.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the 15th chapter, Paul writes to a group that has doubts about the truth of the resurrection, or maybe has even gone as far as to deny it. Here’s a paraphrase of what Paul writes: “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ. If Christ has not been raised then your faith is futile.”

The disciple whom Jesus loved believed, in some way. Mary believed, when she recognized Jesus. In the next chapter Jesus will appear to the disciples, and they will believe. But at the end of that chapter Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet come to believe.”

I am like the DWJL: my faith is present, but far from perfect, and far from complete. But that faith is strong enough that I am convinced, like Mary, that we whose faith is so tenuous and fragile have something to tell the world. We have a message to deliver, like the two angels, and like Mary: “I have seen the Lord.”

I am also driven to look for ways to deliver that message faithfully and effectively in the world we live in, just as Paul was. So I read recommendations from many sources on how to do that. I receive a regular email newsletter from a consultant whose advice I appreciate, but I have learned to take that advice with some skepticism. So here’s a fragment of a recent message from this consultant:

How can you serve young adults, both singles and those with families?

Not how can you lure them to Sunday services, but what can you do to make their lives better? Think, for example, about better day-care for children, social networking for singles seeking partners, free incubator space for entrepreneurs, mission teams, groups dealing with social needs, life questions and transitions. Young adults are asking deep questions about values -- not doctrine, but values for living decent, balanced lives and for making a difference.

How can you serve the elderly, especially as they begin to lose benefits?

Think beyond the elderly folks already sitting in your pews. Think about a massive population needing help. Think about mission work for active elderly, adult day-care, health clinics, assistance in staying in the home, check-in arrangements in partnership with children.¹

There is more along these lines, but this is enough. All of these ideas are great, completely in keeping with the direct command we have from Jesus to care for the hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick, and imprisoned, for when we do these things we care for him. But can you see what’s missing from these recommendations to churches? The directions are great for creating a social service agency. But they are lousy at being the church. For if all we are is a social service agency, then we need to change the signage on this building and on the big sign out front, to remove all vestiges of the word “church.”

As the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to care for those in need, by Christ himself, but if we forget to proclaim Jesus, and Jesus crucified and risen, then we have ceased to be the church, and frankly, we have nothing to say to the world. We become a social service agency, or even worse, a country club.

If Christ is not raised then our faith is in vain and our proclamation is in vain. And we have nothing to say.

One of my uncles passed away in 2004. At his funeral the Rev. Scott Black Johnston, Senior Pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, preached the sermon, and included in it, at my uncle’s request, a brief anecdote that he found particularly meaningful, an anecdote that Rev. Johnston had included in an Easter sermon and that stuck with my uncle for years. Dr. Johnston said this to his congregation one Easter morning, and perhaps on many Easter mornings:

“Sometime today, my phone will ring--as it does every Easter. A voice on the other end will say, “Jesus is on the loose,” and then I will hear the click of the connection ending. I know who it is. I know the voice. It is my roommate from seminary sharing his unique Easter greeting with me.”²

Every Easter Dr. Johnston gets the same message from his old seminary roommate: “Jesus is on the loose.” And then his friend hangs up.

Jesus is on the loose. He cannot be bound by death. Indeed, in his resurrection, God has conquered death. He is risen and alive, present with each of us and with his church even to this day. Ascended to be with his Father, but not remote from us. Far from it: still intimately with us and with his dearly loved church.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Jesus is on the loose!

¹ Tom Ehrich, Church Wellness Report, April 21, 2011 (<http://churchwellnessreport.ning.com/forum/topics/cwr-ask-the-right-questions>)

² Scott Black Johnston, Sermon, “Deadly Things,” April 12, 2009, http://day1.org/1241-deadly_things/comments.