

“Don’t Fence Me In”

Luke 24:1-12

April 4, 2010

Smithfield Area Ministries hosted a service this morning at 6:30 AM in Sunset Memorial Gardens. The Wilson’s Mills churches weren’t quite so ambitious and our service was at 7:00 AM, and that’s what I grew up with – standing in a fenced-in cemetery behind the church at 7:00 AM just waiting for the worship stuff to end so that we could run back into the heated church for Krispy Kreme doughnuts and juice. I hated those services!

I suppose I am cynical about them because I’m not a morning person, but really, what I did not understand then is what I do not understand now. Why do so many churches start their celebration of Easter in a cemetery? And, yes, yes, I understand that Mary Magdalene, Jesus’ friend, started at a tomb. But, her situation was very different from ours. She believed with all her heart that Jesus was dead. She did not even try to soften that up with gentler words. There was no “I lost my friend.” There was no, “He passed on.” Mary saw the crucifixion happen. She did not lose Jesus – she would not have lost something so precious. Jesus did not pass away and slip off peacefully into the great beyond. He died in one of the most awful ways imaginable. Dead. As a doornail. Gone. All of the dreams that he had given them of a new kingdom – gone. All of their dreams over a savior to finally redeem them– gone. Have you ever had a dream? Something you worked for, strived for, longed for, sacrificed for? Have you ever had that get crushed, evaporate right in front of you? Have you ever found yourself in a place where all you felt was disappointment, confusion, grief, even anger? That was Mary. All that she had believed in, all that had given her hope, all that had given her faith a spark and all that had driven her her passion for seeking God’s will and living God’s will - all of that hung on the cross just as dead as Jesus. Her spirit died too as his was surrendered up. It was so dreadful and so heartbreaking that Jesus’ other followers, his so-called disciples, were nowhere to be found. Hiding out, no doubt, for fear that they would be next – a legitimate fear.

But, the women, according to Luke, did not think too much about that. And, they knew, as church women often do, that some practical issues had to be taken care of with regards to “the remains.” Somebody had to keep up with what happened to the corpse. They did. They followed it. They went with a man named Joseph who took Jesus’ defenseless body and laid it in a tomb. Luke 23:55 tells us that “they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.” They needed rest for their next task - to pretty Jesus up, make him smell really good, get him all situated and tucked into the tomb. That’s where our story picks up.

Mary Magdalene and Joanna and another Mary and other women went to the cemetery not to find hope or even doughnuts and certainly not to find a resurrection. They went for the death rights and I suppose that’s a good reason to be in a cemetery on Easter Sunday - the practicalities of death.

But, as we were reminded in one of our Lenten scriptures from Isaiah, God does not always share our enchantment with the practicalities. My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, we were told. It is true that our ways - our limitations and our prejudices and our apathy can hurt people and lead to awful things like the crucifixion, but they do NOT confine the power of God. We’re just not all that. God’s love does not end at the tomb. So, why do we look for anything that resembles God in a cemetery? Why do we look for the living among the dead? Well, like those women, we, too, are familiar with the practicalities of death

and for US once we take care of the practicalities and bake a casserole, we're done. With resurrection, God is NOT done. God tells us that we have to come to terms with not only the practicalities of death but with what keeps killing – like sin. I don't mean the sexy glamorous sins. I mean flesh and blood sin – that evil that keeps sneaking up to your doorstep demanding ongoing payment, telling you that your spirit is dead – things will never change for you and here's why. I mean the raw and bloody sin – the places you've shredded someone else's heart, or someone has ripped into yours, those seasons of poor judgment of words or conduct. It's in these days and these places of death that our sin slaps us in the face – as it should.

That's not the place we want to be – surrounded by our tombstones – the markers of death in our lives. Why do we look for the living among the dead? On our recent church survey, you were asked on what issue would you expect to find solid agreement. I would guess that we all agree Christ got up and out of that grave. We are a “Christian” church. But, I'm not convinced that we believe he's actually out of the cemetery. I'm not convinced we even want to believe that, because what if? What if God gets tired of our fencing; what if God doesn't like the space we've carved out for him, and what if without our invitation or our knowledge or our approval, God climbs the fence and starts eating the church breakfast without us. So, by the time we show up, God has had caffeine and all the sugar Krispy Kreme can provide and is demanding more from us, doing more with us, than we are willing to allow.

