

You Are Grounded

Luke 24:1-12

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You know, when you actually hear the Easter story, it's rather vague, isn't it? This gospel of Luke is not nearly so clear, or as triumphant, as you might expect it to be. At a time in history when our nation seems obsessed with who is evil and who is good, in this version of the Easter story, it's not even clear who the good guys are and who the bad guys are.

The angels are scary, the apostles are stupid, Peter is confused, and the women are not nearly as happy as we want them to be. At the end of Luke's resurrection story, far from being convinced, convicted, and fired up for the future of Christianity, our rag tag group seems divided and disorganized. These are the people who are supposed to carry the resurrection message to the rest of the world? Can I get a recast? These people will never be able to pull it off.

That's a far cry from a radio preacher I heard of. He said, "Let me tell you the good news of Easter." There was a dramatic pause as he wound up for his home run. "The good news about Easter is that Jesus was a winner. Jesus was not a loser. He was a winner and we're all winners, too!"

This guy had clearly skipped the drama of the game and moved straight to the scoreboard, as human beings have been known to do. This was Easter as game-winning home run, town parade, lottery jackpot, beauty contest winner, Captain America wins again, home team advantage, and new car smell all rolled up into one. He had it figured out, tied up, and gift wrapped, didn't he? Easter means we're the winners.

Seems to be a lot of that going around these days. A lot of talk about victory and the winners, with the leaders who read just enough of scripture to decide we're the chosen people, and then they shut the book, while the losers or anyone on the other side are described as evil, sinful, or somehow deserving.

But friends, this morning I want to preach to you a somewhat different Easter message—a message about the losers, and how Christianity is a religion that in the end scolds the self-righteous, and embraces the humble. And that in that humility, there is much more richness than there is in claiming to be right.

This reminds me of another story I heard. Apparently God looked down at the earth, and saw all the evil that was going on, and so God decided to ascertain the spiritual health of human beings at this moment in time. So he sent down an angel with a strong background in sociology to perform a survey.

The angel returned with the results. "Well, God," the angel explained. "According to our survey, 95% of human beings are wicked, bad and evil. And 5% are trying to be good."

"Only 5%," God said. "It has to be better than that. I'm sending down another angel to do another survey." Because even God knows that when you don't like the results of one poll, just do another.

Well, it wasn't long before the second angel returned with her news. "95% of

human beings are wicked, bad and evil. 5% are good, but more troubling still, those 5% are feeling very sad and discouraged.”

That troubled God greatly, so God decided to reach out to those good people by sending the 5% an uplifting and encouraging e-mail. (Look, if God can conduct polls, God can send emails, too.) And do you know what that e-mail said?

Oh. I see...So you didn't get one either?

Don't ever let anyone tell you that Easter is for the winners, my friends. Easter is for the losers, for the 95% of us who are far from the perfect and also the 5% of us who think we are. Easter is God's reminder that on our own we couldn't win that battle between good and evil, so God did it for us through a man named Jesus Christ, who came to earth and suffered on the cross, and was even willing to be a loser, so that losers among us would know that we were loved and safe.

Unfortunately, it's hard to remember that, as our consumer culture takes over the marketing of Jesus' death and resurrection with the ferocity it has taken over marketing Jesus' birth. Just when you thought candy and bunnies were the church's only competition, the marketing of our most sacred season has hit a new low. Comes word from the *Christian Century* magazine that there are Easter baskets currently on sale at K-Mart filled with the Combat Vehicle Military play set for \$15.99. Just the thing to help children celebrate the resurrection of the Prince of Peace. There's also the Wal-Mart version with an Army Tech action figure equipped with an automatic rifle and bazooka, for ages three and up. Wal-Mart's version is cheaper, of course, at \$4.88. Anything you can do, they can do cheaper.

In the old days, the church confronted blasphemy in the passionate preaching debates of the public square, or treatises within the church, but today most Christians confront it from the shopping cart and at the check out line. Judas sold Jesus out for thirty pieces of silver, but we can do it for \$4.99 and the marketing of the perverse message that Easter is for the strong, the powerful, and the winners.

But for people with the faith to be in church today, you know that to say Easter is about victory alone is to ignore the events of Holy Week that led up to it, and more importantly the events that followed it, in which Jesus proclaimed victory over death not on behalf of life's winners, or at their behest, but for all people by the grace of a generous God.

