

The Imperatives of the Resurrection
Matthew 28:1-10
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Do you like to be told what to do? Some do. Some don't. But there are times when even the do not want all the help they can get. After all, there are times when we would have no idea how to proceed WITHOUT some instruction. We certainly are experiencing that today, when the Government, health officials, and Bishop all tell us that we cannot meet together due to the world COVID-19 Pandemic.

I suspect that would have been the case if we had been in the garden with the women on that first Easter morning so long ago. Had we been there, we would have been glad to get any direction at all, because without it, we would have been wandering around like chickens with our heads cut off.

Consider the situation. We would have just gone through one of the most traumatic times of our lives. The leader in whom we had put so much faith and trust for these past three years had been taken captive. He had been arrested and beaten within an inch of his life. He had been hauled before the Roman governor and condemned to death as a traitor. Finally, he had been cruelly murdered in the time honored fashion of crucifixion... left to hang like so much rotting meat in the noonday sun, left to be an example to any other who would even consider challenging the might of imperial Rome.

A few of our number had been bold enough to ask Governor Pilate for permission to give the body a decent burial, and that request had been granted. But good religious folk that we are, the sun had gone down upon our work two days ago and we had not been able to finish the job properly without violating the Sabbath. We figured that there was trouble enough with Rome and the Jewish leaders without offending God at the same time, so we postponed our grisly task until the Sabbath had passed. Now we

were ready to finish what would be one of the most heart-rending jobs that any of us would ever do: the embalming of the body of the one man that NONE of us would have ever figured to die like this...just thirty-three years old...in the prime of life...a man who had done so many wonderful things during his short time with us...and now he was dead...legally murdered. It would have torn our hearts out.

People do not think clearly in times like this. Breaking hearts do not WANT to think rationally...it is too painful. Perhaps that is why we went to the tomb that morning in the first place. If we had THOUGHT about it, how would we have planned to get to Jesus' body anyway?

After all, the tomb had been closed two days before. A huge boulder had been rolled across the entrance to prevent anyone from getting in. The leaders of the temple had even convinced Pilate to post some soldiers there to prevent any of us from stealing the body and then claiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Those soldiers were under the strictest orders not to let ANYONE in, particularly those of us who had been his disciples. Pilate had even instructed that the seal of Rome be placed over the ropes that held the boulder in place to INSURE that no one would get to Jesus' body.

Would the guards have cared about the pleas of grieving friends to get the stone out of the way? Would our request to finish our embalming have mattered to them? Would those guards have broken the Roman seal? Of course not. Why would we have gone that morning? Not thinking clearly, that's why.

The story is most familiar by now. The arrival at the garden in the pre-dawn darkness. Instead of a well-sealed tomb guarded by Roman soldiers, we find that huge stone rolled off to one side and the imperial guards unconscious. And sitting on top of that stone, perched there like a little boy sits proudly on the chest of the neighborhood bully whom he has just beaten in a wrestling match, was an angel of God.

How clearly would ANYONE think in a situation like that? Not very! We would have been afraid enough of a confrontation with the soldiers, but now an angel of God??? Fortunately, the angel must have known our troubled minds so he began to give instructions...commands, if you like. You see, in the Greek text of Matthew's gospel, the angel's words to us are imperatives... orders, actually...orders that began to get our thinking straight again...orders that can help to get anyone's thinking straight upon encountering Christ's empty tomb.

The first thing he told us was, "Do not be afraid." The gentle word of a mom or dad whose child has awakened at a bad dream at midnight or who has been frightened by a thunderstorm, a word of comfort as the little one sits huddled on a parent's lap? Not really. Literally, the angel's words were "STOP FEARING!" During these trying days of this terrible Pandemic, we need to remember these words again, "Do not be afraid".

Under the circumstances, easier said than done, wouldn't you say? We would have been afraid of the might of the soldiers; we would have been afraid of the wrath of temple leaders; we even would have been afraid of that dead body - people always DO seem to fear dead bodies, don't they? Now, we are confronted by an angel who looks like lightning - who would NOT be afraid. So he told us to stop.

Of course, that IS the first thing we needed to do because NO ONE thinks straight when they are terrified. One wonders how many folks' first encounter with the divine has been stark terror. They hear about things like the wrath of God, hellfire and brimstone, and then are quite literally SCARED into the Kingdom. Is that the way it ought to be? This first command of the angel at the garden tomb says, "Not at all!"

His next order is "COME!" A command, another imperative, but at the same time, it is an invitation. Jesus himself had issued that same invitation over and over again. At the

beginning of his ministry he had told a dozen men to COME, travel with me. He had told the crowds, "COME unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." He had welcomed children to himself saying, "Suffer the little children to COME unto Me, and forbid them not." Now the angel in the garden was extending the same invitation to us...COME.

It is a command that is as valid today as it ever was. It is eternally true, of course, that the Lord comes to US before we ever come to him. In his grace, his Spirit moves upon our hearts and extends the invitation. But it is equally true that the invitation has never been to just continue SITTING there. You see, Christianity is more than a system of beliefs; it is an active faith, a faith that will be willing to get up out of its chair and on its feet, a faith that will be responsive to the needs of the world and the righteous imperatives of the God of all creation.

Why do you think such a command would be necessary? Perhaps because it is a necessary prerequisite to the NEXT command: SEE. "Come and SEE," said the angel in the garden. There was something that we would have to experience with our own eyes before we would ever be of much use in sharing the news. We had to see for ourselves that the tomb was empty before we could pass that word with confidence on to anyone else.

Why did Jesus have such an effect on the people of his day? Why would such great crowds follow after him and hang on his every word? Why would some even put aside everything that was dear to follow him? Why? Because he was a great teacher who celebrated the noblest and best in humanity? Of course not! There have been plenty of those. We followed him because we SAW what he could do. We saw the blind have sight restored; we saw the lame made to walk; we even saw the dead raised back to life. We SAW what he did and could not resist following after.

