

Easter - A - 3/23/08 – Matthew 28:1-10 – An Amazing Story – Pastor Charlie

It's an amazing story, isn't it? A tragic death ... a burial ... a guarded tomb ... women who were close to Jesus coming to anoint his body and say, "Goodbye" ... an earthquake ... a monstrous stone rolled back ... soldiers paralyzed with fear ... an angel whose appearance was like lightning ... and then the news ... "He isn't here. He has been raised. Come and see ... go and tell ... He is going before you." But how are we, who live almost 2000 years later, to make sense of this story? It defies logic; it runs counter to our understanding of life and how things work. Here's the deal: We make no attempt to explain what happened. That misses the point of the resurrection. Let's be honest: The resurrection is something that cannot be adequately explained more or less proven. Rather, it is a mystery whose truth must be experienced. So the question becomes: How has the truth of the resurrection touched your life? What's your personal experience? How has God given you new life after a personal defeat or loss? How has God raised you into living a new life?

Like those women on that first Easter, each of us has a story to tell about the resurrection, about God reaching into our lives – into the defeats and disappointments – rolling back stones, moving barriers, and bringing forth new life. Let me tell you the story of a man named Vincent Sims. He's a 47-year-old man with a disability. He's bipolar. Without his medication, his mind is not stable. He was among the chronically homeless population of Greensboro for 15 years, sleeping under bridges that cross Lee Street and the rail lines or in abandoned vans. Sometimes in hurricane weather he crawled into Dumpsters. When Sims was homeless, he medicated his mental illness by resorting to street pharmaceuticals. He'd been an active addict for longer than he'd been homeless. But all that has been changed. Through housing first and the city's effort to end chronic homelessness and the work of Mitch McGee, Vincent now has his own apartment. He's been clean for months as he walked away from his addiction, receives out-patient treatment, and volunteers regularly at the food bank at Greensboro Urban Ministry. He will tell you that a huge stone has been rolled back, that God has called him forth from what was for him a tomb of death, and that through this program and supportive relationships God has given him new life. Vincent has tasted the miracle of Easter. Christ has given him new life.

A second story involves a young man who is now in his early 40s. He grew up in this congregation. His childhood family was unstable, a divorce, verbal and physical violence, the suicide of his mother. After graduation from high school, he enlisted in the Navy and lived in Charleston. As a way of fitting in and medicating his pain, he became addicted to alcohol. After he completed his service, he returned to Greensboro and participated in 12 Step programs, some held here at First Lutheran. On days he would come to meetings, he encountered people who remembered him and who encouraged him to connect with the congregation. Through supportive relationships and counseling, he began to deal with his wounded past and uncertain present. Like Lazarus, the community of his friends began to unbind him. Jobs were hard to come by; his sense of failure lurked around every corner. But there was a growing power within him. A dream, which he believed was God-given, and a desire placed in his heart, was to pursue law enforcement. Over the course of 10 years, he struggled with balancing work and classes at GTCC, and dealing with the failures and disappointments along the way. But the dream, the passion, what he believed to be his God-given purpose drove him. Finally, the stone was rolled back; he passed all his requirements and was certified. For the first time in his life he has a job that pays a living wage and there is a sense of worth and air of confidence about him. This young man has experienced the miracle of Easter. Christ has given him new life.

Each of us has a story to tell about God reaching into the darkness of our lives, those times when all seemed to be lost, of stones being rolled back so we could see life differently and emerge from what had imprisoned us. These are the stories that the world needs to hear. While at first these stories may sound strange to our ears and foreign to our experience, we need to listen and learn for we might encounter their truth at another time, in another place, through another situation, when we stumble in the early morning darkness of life. Here's the truth: God walks with us through the darkness. God rolls back the stones that hold us captive and brings new life out of our losses. Like those women, we, too, will be surprised! Once you've experienced resurrection, once you've heard God call you by name, you have to tell your amazing story of God's power in your life. Friends, I'm no angel! But I am a messenger of God and I'm dressed in a white robe. I'm here to tell you: Christ is risen! Now go and tell your amazing resurrection story!