

He Goes Before Us Matthew 28:1-10

The pink hues of early dawn invade the territory of darkness that was the night. The dew on the leaves along side the path accompanies the chilling air of the night. The two women walking on that path can only now make out their surroundings as the darkness lifts. Both named Mary they are on the way to the tomb of Jesus.

Why are they going? What compels them to rise in the dark of night to make this trek to see the tomb of a dead person? With the chilly air making them shiver as they walk the path what warmth do they hope to gain when they reach that grave?

Matthew doesn't tell us. What is clear is that these women are the last link to the story of discipleship in the gospel. The men were nowhere to be found. Most

of the disciples had cut and run when Jesus was arrested on the Thursday night before. Peter had been reduced to pathetic tears there in the middle of the palace courtyard having completely disowned Jesus. So the women are all that are left. We saw them last on Friday at Jesus execution looking on from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee and were particularly noted for providing for him on his journey. But here they are, still looking for Jesus, following Jesus, even after he was been laid in a tomb. They, indeed, are the true disciples. And as such they are a radical representation of Jesus agenda of subversion. In these women we see the world overturned, from the highest political power to the deepest patriarchal attitudes.

These women go to the tomb at risk of great peril. There are Roman guards there, after all! Who knows

what may happen to them? So they go together, in solidarity.

It seems that throughout history women in groups have risked great peril to pursue their just causes, especially in the worst of times, when things are the darkest. I visited your Wellington Museum, the last day it was open, to see the Suffrage in Stitches Exhibition honoring the thousands of brave women who petitioned for and fought for the right to vote in 1893. We think of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina in the 1970's, standing against the brutal state terrorism of that military dictatorship as they witnessed the disappearance of the men in their lives.

Or the fact that the Black Lives Matter movement was disproportionately lead by women, often on the front lines of protests in which the police use military tactics to push them back.

Or, just three plus years ago, we think of the hundreds of thousands of women who marched around the globe in solidarity the day after the US presidential inauguration. Resistance!

In this resurrection story, even though the conventional wisdom of the day and, sadly, still is often the case, that women cannot be reliable witnesses, that women are somehow constitutionally incapable of being trusted with important messages, it will be these women who make their way to the tomb, who will be entrusted with the resurrection message.

As these women walk toward the tomb in the breaking dawn, they have no idea what is in store for them. Suddenly, an earthquake! The guards fall away as dead men. But the women see! And what they see is incredible. They see an angel roll back the stone

covering the entrance to the tomb and sit on it. And then the angel tells the women that Jesus isn't here.

A sidebar here. This is a bit confusing. If the angel didn't roll back the stone until just now how did Jesus get out earlier? Ah, we'll never know. None of the gospel writers describe Jesus' actual rising, walking out of the tomb. The idea of a video camera placed in the tomb to record the actual rising is not the point. The point is that the disciples experience the risen Christ after he has risen. The important truth is this: "He is not here."

Yet, he is not "in heaven" as might be expected. Where is he then? The angel knows. He tells the women to go tell the other disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead. And he tells them to tell the others that they will see Jesus in Galilee. He goes before them there.

As such, he goes before us! This is what Mary and Mary discovered that Easter morning: God goes before us. God is not in the historic past, locked in some ancient time. Nor is God shut up in our personal past, along with our sins, our youth, our wasted opportunities, our dead parents and friends, our childhood dreams.

No. God is before us—in our future—as the one who will yet forgive sins, feed the hungry, make peace, wash our feet, and raise the dead. Matthew’s gospel, despite all the sober realism of a gruesome death, is really good news—even and especially for us. “Go quickly and tell his disciples,” says the angel to the women. Tell them that Jesus goes before them. Those very same disciples who failed so miserably, that very same Peter who so adamantly denied he ever knew him. The palace courtyard strewn with Peter’s tears is

not the end of the line. The past - our past - is not the determining factor of our lives. Jesus goes before us and urges us to catch up with him, if you will, to go into the future with him. I don't know what past Mary Magdalene brought with her to the tomb. Some suggest she was the woman caught in adultery who Jesus rescued from stoning. But whatever her lot her experience with Jesus before his death was an experience of restoration and healing. Now, with fear and great joy Mary has grasped—indeed, has been grasped—with the knowledge that Jesus goes before her. Her past is dead and gone; the future is truly open. Jesus is waiting for her. Jesus is waiting for the disciples. Jesus is waiting for us.

Ah, but where is he waiting? The angel tells the women that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. Why Galilee? I think it is this: the story is circular! The

future takes us to where we began. For the disciples it all began in Galilee. It is where the disciples were first called, named, sent on mission, and taught by Jesus. So we are told that the story, which appeared to have ended with Jesus death, is beginning again! Go back to Galilee where it all started. The purpose of the resurrection is not a triumphal victory as the disciples had hoped. It is not a restored Davidic Kingdom that ousts Rome from the land as the rebels had hoped. It has resulted in nothing more and nothing less than walking the same path Jesus has already trod.

Let me say it again: If we have eyes to see, as did the two Mary's, we will see the Christ going before us, walking the same path he has always trod. The angel tells them—yes, even Jesus himself tells them—they will “see” Jesus in Galilee. They are to go back to their home. Go back to the world in which they live and

have always lived. There is no promise of triumph in Jerusalem. There is only the promise of going with us in the journey of where we live now. We all are from Galilee, our own Galilee, where we come from, where we live. But we go back to our Galilees on this side of the resurrection. So we don't have to live out of the shame and guilt and sin and failure of our old Galilees. Now we return to Galilee with hope—profound hope. We go back with joy and fear as the women at the empty tomb left in joy and fear. We go in joy because we have encountered Jesus; he does go before us; he is the future and not the past.

In the end it comes down to this. Our experience with the risen Christ is a call to discipleship. But this discipleship is entirely a matter of grace. Jesus goes before us. He meets us in our Galilee. Let us then head for the road and travel into the future - a journey

full of hope, for us and all humanity. There you will see Jesus. On this Easter day, may we seek to emulate those two risk-taking women on that first Easter morn. Amen.