

Sprinting toward the Tomb

Luke 24:1-12

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Of all the characters in the New Testament, Peter is my favorite. He’s the guy who’s always a day late and a dollar short. He can never seem to make it to class on time. He manages somehow to run out of gas on the way to his dentist appointment. Always a bit disheveled, soup stains on his necktie.

We encounter Peter several times in the New Testament. When Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee to join the disciples in their fishing boat, Peter gets all excited and says, in effect, “Neat trick! Can I try?” The ever-exuberant Peter vaults over the gunwale and takes a few steps. He’s doing fine until, distracted by the waves churning all around him, he takes his eyes off Jesus. Then he sinks beneath the waves – like a rock.

And then what we might call Peter’s come-to-Jesus moment. Jesus, in talking with his disciples, asks who people say that he is. Some say Elijah or Jeremiah or John the Baptist, they replied. Then Jesus pressed further, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”¹

And here is where Jesus congratulates Peter, declaring that upon this rock – *Petra* means rock – I will build my church. “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus says, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”²

The Roman Catholic Church cites this passage to underscore its claims that it is the only true church. Every pope throughout history, Catholics believe, is the apostolic successor to Peter, the first bishop of Rome, so the power of the keys is vested in the pope, who determines who is saved and who is damned. The yellow-and-white Vatican flag, you’ll recall, features two crossed keys, symbolizing the keys to the kingdom.

I mean no disrespect whatsoever toward our Catholic friends, but I honestly believe that Roman Catholics have utterly misinterpreted this encounter between Jesus and Peter. I believe that this is a rare stab at humor in the New Testament, because as the incident at the Sea of Galilee demonstrates, Peter “the Rock” was anything but solid. He was spineless and dithering, as we will see. And when he lost his resolve and turned his eyes away from Jesus, he sank beneath the waves – like a rock.

¹ Matthew 16:13, 15 (NIV).

² Matthew 16:18-19 (NIV).

And when Jesus predicts that Peter will betray him three times before the rooster crows, Peter indignantly protests. “Even if I have to die with you,” Peter declares, “I will never disown you.”³

Only hours later, as we know, Peter once again demonstrates that “the Rock” was anything but solid. He collapsed like house of cards in the face of challenges from a succession of two young girls and then a larger group, each of whom said, in effect, “I know you. You were hanging out with that Jesus character.” Peter the Rock heatedly denied that he knew Jesus. And then the rooster crowed.

So I guess it shouldn’t surprise us that Peter arrived late to the tomb on Easter morning. It was the women who came first, planning to dress the body in spices, to show proper respect to the deceased. The story by now is familiar. They found the stone rolled away and the body gone. Two angels reminded the women that Jesus had predicted his own resurrection, and why should they be surprised?

Half stunned and half giddy, the women rushed to tell the apostles, who came running to see for themselves. Peter had apparently decided to sleep in, for Luke tells us, “Peter got up and ran to the tomb.” John’s account says that it was Peter and John who came when they heard the news, but John sprinted past Peter and arrived first. Poor bleary-eyed Peter, even on this of all mornings, he came up short. Couldn’t quite get his act together. A day late and a dollar short. But Luke tells us that Peter came away “amazed at what had happened.” Peter was amazed at what he saw – or what he didn’t see on that Easter morning. The tomb was empty.

Who could not be amazed at the vacant tomb on Easter morning? The resurrection of Jesus defies everything: death, physics, the Jewish leaders, the Roman authorities. The resurrection defies logic, and it threatens our tidy Enlightenment categories of rationality. No wonder that skeptics through

³ Matthew 26:35 (NIV).

the centuries have sought to debunk it, to explain it away as a figment of someone's imagination, an illusion, the collective hysteria on the part of the followers of the man from Nazareth.

St. Luke tells us that Peter, "the Rock," returned home amazed at what he had seen. But Luke offers us no further information about how Peter might have spent the balance of that Easter Sunday. Did he go back to sleep? I doubt it. Did he head out for Sunday brunch or settle in to watch the Red Sox on opening day? Who knows? But I suspect that Peter, of all the apostles, was elated to see the empty tomb because it would give him the chance once again to see Jesus, to say I'm sorry for those denials and for plunging beneath the waves on the Sea of Galilee. Peter the Rock. Sorry for messing up again and again.

And that's why I love Peter. I identify with him. Never getting it quite right. Messing up time and time again. A day late and a dollar short. Coming in a distant second during that early-morning sprint to the tomb, soup stains on his necktie.

Peter is Everyman. He is all of us. And that's the beauty of the passage in Matthew. Not that Peter and his successors can claim superiority to the rest of us, or even to other expressions of the faith. The beauty lies in the fact that Jesus elected to entrust his entire earthly legacy to flawed individuals like Peter – and by extension to flawed creatures like you and me.

No, Peter was not the first to arrive at the tomb on Easter morning. But he made it, plodding along like the rest of us, winded and wheezing. Some of us, like Peter, come to the faith later in life; we're not the first to arrive. We come at our own pace, in our own time. But we make it somehow, because the greatest of all earthly gifts is the ability to acknowledge Jesus as Lord in this life.

And so, soup stains and all, we arrive at the empty tomb. We come with our doubts and our reservations, our hurt and our disappointment. We bring

our own wounds – fractured relationships, frustrated aspirations, an acute sense of our own failures. Like Peter, we bring our sad, broken lives to Jesus.

And Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, the Broken One, welcomes us with open arms.

That's the message of Easter, the empty tomb. Death does not triumph. Despair is not the final word. Jesus, the Crucified and Risen One, takes our sad, broken lives and somehow, through the miracle of grace, makes us whole.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Easter Sunday

April 4, 2010

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut