

Resurrection Means Mission¹

Quite a number of years ago, we took an elaborate driving trip to places like Yellowstone National Park. On the way, we spent the night at Spearfish, South Dakota. This turned out to be the site of an impressive passion play, which we attended. It was hours long and started in the late afternoon. A passion play is a community effort that includes hundreds of actors, including kids and animals and a huge permanent set with real buildings and life-sized scenery and props.

On the Spearfish stage the entire drama of Jesus' last days was realistically acted out. I use the word realistically because these efforts take pride in their lifelike, life-sized depiction of the Passion of Jesus. If the crowd scene entailed hundreds of people in the Jerusalem streets, Spearfish came up with hundreds of people in a reconstructed street.

The passion story was thus presented—until the resurrection. Coming at the end of the play, the resurrection scene took place after the high plains sun had completely set. It was fully dark. Obviously, the producers wanted the resurrection to be as impressive as the emotionally charged crucifixion scene had just been. Curiously, special effects were employed. Of if they were not technically "special

¹Doug DeCelle preached this sermon on April 26, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

effects," the producers worked with several devices to pump up the impact. It all started with total darkness and suspenseful silence. Then there was a blast of music, and multicolored lights blazed. Jesus was seen triumphantly standing in front of the open tomb. Angels appeared and the three women who visited the tomb were included posed as if completely overwhelmed. All was frozen in an awesome blazing thunderous display of Easter magnificence. Then darkness and the final applause.

Now, I've described the Spearfish Resurrection because it is different in tone and content from the resurrection scenes in the Bible—notably in Luke. In our lesson, the disciples are going about the business of talking in a house somewhere in Jerusalem. Quietly and without fanfare they notice that one more person is present with them, one whom no one had noticed had come in. It's Jesus. He's there as if he'd never left. Instead of cosmic triumph, Jesus return is like someone slipping into a room without anyone noticing. Instead of awe, the disciples are startled. They don't know what to think. Had they only dreamed he died? What's going on?

Jesus shows them his hands. I visited a guy in the hospital who wanted to show me "what the doctors had done." What do we say in these situations? "That's okay. I don't need to see. I believe you." Then Jesus says, "Hey, you got anything to eat?" It's like my kids driving in late at night.

They start rifling around in the cupboards and find two week old cheddar Doritos in a rolled up bag with a rubber band around it. They're stale, but still taste good.

I'm not being cute. I'm noticing that there is a certain ordinariness about Jesus' return that we're not expecting. I'm trying to think of ways to describe it. I come up with "everyday," "low budget," or "underwhelming." It's simply not what you'd expect. It's not at all as majestic as the Resurrection According to Spearfish.

What are we learning? Jesus' triumph over death is revealed in everyday life. If Jesus were to be resurrected in our time he might approach us as we waited in line at the post office or hanging out at home watching TV and folding laundry. And doesn't that say something amazing about folding laundry or waiting in line? What it says is that the everyday world is the stage where God's work is played out.

Our lesson moves on. The risen Jesus explains the situation to the disciples. Let me paraphrase. He says, "You've been getting ready for this moment for a long time. This is what the Scriptures have been teaching you. The Messiah comes and suffers rises again and word of that changes the whole world. Well, guys, that's where we are right now. You've seen the whole drama and you're the ones who will take it to the world."

The worst Easter Day stunt I've ever heard of was done by a wacky minister who arranged for a coffin to be brought into the worship. He was in the coffin and jumped out in his robe and proclaimed that Christ is risen and so will we be raised up. I'm certain that Easter brunch that year was the liveliest ever.

Now, notice that the real resurrection story, again our text doesn't leap from Jesus' resurrection to our own eternal life. When Jesus really came back, the impact of his new life was mission. In every encounter that the risen Christ has with his disciples, he commissions them to venture into the world in mission. Now, in truth, Jesus' resurrection does indeed mean eternal life for us. Hopefully, we don't have to jump out of coffins to make that vivid. But Jesus' return means in the first place that we go out.

Did you ever think that the risen Jesus touches our lives in their ordinariness and everydayness and seeks to enrich that very ordinariness? Did you ever think that the risen Jesus wants to be blended into your ordinary daily existence?

How do we do this? The answer comes in the text. We are witnesses. That means our gift to the world is simply sharing what we've experienced.

Let me share with you an example. I like to keep a spiral notebook on hand when I pray and read the Bible. Whenever I feel I'm learning something from God I make note of it in the

notebook. One day when I was struggling to figure out what to preach about, it hit me. Preach about what's in the notebook. Preach about what God has given me. Give to the congregation what God has given to me. Just as Jesus gave to his disciples the stunning realization that he was alive, so was it the disciples' task to give that very gift of new life to the world.

You can do that! Each of you has learned a thing or two from God. You don't need a notebook. Each of you has seen some wonderful things. Each of you knows that there's a love and new life out there. You can have a conversation with a friend whose family has been away from faith for awhile about what Christ means to you. You can give something precious away to someone who needs it more as an act of deep optimism that one day everyone will have what they need. All of the patience and inspiration and tenderness that God gives you are part of the Kingdom that is coming and can be made available by your decision. Jesus says to us—"You are witnesses of these things."

When we carry what God has already given us into the world, that's where resurrection victory is made manifest. Immediately around us. In you, in your daily round, the new creation unfolds—because that's where our Risen Lord has chosen to reveal himself.