

He is Not Here!©

Acts 10:34-43; Luke 24:1-12

April 21, 2019

Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

EASTER SUNDAY

I love to tell this story and so I'm sure I've shared it with you. I can't come to Easter without thinking of this joyous, funny thing and so I will share it with you again. Hoping you aren't tired of the telling.

When our daughter, Annie, was a senior in High School, the New Creation Youth Group I led wrote and produced an Easter Sunrise Service. It was in Onslow, Iowa, a very small, rural town surrounded by cornfields.

The sunrise service was held early on a chilly Easter Sunday in the small park at the outskirts of town. From where we sat, we could see off in the distance, totally unplanned by us, three electric, or, telephone poles, standing side by side, with the sun coming up behind them. It was nice to have that special effects background for the skit the youth had planned.

Their skit was about the women, of course, who went to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus. They had it all planned.

Most of you have come to know my husband, Fred. And while he has a great sense of humor, always loving to make people laugh – sometimes he sincerely wants to enhance something. Even though it may turn out kind of humorous.

You see, Fred truly believed he would enhance the play by adding to it something he did not think to tell the youth group about. That morning, as the young people were gathering and getting ready, Fred donned his own costume – a long, brown tunic and a big cover for his head.

And, unnoticed by anyone, he walked out into the cornfield where the corn was already getting as high as an elephant's eye, as the song in the musical Oklahoma, goes.

And so the skit began. The youth were doing a fine job of portraying the women going to the tomb and finding it empty. But every so often, unexpectedly, this person who looked like a monk, came popping up out of the corn, yelling, "He's not over here!" And then he would disappear into the rows of corn again.

Later, he would pop out in another place and shout again, "He's not over here."

The youth would stop and all heads would turn to the cornfield to see the strange monk back into the corn. After a while, Annie came over to me and asked, "Mom, what is dad doing???"

I just shrugged and said, "He's adding to your story" ... which is exactly what he intended on doing. He just planned on helping to make it even better, but, it was very funny in a strange kind of way.

Easter plays can be powerful, but they can be funny as well ... just as we have so many stories of the children doing the Christmas pageant.

The thing is ... that Easter morning so long ago ... was not a skit; not a play. It was the real deal. Someone really had died, and it was tragic and shocking and horrid. It was unbearable to witness, and hard to believe.

This was someone who was loved by many; someone who had close relationships. This was someone's son, someone's brother, a nephew, a friend. This someone was Jesus.

We all know even if we haven't been there yet – losing a loved one; going through that awful grief and pain, that stunning shock – we know we will be there eventually. It's one of those things in life that we can count on. Death is not something we can avoid.

Many of us have already been there. As a pastor, I have lost count of the number of times I've been beside the bed of one who drew their last breath. I have sat with families as they go through that initial acceptance that it really happened.

But as a daughter, I have personally endured the grief, the shock, the incredibly difficult thing of accepting that my mom was gone. And I understand going to that gravesite just to be there, because we don't know where else to go to be close. Even though we get there and we really aren't close.

As a pastor, I assure people that their loved one is in a better place. But as a daughter, missing her mother, I cried out "Where are you, really?"

We know the feeling of anguish and loss, don't we? We can, most of us, relate to these women who went early that morning to anoint Jesus' body. We know what it feels like to want one more time to touch our beloved, to hear their voice, to smell the scent of their skin.

What else could these women could they do? Where else would they want to be? It was something to do. It was a loving, caring, compassionate, last act of physical touch they would ever have with Jesus, their beloved.

Yes, we are told they go to anoint him because it is proper and there wasn't time on Friday when he died because Sabbath was upon them and they could do nothing then.

But let's not fool ourselves. The human emotions are strong and compelling and when we lose someone we love, we are drawn to where they are – for a while anyway – as we come to terms with the new situation we are in; that is, they are gone, and we are left missing them.

So, the word of the two men dressed in dazzling clothes, there in the empty tomb, would be perplexing, confusing, and totally amazing, as well as unbelievable!

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" They asked the women.

Good question, isn't it? Numerous times, I found myself at my mom's grave and then would stand there and find that talking to her there seemed rather meaningless. It was comforting to sweep the headstone, to pull weeds and to think about her, but it was almost like someone was saying to me "why are looking for the living among the dead?"