Why were the leaders of the temple so concerned about Jesus? Why did they worry

about the impact he was making on the people? Why did they concern themselves about the effect he might have on the nation's relationship to Rome? Why? Because they too SAW what was happening. They SAW that their authority was being undermined and they finally determined to put a stop to it... permanently, they thought. They made their fateful decision because they SAW what Jesus was doing.

Have you ever noticed just how true that is in Christian witness? The most moving testimonies we ever hear are from those who have actually SEEN the power of the risen Lord at work in their own lives. You have often heard the story of the converted drunk who was asked by the skeptic if he really believed all that stuff about miracles in the Bible. His response was, "I don't know about any of them, but in my house, I have seen God turn whiskey into furniture." Here was a man who had SEEN the Lord at work, and the result was a powerful witness.

Yes, we at the tomb that morning were commanded to "come and SEE," because until we had done that, the next imperative would have been useless. Do you remember what it was? "GO...go quickly."

What would the resurrection have mattered to history had we been content to sit there outside the empty tomb and reflect among ourselves about what had happened? What comfort could have been offered Jesus' grieving comrades had we stayed where we were and celebrated the resurrection in private? What impact would we have made on the hearts of religious people through the centuries? Had we just SAT there, we would have done no good at all.

Of course, the reason for going was in the next command, the next imperative: "TELL!" As Paul would write later, "Faith comes by HEARING!" People had to HEAR the good news of the Lord's resurrection before it could make any difference in their lives, and people would ONLY hear if someone were to TELL them.

Yes, there would have been the temptation to keep quiet had not the angel specifically told us to do otherwise. After all, why open yourself up to all sorts of snide remarks from a world that says, "When you are dead, you are dead - there is no such thing as resurrection?" Why let people think you are a crackpot? Why not just keep the news to yourself and save all that potential embarrassment? Why not? Because the angel gave orders to TELL, that is why not.

Of course, once word got around, the early church DID begin to tell. The first sermons that we find recorded in the book of Acts ALL centered around the resurrection. They were not concerned with Jesus' remarkable ethical teaching; they never talked about his background; they only casually mentioned his miracles; the main thrust of those early sermons was that he who had been crucified, dead and buried, was now risen and alive forevermore.

What makes Christianity different from the rest of the world's religions? Are our ethics any better? No. Is our concern for justice any greater? No. Is it an "Our God can beat your God" kind of thing? No. The difference between Christianity and all the others is that OUR Lord is ALIVE! Buddha? Dead. Confucius? Dead. Mohammed? Dead. But Jesus is alive! And that news needs to be shared.

"Come, see, go, tell"... the commands of the angel at the empty tomb. But there were more. You remember what happened. As we hurried out of the garden, we actually MET the risen Lord. His first word to us was another imperative. Different translators render it in different ways: "Greetings, All hail, Good morning" - all are legitimate, a typical Jewish greeting. But the greeting was literally a command: REJOICE!, BE JOYFUL!, BE OF GOOD CHEER! That was something else we needed to hear. So much had happened to us in just a few short minutes that our minds were still reeling from the news. The one thing that we might have forgotten in the rush was to BE HAPPY about it. Only two days ago the Lord in whom we had placed so much faith

was dead...now he was alive again. Tremendous news! Certainly his other friends would want to know. Certainly it would shake the world to its foundations. But even more certainly, it was a cause for rejoicing. This was the best news that ANY of us would ever hear - all our hopes and dreams were still good. They had NOT died upon that cross. Our God could conquer ANYTHING...even death. There was REASON to rejoice.

Isn't it strange that so many Christians walk around looking like they have just been sucking on a lemon? Isn't it strange that some are only really joyful when they can count their faithfulness to Jesus on the list of things they do not do? Isn't it strange that so many are only really happy, only really UP, when they are running someone else DOWN? Isn't it strange? Isn't it SAD? Beloved, that is not the EASTER faith. The Easter faith is a celebration of the sovereignty of God over everything in this world, death included, and a celebration of grace in the guarantee of eternal life for all who believe. We have reason to rejoice, and Jesus gave us that reminder on our way from the garden.

Of course, there were three more commands that he gave us. They simply reaffirmed the instruction of the angel. First, he repeated the instruction to STOP BEING AFRAID. It is a reminder we ALL need from time to time as we begin to share our faith. Then he said GO. Again, there are times when we need to have someone shake us off our rusty-dusties and get us out into the world and to work. And finally, TELL. In our pluralistic society, we need that command lest we be content to keep the good news of the Gospel as some private treasure. Would Easter mean anything to us had not someone told the resurrection story, the story of God's power over death, centuries ago? Would it mean anything to us had not the church continued to tell the story through the ages of history? Would it mean anything to us had not our parents and grandparents, preachers and teachers, passed the word? Of course not. The challenge that Jesus gives is for us to continue telling the story so that the whole world might believe.

There is an old legend of Jesus encountering Abraham in paradise after the Lord returned to glory. Abraham asked him, "Who will share the message of God's goodness and love now that you are no longer there to do it?"

Jesus replied, "I have left my disciples to do it."

But Abraham responded, "Suppose they don't DO it; what is your alternate plan?"

Jesus answered, "I HAVE no other plan."

The imperatives of the resurrection...nine of them in just ten short verses, and three of them repeated for emphasis. "Stop being afraid, Come, See, Go, Tell, and Rejoice." Challenges to believers everywhere on this Easter morning. We might not like being told what to do, but in the face of such an overpowering event, we need all the help we can get.

Christ the Lord is risen today.

Alleluia, Alleluia.

Amen!