

Easter Sunday 27 March 2005

Matthew 28:1-10

A Sermon by Geoff Wraight

THE DNA OF RESURRECTION FAITH

Mike Willesee is obsessed with a mission. The one time famous journalist and host of prime time TV Current Affairs programs and now 62 year old multimillionaire is pursuing the scoop of his career – no less than a worldwide search to locate the actual blood of Jesus Christ and thus prove that God exists.

He has examined ancient burial cloths in the dusty back rooms of medieval Spanish churches, flown to state-of-the-art genetic laboratories in the United States, and visited obscure Latin American villages where statues of Christ bleed from the head. And he is not about to give up.

He tells of a recent trip to Oviedo in northern Spain, where he was allowed into the secured chapel of the cathedral to examine the Sudarium, an ancient cloth said to have been wrapped around Jesus head following the crucifixion. “The Sudarium”, explains Willesee, “might contain the decomposed blood of Christ. If a DNA sample from the Sudarium could be matched with a DNA sample from the Shroud of Turin, the mysterious shroud would be authenticated, which would prove that Jesus was a supernatural being, the Son of God.”

Hmmm! My mischievous mind wants to ask how Willisee will know that the DNA matches that of Gods – and how did he get hold of that sample in the first place!

But the serious side of this story is not to do with the DNA of Jesus but with the assumption that lies behind this obsessive quest.

That is that all we have to do is prove that Jesus was the Son of God and our faith will be vindicated. All we have to do is prove scientifically that the Jesus raised himself from the dead and people will finally believe. right?

Well, not according to Matthew’s Gospel.

Resurrection faith not just believing in the empty tomb.

Matthew’s gospel tells us that there was an explanation circulating that the body had been stolen.

It’s not believing that a dead body came back to life, because those who had believed that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead and those who saw Lazarus raised from the dead are not described as having resurrection faith.

It’s not even just believing that Jesus came back to life after he had been dead for a few days, because Matthew again tells us that the guards and the chief priests actually knew that that had happened. The guards in fact were the only eye witnesses to the resurrection. But the guards and the priests formed a conspiracy to suppress the information and they are certainly not examples of resurrection faith, even though they believed that Jesus had come back to life.

Resurrection faith is also not some unwavering belief in a particular concept of the resurrection.

The appearances of the risen Christ are described in so many different ways in the gospels that it is impossible to hold steadfastly to any one detailed explanation of the resurrection and still make sense of them all. The gospel writers seem to deliberately undermine any possibility of being dogmatic about the nature of the resurrection. Even Matthew speaks of the resurrected body of Jesus in different ways..

So what is Resurrection Faith? and

What does the story of these two women, the two Marys tell us about resurrection faith?

First, Resurrection faith is about ordinary people embarking on an extraordinary journey.

In Matthew's version of the story Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to Jesus tomb with no intention to roll the stone back or anoint the body – they know the tomb is guarded. Perhaps in their grief for the loss of their friend and teacher they simply want to pay their respects.

But what they see sets them on a journey entirely new in history and creation. The angel identifies the risen Jesus as the crucified one. Jesus crucifixion was no a temporary episode in the career of the Son of God, a past event now nullified, cancelled out or somehow exchanged for something greater. Even as the risen one Jesus bears the mark of his self-giving on the cross – a permanent sign of his character and call to follow in the journey even at great cost. Resurrection faith is a call to follow Jesus and God's yes to the way of Jesus in life and faith.

The angel then commands the women to carry the message to the other disciples, thus making two ordinary women of the time not only the first initial witnesses of the empty tomb, but the the first bearers of the good news that “he has been raised by God from the dead”. One could say that against all the conventions of the time – the male disciples were in bad shape without the women to lead the way and give them the good news that Christ still calls them brothers even though they were defeated deserters. (One could be tempted to say that in two thousand years nothing much has changed!)

And they do not linger at the tomb – they get up and run, stopping for one extraordinary moment to worship at the feet of the crucified one now living, but then off they go! Resurrection Faith is about a journey of discovery and action and being turned around to live your life in a new and purpose filled way. Not to dwell on intellectual explanations of the proof of the resurrection.

Second, the opposite to resurrection faith is not doubt but fear.

The angel's first word to the women and later Jesus' word to them is “Do not be afraid.” It is the same word given to a bunch of fearful peasant shepherds outside of Bethlehem. It is the word spoken to fearful disciples on the Sea of Galilee. It is God's word of new life, spoken to us.

