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Explaining the Unexplainable!

Matthew 28: 1-15

March 27, 2005

Easter!

The airline luggage handlers were tired. But as they unloaded what looked like just one more trailer stacked high with suitcases, they found the dead dog. Now this wasn't just any mutt. The carrier was well made. The dog looked like an expensive French poodle. She was neatly trimmed, with a ribbon tied around her neck. But the dog was dead. It was late afternoon. It had been a long day. The luggage handlers panicked. After all, who wants to be accused of killing an expensive French poodle?

So thinking fast, they called the baggage waiting area and left a message – the poodle had been misrouted. It would be arrive on a later flight and would be delivered once it arrived. Then they went to work visiting the dog kennels of the city. At last they found what looked like the perfect match. The dog had the same color, the same height, and the same features. They washed and shampooed the dog. They made sure it was trimmed just right. They took the collar, the tags and the ribbon off the dead dog and put it on the replacement.

They then took the dog to the owner's home, rang the doorbell and waited. A woman came to the door. Yes, she was the dog's owner. They handed her the cage with the poodle, but they were totally unprepared for the her response. When the woman saw the dog, a look of amazement crossed her face. "That's not my dog," she declared. "My dog was dead. I was bringing her home for burial."

One thousand, nine hundred and seventy-five years have passed since the women went to the tomb that first Easter morning. That's a long time. Many still have difficulty believing what the women claimed to have discovered. For some the whole idea sounds preposterous, like bringing a dead dog back to life. The idea of a resurrection just does not fit our understanding of reality. How can we really know that the disciples were telling the truth? Maybe someone just got the whole story mixed up. How do we explain the unexplainable?

Frank Morrison was a young skeptic. He lived in the early part of the last century. He set about to disprove the resurrection. He was going to look at all the arguments, pro and con. He was sure that once everything was written down, that once all the facts were in place the whole idea that a person could be raised from the dead would be exposed as a massive hoax. Morrison intended to demonstrate to the world why Christianity and the claims of scripture and the claims of the church just had to be wrong.

What Morrison found surprised him far more than he expected. In a little book entitled *Who Rolled Away the the Stone?* Morrison described his own journey from skepticism and doubt to faith and belief. He found the evidence was overwhelming. There was no hoax. There was no cover-up. He decided that the only explanation of the events that really made any sense at all, was that Jesus was crucified and that Jesus arose from the dead just as the scriptures said.

Morrison is not alone. I have found a number of stories of persons who thought they could disprove the stories of the resurrection, only to discover that they themselves had become believers instead.

I find an interesting parallel to Morrison's conclusion is a story told by Chuck Colson. In the early seventies, Colson was an aide to President Richard Nixon. As such, Colson was intimately connected with the details of the conspiracy that we now call Watergate. Colson writes that from the time Richard Nixon knew of the cover up plot until John Dean went to talk with the congressional investigating committee was three weeks – just three weeks. Colson notes that the persons involved in this conspiracy were well-educated, highly dedicated, professional people. They knew that their jobs, their reputations, and their careers were on the line. Some knew that if the cover up ever became public, they would be going to jail. But the lie could not be contained. Colson writes, there is no evidence . . . none . . . that the resurrection was either a lie, or simply a story produced by simple-minded, confused disciples.

Many, many years ago a very wealthy man by the name of Jeremy Bentham left a very substantial sum of money to a hospital in England. But the gift also contained one very unusual stipulation. At every meeting of the board of directors, an urn containing the ashes of Bentham was to be put on the table. And so, for more than a century, the minutes of the board of directors of that hospital, contained the notation, "... Jeremy Bentham, present but not voting."

Most of us have very little trouble believing that the resurrection really happened. What we have far more trouble believing is that the resurrection can happen and is happening for *us*. We may be completely convinced of the reality of the resurrection, but if all we have are the memories of the what happened one thousand nine hundred and seventy-five years ago, then all we have is the ashes – the residue of faith. The real question that we are confronted with, the real issue with which we must wrestle is, What does the resurrection mean to *me*? How am I today experiencing the hope of the resurrection? In what ways and times and places have we *seen* Jesus?

For some, that experience of seeing Jesus can be described as an almost overwhelming sense of the presence, the love and the goodness of God. For some that experience is just as real as knowing that another person is sitting beside us in the pew today. All I can say is, if that is your experience . . . praise God! If we had our choice that is the experience that most of us would want. It's definite . . . overwhelming . . . there is no doubt about it.

