

Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus

The Rev. Gary Coffey Grace Episcopal Church Easter Day, 2014

One day, three men were walking along and came upon a raging, violent river. They needed to get across to the other side, but had no idea how to do it. The first man prayed to God, "Please, God, give me the strength to cross this river." *Poof!* God gave the man big arms and strong legs, and he was able to swim across the river in about three hours.

Seeing this, the second man prayed to God saying, "Please God, give me the strength and the ability to cross this river." *Poof!* God gave him a rowboat and he was able to row across the river in about two hours.

The third man, seeing how things had worked out for the other two, also prayed to God and saying, "Please, God, give me the strength and the ability and the intelligence to cross this river." *Poof!* God turned him into a woman; she looked at a map, then walked across the bridge. (This story taken from *Synthesis for Easter Day, April 20, 2014*)

Think about it, it's no wonder that God chose the two Marys as the first witnesses of the resurrection. After all, Peter, Jesus' right hand man, had denied Jesus in His hour of need. After his arrest, the rest of his male disciples scattered like sheep on a Judean hillside. Other than John, the Beloved disciple, it was Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene and the other women who were there for Jesus at the Cross.

Who knows what might have happened had the angel delivered the message of Jesus' resurrection to a guy? Men, you know how we are. We might have forgotten what the angel said or not believed the angel or we might have forgotten to tell the others. No, it was these faithful women who received the most joyful message ever delivered. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed is going ahead of you into Galilee; there you will see him.'"

The women took off to deliver their message and Jesus appeared to them saying, "Greetings!" The women fell down on their knees, took hold of his feet and worshipped him.

We are so blessed in our Episcopal churches to have kneelers in the pews. For those new to the Episcopal Church, kneelers are those wooden pieces which are attached under the pew in front of you which fold down so that you can kneel on them. If you grew up in a church with kneelers, you may not be able to appreciate the importance of kneelers. But if you grew up in another tradition, as I did, the kneelers probably mean a lot to you. When I first came to the Episcopal Church, about 40 years ago, there was a lot about the worship of the Episcopal Church that was foreign to me. But the one thing that resonated with me, then and always, is that there is something right about kneeling down together before God in worship.

Think about it. In our world, we don't kneel down before anyone or anything. Therefore, in getting down on our knees together before God, we are outwardly and visibly humbling ourselves before God and thereby demonstrating with our bodies that we are offering God the first place in our hearts and minds and lives.

I heard my former bishop in Iowa, Christopher Epting, once say that God's very being draws praise and worship from us as God's people. That being the case, I don't think that these women even thought about kneeling at Jesus' feet before they did it. I think their kneeling was a natural and spontaneous response to being in the presence of our resurrected Lord.

I remember spending the night with my grandparents one night as a child. I think it may have been when my mother was in the hospital giving birth to my sister. So, I would have been about five years old at the time. Before they went to bed, I will never forget it, my elderly grandpa and grandma got down on their knees in front of the sofa in their living room and prayed together. As I think of that evening, it makes me mindful of the benefits of spending time each day on one's knees as they did.

Getting on our knees to pray reminds us that to call Jesus Lord or Master means that our desire is to humble ourselves before Him, to do what He would have us do, to live into the words of the Lord's Prayer, "THY Kingdom come, THY will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

We have the privilege of kneeling before Jesus just as these women did. The only difference is that we don't have the great honor of grasping his feet as we pray. We don't have that honor yet.

The second thing that I noticed in this resurrection story is that the angel and our Lord Jesus both said four very important words to the women. I have noticed that almost every time an angel of the Lord makes an appearance in the Bible, the angel says some version of these four words, and here our Lord echoes the angel and says these four words as well. Do you remember what the four words were? Yes, they were, "Do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid. It would probably be impossible to overemphasize the importance of these four words in our life of faith. The reason for this is that faith and fear are spiritual opposites. When faith goes up, fear goes down and when fear goes up faith goes down. God is always calling us out of our fear into faith or trust in God. God is forever saying to us, "You know, you really can trust me with that, whatever "the that" happens to be.

Both the angel and Jesus told the women not to be afraid. Thinking of the many times this is said to God's people throughout the Scriptures, it is crystal clear that God means for us not to be afraid either. Why not? I think it's because no matter /where we are/ or what is happening to us or around us/, the fact that overcomes our fear is the fact that God is with us/, and that God will always be with us/, and because of God's power evidenced in the resurrection, even death cannot and will not ever separate us from the presence of God or from the love of God.