Fear can be the most life-sucking thing in our lives and the life of our community and nation. Fear of tomorrow, fear of the stranger, fear of the different, fear of the other. fear of financial insecurity. Fear of losing one's place, popularity or power. Fear of change, of decisions, of responsibility or of closing off our options... Fear of death and Fear of the deathliness that creeps into our corridors of power and industry sucking creativity, compassion and courage from a system that raises profitability as the ultimate goal of all institutions and human endeavour..

In the final verses of Matthew's story where Jesus gives the Great Commission to his disciples we read, "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted – yet Jesus came to them and said 'Go therefore and preach. . . etc'" So resurrection faith rather than excluding doubt, takes doubt into itself. Resurrection faith is the transforming gift of God that enables us to be fully human, full of self-doubt and uncertainty but nevertheless empowered to be free, free to love and live authentically and without fear. And this applies equally to us as a community as well – despite our doubts, failures and imperfections – God is still here and still draws us on and empowers us to act with courage and faithfulness in living out the freedom, compassion and justice and love we have experienced.

Third, Resurrection Faith is knowing that hope will be reborn out of death

The Resurrection is not merely the happy ending of an almost-tragic story of Jesus, like a postscript at the end. The resurrection perspective permeates the story from start to finish, so that all of Matthew's story is testimony to the risen Lord of the church. It is God's resounding "YES" to the life and values and faith of Jesus of Nazareth.

Resurrection Faith is that which enables us to **see** and **recognize** and **expect** the life of God breaking through in the darkest and most despairing moments of life and history.

Breaking through..

In the face of a young man called Moses minding his own business in the paddock when a bush burst into flame. "I've heard the cry of my people," said the voice from the bush, "and I'm going to set them free. I'm going head to head with Pharaoh and guess who's going to help me?"

In the voice of a fiery tongued prophet named Jeremiah, who promises return to the downtrodden exiles. Who in an inspired speech points the way to a great home-coming party, a great dance of the merry-makers that will outdo anything you've ever seen down at the Phone Dome..

In the quietly jubilant song of a young women in a stable down in the back streets singing. "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour. . . for God has scattered the proud, and God has pulled down the mighty from their thrones."

but Mary, there's Romans on the corner, why do you clench your fist and sing? Mary replies, "Well I'm going to have a baby."

The campaign went well but we didn't get him elected Messiah," the men explained to the women, "You go on out to the cemetery and take these flowers to show our last respects to Jesus. We'll come out later in the day." And so the women went out to death's memorial park and peered into the tomb. Surprise!

God's life had broken through!

On the way back from the cemetery Jesus meets them and says "Greetings!" The funeral wreaths they're holding look a bit silly at that point, and the fall down and worship.

Look at the stories of Jesus' life. All the way through you can see that death is losing its grip. Every time somebody once crippled stands and walks, or blind eyes begin to see, or prisoners of

fear break free, or the outcast dance in the temple, death is being pushed onto the back foot, and fullness of life is having its way over deathliness and despair. Every time Jesus is confronted with the finger prints of death, life breaks through. By the time we get to Easter,
HOW COULD THE TOMB BE ANYTHING BUT EMPTY?

This is what resurrection faith is all about.

It's got nothing to do with theories and doctrines and speculations about the nature of Jesus's post-Easter body.

It **is** a radical trust in the God who keeps coming back when everything seems lost.

It **is** a willingness in the face of overwhelming odds, of oppressive power-mongering and the might of dollar and dictator, to entrust ourselves to the ways of life and love.

It **is** a desire to sing and dance and celebrate in the face of those who would stifle joy and measure out existence by the spoonful.

It **is** to rejoice even in the face of our own doubts, because as we noted earlier, even face to face with the risen Christ some still doubted.

Because the life of God is bigger than our doubts.

Bigger than our accommodation to the ways of the lifeless.

Bigger than any army or dictator or power monger who would stand over you and wrest your life from you hands. Even if they kill the body, they have no power to stop the one who keeps coming back and resurrecting us body and all back to life and life to the full.

Easter Sunday is not an isolated event. It is unique in its climactic and timeless nature, but we have seen glimpses of it over and over again as God repeatedly responds to people faced with the power of death and led them forward to freedom and fullness of life.

Easter is everywhere, wherever the Spirit of God comes back in the hearts of downtrodden or despondent people and they begin the dance of life, with futures resurrected as they follow the resurrected Lord of life and become part of God's great movement of raising life from the midst of death when all hope seems gone.

This is the DNA of Resurrection Faith. And I have a hunch that you need look no further than right here right now in this little community of faith to find it.

And when you do, and you feel the energy of God's life breaking through in your own heart...

You too, will have no option but to go and tell others, "He has been raised from the dead and you will see him!!"