But let's be real here. This is about as far as it goes in comparing our own experience with the experience of the women that Easter morning. Because, while our emotions and theirs are the same, because we are all human, as they were, the body that was missing, the tomb that was empty was Jesus', and it wasn't quite the same as what we go through now.

If we think the friends of Jesus were in shock because he had died, think about the shock they were in when they were told he had come back to life! Really, that is stunning, shocking, almost unbelievable news they are told.

David Lose, from Working Preacher, writes, "And, quite frankly, who can blame them? I mean, resurrection isn't simply a claim that Jesus' body was resuscitated; it's the claim that God entered the stage of human history in order to create an *entirely new reality* all together. Which, quite frankly, can be frightening.

As Anna Carter Florence says in a wonderful interview on workingpreacher.org, if the dead don't stay dead, what can you count on? Resurrection, seen this way, breaks all the rules, and while most of us will admit that the old rules aren't perfect – and sometimes are downright awful – at least we *know* them. They are predictable, a known quantity, and in this sense comforting. And resurrection upsets all of that."

So what does resurrection mean for us today? First, we who live in this 21st century, so far from that incredible morning when the women found the tomb empty, have to decide if the unbelievable is something we believe. Are we, who are so postmodern, so scientific, so factual about everything, open with our hearts and minds to believe this incredible story of God's amazing grace and power?

It's important that we think carefully about this resurrection that we proclaim as the truth and that we realize what a powerful, amazing, event it was! And even though it is hard to believe, believe we do! Because God has given us the faith in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. A plant that grows within us.

And second, once we decide again, with clear conviction, that Jesus truly died for us and that he rose from death to life for us; that the resurrection is as real as the very breath we breathe, we must think about what the implications are for us.

Sure, it's a great and wondrous thing to be assured that we will not stay put in those graves but that we too will be raised from the dead. Death has no power, no sting, for us.

But there has to be even more right there – right now. As David Lose wrote, "resurrection breaks all the rules; makes life unpredictable. We are people of routine, of the same old thing, we are the people of "we've never done it that way before." That has been our motto for years.

But with resurrection comes new life – not just after death but now – while we are still living and breathing the earthly air. But are we seeing it? Are we welcoming that new life? Are we embracing it, or do we try to bury it in the deepest grave we can dig? New life, of course, means new ways, transitions, different than before.

But don't you see it? Isaiah says it exactly. God says through his prophet, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it comes. Do you not perceive it?" Do you not see it?"

And the angels said, "Why? Why do look for the living among the dead? He is not here. There has been a resurrection! Sing alleluia and get moving! Go tell the others!"

If we but look, we do see resurrection, do we not? Isn't there a sense of new life outside as we breathe a different air that promises spring really is upon us?

We look at these beautiful flowers, blooming with color, that are signs of new life right here in this sanctuary, the fragrance floating out into the air we breathe, giving us new hope that winter is about over.

Every day, life happens. We love, we hurt, we forgive, we cry, and we laugh. We grieve and we rejoice. We develop new and meaningful relationships. We find new meaning in life and new enjoyment in the things we are given to do. We are born, we grow old, we die ... and then we live again.

The Church is very much like all of life. All those things I just said are true in the Church, aren't they? We love, we hurt, we cry and laugh. We grieve, we rejoice. We are born, we die, we gain, we lose, we do new things and we try to let go of most of the old that we don't need anymore. No, that doesn't mean old people. We love the people – young and old and in between.

But we let go of the old ways of doing, the old ways of thinking, the old ways that don't work in a new day.

Resurrection is about new; about unpredictability! Resurrection is all around us. We need only look for it, and not be looking among the dead.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the reason we can say, with deep conviction, that our loved ones are not there in their graves. Jesus' death gave us forgiveness and mercy and grace and reconciliation with God.

And Jesus' resurrection – his rising from the dead – gives us new life, eternal life, life that means we too shall rise and not be dead in our graves, that we will be where he is, as he promised.

Jesus' resurrection – the empty tomb – is the reason we cling to the faith – the hope that is more than hope, – the faith that we will see our loved ones again someday.

Jesus' resurrection means we have new life now and eternally. Why do you look among the dead?

“He’s not over here!”
He is risen as he said.

Alleluia! He is risen indeed!

© *Copyright 2019. All Rights Reserved.*