For while the world tries to divide us into camps, we who have new life in Christ acknowledge the humble truth. That for most of us on this earth, we're less like action heroes and much more like those women leaving the empty tomb, scared, excited, and confused all at once. I know that far from seeing yourselves as either winners or losers, those of you gathered in church today have a deeper understanding of how life works. For in a year that may have included job loss, or financial uncertainty, or the end of a relationship, or a child leaving home, or even a loved one leaving this earth, we know that Easter has got to be about more than feeling like a winner. For life is tender, and sometimes difficult, but every Sunday here in church we remember that underneath it all runs this fragile thing called faith, that tells us there must be something more.

And the resurrection stories say: Listen to that hope, for there is more. More than winning and losing in this dog-eat-dog world. More than calling one side evil and another good. For in Christ there is no male, no female, no Greek, no Jew. For in his eyes there have never been separate teams, but only one vision, and far from being a

victory of one person over another, this is a more powerful victory. And that victory is our hope.

Speaking of hope, for eight years I've been holding on to a newspaper clipping from the *New Haven Register*. In this crumpled up Associated Press story with a Vancouver dateline, the headline reads: "Tears turn to laughter as dead couple returns." Do you remember this story?

On August 25, 1996, the newspaper article told the strange tale of a couple whose airplane crashed in a remote lake, leaving an oil slick and the couples' possessions and identification floating eerily on the water's surface, their bodies drowned and disappeared. As their obituaries got written and funeral plans were finalized, a coroner was flown out to the crash site days later to make the final report.

And there, lo and behold, on the shore a full quarter mile's swim from where the plane had made its fiery nosedive, were the stranded couple. They were living on fresh water mussels and waving thinning arms into the wilderness air to attract the attention in case anyone flew by. They never gave up hope, and found it in a coroner looking for death.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" our gospel reading tells the Easter story, of onlookers searching for Jesus in an empty tomb. But perhaps what was meant was, "Why do you look for the dead among the living?" A coroner searching the shores for cold dead bodies found beating hearts and warm flesh instead. Imagine his delight. The stone had been rolled away.

It's the reversal we all hope for, but most of us don't receive. The last minute reprieve from execution, the death cheating miracle medical cure, the stranded airplane crash victims discovered against all odds, the missing child who is found.

This is the dream most of us never see lived out, so we hang on to crumpled newspaper clippings. We rejoice in the rescue of our soldiers missing in action, as though they have been returned from the dead, as Iraqi families wait with that same longing, hoping that their loved ones will be among those held in prison camps rather than tombs.

As a nation we follow stories of missing children, both flinching away from the potential horror and yet sucked into the hope nonetheless. We rejoiced when the missing Utah girl, Elizabeth Smart, was found, against the odds. Even though she hadn't died, it was as if when we saw in her beautiful face on the news that she had returned from the dead.

In a world of unhappy endings, every now and then we get a happy one, and when we do, we cling to it as a people, no longer separated by national boundaries, but as ordinary people suddenly unified in our common humanity. We just want to be with the ones we love.

Are these events resurrections? No. Not really. These people were not dead and raised. They were alive and found. But I think they feel to us like resurrections, as the shadow of a building across your face suggests a castle of heights you cannot imagine, because they may be the closest we get to resurrection until it happens to us at the end of time, for real.

So finding a lost one on earth strikes up in us a hope that one day, after we have left this earth, no one will be lost to us ever again. Every time that hope conquers fear, on earth, or life conquers death, some fire comes alive in us that I am convinced God implanted there waiting to find the real resurrection, the one to come and the one who

has already come in Christ. Hope on earth is our way of knowing we can hope for even more after that.

So trust that hope and longing in yourself. And don't let Wal-Mart, wars, or weariness take that Easter hope away.

When that Vancouver couple returned home after their plane crash and their time in the wilderness, their eight year old son, Lewis, who had never given up hope, greeted them with a cake in the shape of an airplane that said, "Bugsy and Sheila, Welcome Home. You are grounded."

"You are grounded," is the message we get whenever we cheat death, whenever we brush up against the resurrection to come. Ask anyone who's been sick and recovered, if the leaves on the trees didn't appear a little brighter the next day. Ask anyone whose job was saved if the boring old paperwork at the office didn't suddenly seem engaging. Ask anyone whose relationship got pulled back from the brink if they didn't notice a more beautiful spark in their loved one's eyes across the breakfast table in the days that followed.

Suddenly, what used to seem important slips to the bottom and the ordinariness of life acquires remarkable beauty. That's what I think the child meant with that cake for his missing father. You are grounded.

The problem is that we don't stay that way. Because that kind of grounding—grounding in God, grounding in gratitude, grounding in goodness, grounding in hope—gets set aside eventually by the rush of life. Or we lose that grounding in hardship, pain, or the lure of worldly delights and blasphemous promises that material things or human power will fill the hole in our hearts called hope that has been left to long for God. And so Easter reminds us, you are grounded. Against all that you hear out there, you are grounded.