What if God joins with Cole Porter and sings “Don't fence me in.” In our first house, we had a little beagle mix, Peanut, who I rescued from the woods, and I put a collar on her and I put her in the back yard – a good sized back yard where my other dog was quite happy – and she was safe, two squares a day, and a five foot fence. Let's suppose I go to work. I come home and Peanut is nowhere to be found. But, the lights are blinking wildly on the answering machine. First message. We have your dog. She got out. We put her in our back yard. So, I go to get her, but by the time I get there, she's gone. The next day, still missing, but another message from a neighbor a few streets over. We have your dog. She was in our front yard, so we put her in the fence. Call us. Went to get her. Gone again. Then, two days later, someone left Peanut's collar hanging on our front doorknob but no dog. And then came the ad in the paper. Found: Beagle mix, recently spayed. Call us. As it turned out, Peanut could climb a five foot fence and wiggle out of a collar – don't fence me in. Ordinary measures meant nothing to her, and if I wanted more than just an empty collar, I would have to face that truth.

So, what if Jesus doesn't want to stay in our cemetery? What if he doesn't want to be collared by us? What if one day he decides to go over the fence? Easter morning comes and up and at 'em goes Jesus. Meanwhile, his friends come to take care of practicalities, but all they find is an empty collar hanging on the door. The stone that sealed him in, that kept him safe, has been rolled away and his body is gone! What happened? We JUST put him in a safe place. Who would take him? At first, it did not even occur to them that God was responsible for this. That was so far out of their realm of understanding – it wasn't even on their radar, and they were perplexed. We had him fenced in right here.

But, then – these two men in dazzling clothes – bleached white with sequins like Liberace, I guess – these two men are there and the women drop to their knees in fear and put their faces on the ground – their hearts beating in their throats. Those men have the most incredible word for them. . “Why do you look for the living among the dead,” and then they give the most hopeful news this world has ever heard. “He is not here but has risen.” Doesn't it just give you chills? “Don't you remember,” they go on, “that he told you he must be handed over, and be crucified and on the third day rise again.” And the women, hearing this with their

faces pressed into the wet ground begin to glance sideways at each other. Raising their eyebrows in question. Do you remember that? Yes, I think I do – He DID say something about that three days. Dare they hope? Dare they hope that something so raw and bloody could rise from the dead?

Dare we hope? Don't answer too fast. If you hope, you do set yourself up to be hurt. You will pour out your heart, and people will tell you that you are full of idle tales. People will dismiss you and think they know better. But, this is God we are talking about, and it is Easter morning. If you want to hope with me, if parts of your life and your passion and your love need to rise up from the cold of death, then you'd better stay far away from any cemetery. Why would you look for the living among the dead? You'd better get out from behind the fence – because God did not suffer crucifixion and death to stay put in any of our tombs.

And, they are all over the place – each of us has plenty of tombstones to remind us of every painful moment that the breath of life got knocked out of us. When tempers came untethered. When a relationship ended. When we lost something that gave our lives meaning. All of those times just wait for us to pay them a visit again and give them more attention and pretty them up with spices and ointments and flowers and pray for the Lord to help us warm up what is dead, dead, dead. There is all that.

And there is Jesus. No warming up there.

Tombs emptied out.

The raw and bloody rising up from the dead.

So, there is no need to look at the markers of death in your own life. Not today. Not if you claim resurrection. You don't have to stare eternally into the emptiness of a broken relationship. He is not here. He has risen. You do not have to languish in the darkness with the remains of a lost job, or lost health, or lost opportunity. He is not here. He has risen. You do not have to sugarcoat your disappointments. Or decorate your grief. You do not have to put flowers on your anger. Or soothe yourself with your rights and your opinions. He is not here. He is not in any of that. He has risen. He has risen.

If Easter is true, the good news, the very, very, very good news is that Jesus has no interest in your cemetery. He's already out of the fence. He's doing things with death that you cannot possibly imagine. He's bringing daffodils up from the just frozen dirt. He's dragging survivors out of the rubble. He's bringing beauty from the ashes we make of our lives. He's pulling us from all that would kill our spirits into the white hot presence of God, who is not behind us waiting for us to spice him up, but over the fence, ahead of us, every step of the way. Go find him and let your cemetery rest in peace.