

April 4, 2010

WHEN EASTER CALLS YOUR NAME

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’” John 20:16

Bill Bryson has written a fascinating book entitled *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small Town America*. In one chapter, he tells of traveling to Hannibal, Missouri, to visit the boyhood home of the noted author Mark Twain. He described the house as a “tidy whitewashed house with green shutters set incongruously in the middle of downtown.”

Bryson said he found the home to be a disappointment. “It purported to be a faithful reproduction of the original interiors, but there were wires and water sprinklers clumsily evident in every room. I also very much doubt that young Samuel Clemens’ bedroom had Armstrong vinyl on the floor....or that his sister’s bedroom had a plywood partition in it.” The house is owned by the city of Hannibal and attracts thousands of visitors each year.

Bryson was also disappointed that he was not able to actually go inside the house. “You look through the windows,” he says. “At each window there is a recorded message telling you about that room.”

As he proceeded from window to window, he met another tourist who seemed to know a lot about the house. Bryson asked him, “What do you think of it?”

The friendly stranger replied, “Oh, I think it’s great. I always come here whenever I’m in Hannibal – two, three times a year. Sometimes I go out of my way to come here.”

Bill Bryson was fascinated. “Really?” he exclaimed.

“Oh yes,” the man went on, “I must have been here twenty or thirty times by now. This is a real shrine, you know.”

As they continued walking and touring, Bill Bryson commented, “You must be a real fan and follower of Mark Twain. Would you say the house is just like Mark Twain described in his books?”

“I don’t know,” answered the tourist. “I wouldn’t have the foggiest notion. I’ve never read any of his books!”

Visiting his shrine, but ignoring his books. Sadly, that may be a pretty good description of the way many people deal with Jesus Christ. They visit his shrines, but fail to accept him or follow him, or apply his teachings to their daily lives.

Now then, it is important to notice that Easter did not become real for Mary until it became personal, until Easter called her by name. When the risen Christ said, “Mary,” when it became a personal experience for her, then it became real, powerful, authentic, life-changing. And at that moment, Mary was resurrected too. She too received new life.

Remember the story with me. On the Thursday night before Easter, Jesus was arrested on trumped-up charges. He was brutally beaten, rushed through a fixed trial held strangely in the middle of the night, and declared guilty. The next day, Good Friday, Jesus was crucified and buried in a borrowed grave. And then on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.

The stone that had been covering the opening to the grave had been rolled away. She looked inside. She was startled to see that his body was gone. She thought someone had broken into the grave and stolen it. She was crushed, heartbroken, devastated. “They crucified him, and now they have taken his body away. How could they be so cruel?” she cried.

But then she heard a noise behind her. She turned and saw the silhouette of a man. She thought it was the gardener – that is, until he called her by name. “Mary,” he said tenderly. She recognized that voice, and at that moment she ran headlong into Easter. She realized the truth. It was Christ!

His body had not been stolen. He had risen. He had conquered death. He had defeated evil. He had come back to life. He was resurrected. She had come to the tomb that Easter morning looking for a dead body and found, instead, a risen Lord!

And with that discovery, Mary too was resurrected! No more weeping and wailing. No more heavy sighing. No more tears of sorrow. He sent her running and shouting the good news: “I have seen the Lord! I have seen the Lord! He is risen!”

On that Easter morning long ago, the key moment came when the risen Lord called Mary by name. Well, the risen Lord is still speaking, and he is calling your name and mine. Can you hear him? He is calling us by name. He is telling us that he had conquered death, and he promises that we too can be resurrected with him.

He wants to share, with each one of us, the joy and encouragement that come when he resurrects us and gives us new life.

FIRST, THE RISEN LORD WANTS TO SHARE WITH US THE JOY OF THE RESURRECTION. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb filled with despair, but Easter changed all that. It gave her an amazing, indescribable joy.

Let me tell you about Philip. He was eight years old, and he attended the third-grade Sunday school class at his church. Philip was a special little boy. He was deeply loved by his family, but sometimes society didn't quite know how to respond to Philip because, you see, he was a Down's Syndrome child. The other children in the third-grade Sunday school class didn't include him very often. It wasn't that they were mean or cruel. It was just that they were only eight years old, and they didn't understand why Philip was different. They didn't realize how special he was.

However, one Easter Sunday morning, a wonderful thing happened. The teacher came up with a creative plan. She told the children the story of Easter, and then she gave each of them one of those plastic eggs that opens up.

She said to them, "Take your egg, go outside, and find something that reminds you of new life and Easter! Put it in your egg and bring it back, and put it in our Easter basket. Then we will open them for all to see and share." The children were delighted, and they rushed outside.

Soon they were all back and had put all their plastic eggs in the big Easter basket. Then the teacher began to open the eggs.

A little girl in the class had put a flower in her egg, to show how only God could make a beautiful blossom like that. Another little girl had put a butterfly in her egg. She said she remembered that the butterfly was one of the church's symbols for Easter. A little boy had put a rock in his egg. He explained, "I knew the girls would pick flowers and stuff, so I found a rock to remind us that the stone was rolled away from the tomb."

The teacher was pleased. This was going quite well. But when she opened the fourth egg, it was empty! This upset the students. "Unfair! No fun! Somebody cheated! Somebody didn't do it right!" they complained in frustration.

“It’s mine,” said Philip. “Oh, Philip,” they said. “You never do anything right!” “I did so do it right!” Philip argued. “It’s empty because the tomb was empty! It’s supposed to be empty because Christ arose!”

There was a sudden stunned silence in the room – and then the miracle of Easter happened again. The children began to cheer for Philip. They ran to him and hugged him and patted him on the back.

“Way to go, Philip,” they said. “You did great!” “You did best of all!” And Philip beamed with joy – the joy of Easter! From that moment, Philip was accepted and respected and included and loved.

That Easter morning, those children celebrated not only the resurrection of Christ, but the resurrection of young Philip. Friends, this is the good news of Easter, the joy of Easter – that Christ came back to life, and he chooses to share his victory with you and with me – and with all the Philips of the world.

SECOND, THE RISEN LORD WANTS TO SHARE WITH US THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF THE RESURRECTION. Bishop Kenneth Goodson loved to tell the story about a famous painting of the crucifixion that was placed on display in a downtown store window in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, during Holy Week one year. He said the depiction of the blood dripping from the crown of thorns was so real, you wanted to reach out and wipe it away.

Early one morning a businessman stopped to look at the painting. He was joined by a newspaper boy making his early deliveries. After a few moments of silence, the man turned to walk away, shaking his head, tears misting his eyes, and muttering to himself, “What a pity! What a shame!”

The newspaper boy heard him, and as the man started across the street, the boy shouted after him: “Hey, Mister! Didn’t you know? Haven’t you heard? He ain’t dead anymore. He’s alive! He’s alive!”

Do you know what? Sometimes the Good Fridays of the world do indeed make us shake our heads and mutter, “What a pity. What a shame.” But then along comes Easter to remind us that there is no evil strong enough to keep Christ in the grave.

He will win! Goodness will win! Truth will win! Love will win! Ultimately, God will win! And my friends, through faith in God, the victory can be ours as well. And if that doesn’t encourage you in this journey called life, I

don't know what will. That's the joy of Easter and that's the encouragement of Easter. And that's good news! In fact, that's the best news ever!

Hallelujah! Christ is risen indeed!

The Rev. Craig S. Davies, First Presbyterian Church, Inverness, Florida