There's another ad on television that has come out and to me, it's even worse than the military Easter baskets or the culture of baby chick and bunny cuteness, because this ad is just so much more subtle. I want to tell you about it around Easter so that we can be reminded what, as people of faith, we are up against, and in guarding against it, stay grounded.

In the ad, the serenely beautiful Lancôme cosmetics spokeswoman, Uma Thurman, stands on a hilltop in the middle of green fields as orchestral music swirls around her. She stands tall in a long flowing skirt with milky, sleepy eyes that seem tearfully overwhelmed by the natural beauty that surrounds her, as she proceeds to watch a perfect sun rise. As the light falls over her long flowing hair and the sun kissed natural scene, we see what Lancôme's product is. It is a perfume called "Miracle."

Ah, the viewer thinks. The sunrise is a miracle, and a miracle comes from God, and so everyday beauties like the sunrise, or even the woman herself, are miracles. Perhaps this perfume will, in its beauty, remind us of all the other beauties so far, and so the call it buy it is a spiritual one. It's a bit tawdry, but okay, there's a hole called hope in our hearts, and they've found a way to market to our longing for the holy in our lives. But then comes the kicker. "Miracle" the screen proclaims over the sunrise. "You make it happen."

You make it happen? Miracles? The last time I checked, that fell under God's job description, but now, apparently, we human beings are in charge over even that. Now that is cynical.

Between Wal-Mart, Lancôme, and the arrogance of a world of winners that has

lost its grounding, I think we all need to be in church today to hear a different story, about women who may not have been as glamorous or serene as the perfume model but whose grounding was a little firmer than all that.

The women that day—Mary, the grieving mother, and Mary Magdalene, the prostitute who had become a leader, along with her friends—had arrived at the tomb with the everyday details on their mind. They wanted to attend to Jesus' body, to lay the spices in his tomb. But after all they had been through, as is often the case with grieving people, it was something very concrete and ordinary that finally got them down. They knew an obstacle would stand in their way. A stone. A massive stone blocking the entrance to the tomb, which back then would have looked like a giant cave, the size of a room.

"Who will roll the stone away?" they had wondered, as grieving people do. I've lost the one I love, my hopes are dashed, but it's the details and rituals of death that threaten to unravel our flimsily stitched clothes.

"Who will roll the stone away?" they asked, in another gospel, knowing that their own strength was limited, and understanding that they were not all powerful, holding a humility that was so lacking in the mighty empire powers who had hung Jesus to die on the cross.

But when they arrived, the ordinary problem they had been so worried about had been taken care of. But, again, as is often the case when you are grieving, a larger one had taken its place. Now the stone was rolled away, but the body they had come to see was gone as well. One problem was replaced with another one.

And rather than feeling grounded, at that moment, they must have felt the earth move under their feet as it had on Good Friday when Jesus had breathed his last breath on the cross. They were losing their grounding, and what they saw next reminded them that indeed, in the case of miracles, they did not make it happen. Something else was at work.

There waiting for them were two angels, who were not the kind of cute china figurine angels that sit on your mantel piece with chubby cheeks, fat little tummies, harps, and a gossipy interest in your personal problems. No, these were Bible angels, big men in dazzling clothes, yet supernatural, God-powered and scary.

"He is not here, but has risen," the strange creatures told them. For the women that day, that good news couldn't have sounded so good. After all they had gone through, this must have seemed like way too much.

Abandoned in death, they were now cheated in grief, in a world in which the followers of Jesus were now the losers in a society that had never opened the winner's circle to them anyway. They were the women who would now be mocked for following a man who had died as a criminal. And they were supposed to proclaim the resurrection to the world? They must not have done it very well that day, for they weren't even able to convince the disciples, the true believers. None of these people are very likely leaders, are they?

But the wonderful message of Easter is that these very people are the ones whom God chose for that day. They didn't have to be pretty, they didn't have to be smart, they didn't have to carry bazookas, they didn't have to make miracles happen, and they didn't have to be the winners. They didn't even have to get it the first time around. As scared as they were, as confused as they were, as broken as they were, as much like

each one us as they were, *they* were the ones, as *we* are the ones, whom God has chosen to proclaim his love on this earth.

In the midst of an empty tomb that looked nothing like what they were expecting, came a message to the lost and the losers—a challenge to spread the good news to all God’s people. You don’t have to empty the tomb yourself. You just have to point out to others that it’s been done.

“Welcome home,” God says every Easter, to a people who have been lost. “He is risen.” And you, my friends, are grounded.