The bottom line, Beloved, is that we need not fear. We are safe in the love and care of our God, this day, each day, now and always. This security in Christ can help us live without the crippling effects of unjustified fears. Unjustified fears like fears of not being good enough or smart enough or strong enough or brave enough or attractive enough. Remember, whatever our fear is, we can trust God with it. Before I close, I have to mention the Epistle reading from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians, because it is the "so what" of the resurrection. Jesus was raised from the dead. So what? St. Paul wrote these words, "Since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory."

Here, St. Paul is describing what it means to walk with our Risen Lord each day/ by loving others and by following His teachings in our lives,/ teachings like,/ "Love one another as I have loved you."

I ran across a great example of this kind of love as I heard Justin Horner,/ a graphic designer from Portland Oregon,/ telling his story on the radio. Justin had blown a tire and was stranded without a jack on the side of the road. The following words are his:

"A Mexican guy stopped to help me with the blowout even though he had his whole family of four in tow. I was on the side of the road for close to three hours with my friend's big Jeep. I put signs in the windows, big signs that said, "NEED A JACK," and offered money. Nothing. Right as I was about to give up and start hitching, a van pulled over, and the guy bounded out.

He sized up the situation and called for his daughter, who spoke English. He conveyed through her that he had a jack but that it was too small for the Jeep, so we would need to brace it. Then he got a saw from the van and cut a section out of a big log on the side of the road. We rolled it over, put his jack on top and we were in business.

I started taking the wheel off, and then, if you can believe it, I broke his tire iron. It was one of those collapsible ones, and I wasn't careful, and I snapped the head clean off. Damn.

No worries: he ran to the van and handed it to his wife, and she was gone in a flash down the road to buy a new tire iron. She was back in 15 minutes. We finished the job with a little sweat and cussing (the log started to give), and I was a very happy man.

The two of us were filthy and sweaty. His wife produced a large water jug for us to wash our hands in. I tried to put a 20 in the man's hand, but he wouldn't take it, so instead I went up to the van and gave it to his wife as quietly as I could. I thanked them up one side and down the other. I asked the little girl where they lived, thinking maybe I'd send them a gift for being so awesome. She said they lived in Mexico. They were in Oregon so Mommy and Daddy could pick cherries for the next few weeks. Then they were going to pick peaches, then go back home.

After I said my goodbyes and started walking back to the Jeep, the girl called out and asked if I'd had lunch. When I told her no, she ran up and handed me a tamale.

This family, undoubtedly poorer than just about everyone else on that stretch of highway, working on a seasonal basis where time is money, took a couple of hours out of their day to help a strange guy on the side of the road while people in tow trucks were just passing him by.

But we weren't done yet. I thanked them again and walked back to my car and opened the foil on the tamale (I was starving by this point), and what did I find inside? My \$20 bill! I whirled around and ran to the van and the guy rolled down his window. He saw the \$20 in my hand and just started shaking his head no. All I could think to say was, "*Por favor, por favor, por favor,*" with my hands out. The guy just smiled and, with what looked like great concentration, said in English: "Today you, tomorrow me."

Then he rolled up his window and drove away, with his daughter waving to me from the back. I sat in my car eating the best tamale I've ever had, and I just started to cry. It had been a rough year; nothing seemed to break my way. This was so out of left field I just couldn't handle it.

In the several months since then I've changed a couple of tires, given a few rides to gas stations and once drove 50 miles out of my way to get a girl to an airport. I won't accept money. But every time I'm able to help, I feel as if I'm putting something in the bank.

Justin Horner is a graphic designer living in Portland, Ore. This essay was adapted from a message-board posting on reddit.com.

Of course we have no idea if this family who helped were people of faith. But what we do know is that they did what Jesus would have us do in their situation.

The choice is clear beloved. We can live only for ourselves or we can follow our resurrected Lord and be a blessing to others recognizing that we are all in this together. Today you. Tomorrow me.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Notice he does not say, “If you have been raised with Christ”, but rather “Since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

St. Paul goes on to say, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Now, “to set our minds on things that are above” does not mean we are to be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. It doesn’t mean going around thinking about heaven all of the time. Quite to the contrary, what it means is to live life on this earth fully and joyfully and fearlessly in Christ’s service. It means allowing people to be loved by Him through us and allowing others to come to know our resurrected Lord as He lives in us.

It means leaving behind our false self that was drowned at our baptism, where we died with Christ, and to live fully with Him in our true self, the self we were created to be, in the power of His resurrection.

I will close with a quote from Major Ian Thomas who sums up the “so what” of the resurrection of Jesus by reminding us that

Christ not only died for us, but He rose again to live in us.

To personalize it, I will say this directly to each of you,

“Remember, Beloved, Christ not only died for you. He rose again to live in you and through you so that you will be a tremendous blessing to others in this world. So, go forth this week and be the blessing God created you to be!”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