But as I have tried to be a follower of Jesus . . . as I have talked with other believers . . . that overwhelming sense of the presence of the Risen Christ is the experience of some, but not of most. So where do we see Jesus? How do we sense the presence of the Risen Christ in our midst? In the closing moments that we have together this morning, I would like to suggest four ways . . . four places where we can see the Risen Christ. Those four ways are: (1) where brokenness is being healed, (2) where God's people suffer, and (3) where God's people gather to worship and (4) where they go forth to serve.

I believe we see the Risen Christ where brokenness is being healed. We live in a chaotic, frustrated, angry, broken world. What are the stories that have dominated the news this week? Still another school shooting . . . the battle over what the dying wishes of Terri Schiavo would really be . . . the murders and the bombings that continue in Iraq. Daily we hear the stories of violence in our towns and cities. We grieve because of the brokenness that exists in our families and even in our churches.

But yet, over against all of this stands the gently working of the Spirit of God, touching, healing, bringing renewed hope. One story that many have heard is the story of Ashley Smith. Confronted with a rapist and a killer, named Brian Nichols, Smith used that time to tell him her own story and to convince him that God still had a plan and a purpose for his life. And Nichols surrendered to the authorities without any further bloodshed. Was the Risen Christ present in those moments? I believe that he was.

Jesus once told a powerful story of a father who welcomed home a wayward son. That story continues to be repeated as repentance is voiced and forgiveness is offered and sisters and brothers discover that they can walk together as members of God's family once more. That does not occur nearly as often as we would wish. Yet when it does, we can be sure that the spirit of Jesus is present bringing new life to the dead. We see Jesus when brokenness is healed.

We see the Risen Christ in the midst of the suffering of God's people. Even as the brokenness the alienation, and the separateness of our world is very real, so is the suffering that we all must endure. Sometimes that suffering is particularly because we are followers of Jesus. When we stand up for what is right . . . when we dare to say racial discrimination, or abortion, or pornography, or war is wrong, we will be criticized and ridiculed. Sometimes our suffering is because we are committed followers of Jesus.

Sometimes our suffering is simply because we are a part of fallen human race. Why do some babies die young? Why a husband is taken in the prime of life? Why do some people suffer with AIDS or with cancer or with any of a host of other diseases? I do not know. Why do

some have the misfortune to be born in the slums of Calcutta while others have the luxury of birth in the United States? I don't know. Why does injustice continues to be a. very real part of our world? Again I don't know.

But the Lent and Easter season is a reminder that God entered our world in the person of his Son, that he experienced the same trials, the same disappointments, the same rejection that we face each and every day. God, in Jesus, suffered as we suffer. God was in Jesus hanging bleeding and dying upon the cross, suffered far more than we will ever experience. God in Jesus gives us the assurance that good can come from evil . . . that life can follow death . . . that even in the midst of our pain and our suffering Jesus is there.

Paul Tournier, in his book *Creative Suffering*. writes these words, “The Christian hope which inspires me is not a thing, but a Person. Not that little thing forgotten at the bottom of Pandora’s box . . . no – a person. The person of Jesus . . . who is alive . . . and who is awaiting us beyond death,” We see Jesus, in the suffering of God’s people.

We see Jesus when together we worship. It’s true that sometimes worship just may be a private devotional experience. But worship in the best sense of the word, in the way in which the term is primarily used in the scriptures is a corporate experience. Worship is meant to be something that we do together.

Worship is turning the attention away from ourselves, focusing our thoughts on God, on who God is, on what God wants us to be and to become. Our world exerts enormous pressure asking us to think only of ourselves . . . about our wants and our wishes. We need that encouragement to look up and beyond. When we worship, when we worship in Spirit and in truth, the Risen Christ is there.

The Risen Christ is present when we leave this place to go forth to serve in the name of Jesus. I am very, very grateful for the many who are using their gifts for ministry . . . who in a wide variety of ways are reaching out to serve a lost and hurting world. I am grateful for the many who have experience the joy of seeing Jesus as you have served in his name.

We gather to worship. We go forth to serve. I see that as a holy rhythm, almost like the rhythm of breathing. We cannot simply breath in . . . and breath in . . . and breath in. Nor can we breath out . . . and breath out . . . and breath out. We must do both. We gather for worship. We go forth to serve.

How do we explain the inexplicable? I don't know that we can. I do know, that as we continue to open our lives to what God still wants to do, as we seek to reconciled and to be reconciled . . . as we trust God even in the midst of pain and suffering . . . as we meet to worship and go forth to serve . . . then we too, like the women looking for Jesus on that first Easter morning will be surprised by joy as we recognize the presence of the Risen Christ.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Amen!