

## RESURRECTION DIRECTIONS

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20

April 16, 2017

Rev. Jerry Duggins

One of the things that I've really enjoyed about the He Xi exhibit and about his art in general is the use of bright colors. It seems particularly appropriate on this special day when we focus our attention on the resurrection of Jesus. Color evokes a sense of celebration. It stands in for joy.

Perhaps, you too, were a little surprised to see the painting called *After Resurrection* lack some of the brightness of the other works, and hence some of the joy. Next to *Holy Spirit Coming* it feels almost gloomy. And yet, here's another surprise, it seems to depict the scene and mood of the opening of Matthew's resurrection story.

Resurrection day began for the women with the dawn when the light is slowly slipping into the day, when maybe candles are still necessary to avoid mishap as they travel to the tomb. After the death of someone so well-loved, the darkness tries to hang on. The women are up early because they haven't finishing the task of caring for the dead. The Sabbath interrupted their preparations for the body, and now they are headed to the tomb to finish their work, to honor the dead. This is the moment that He Xi depicts in his painting, *After Resurrection*. He might also have called it *A Resurrection Not Yet Noticed*.

Isn't this where many faith journeys begin. Preachers commonly remind their people that there is no resurrection without crucifixion. The image of baptism begins with a "dying" before "rising with Christ." And if you remember our series in Lent where we talked about three different versions of the crucifixion, you may recall that death is very real in Matthew's version. Jesus' only words from the cross speak of abandonment. There is no offer of paradise to the thief who dies beside him, and no prayer for forgiveness for his persecutors as we get in Luke. There is also no attempt to build up the community of faith from the cross as we get in John's version. There is only death and abandonment with no sign of the life that is to follow.

But this is not Good Friday. It is Easter Sunday, and even if we don't yet know about resurrection, there is a light breaking across the horizon, or a candle to guide our way. Maybe we can't quite believe that God's love is real, but despair is not total, because we have this one act of love that we have committed ourselves to, an act of love that directs us back to the tomb.

And what did we expect to find there: the body of our loved one who had made our hearts burn within, who had healed our diseases, who had instilled in us hope for the future, who had satisfied our hunger, who had taught us the reality of God's love? The women went for one final opportunity to honor one who had become their very life, a task suited for the early hours of the morning.

One thing is certain: they did not find what they had expected. The two Marys are literally shaken by an earthquake and stunned by an angel sitting on the very stone that should have been covering the grave. The mood has changed from a quiet solemnity to fear.

There's nothing wrong with acts of love that honor the past. Remembering is an important part of Israel's faith in the Old Testament. It lies at the center of the sacrament of Communion. There is something so beautiful about the actions of these women on resurrection morning. In fact, Christians have consistently turned toward the cross, toward the death of Jesus as foundational for faith. We begin the journey with the affirmation that Christ died for us. This shakes us and sometimes it scares us that his love should run so deep. But we are not meant to become paralyzed by fear. For it is resurrection morning and ultimately we are not headed for a tomb, but to another place.

And so the angel says what angels always say at first, "Do not be afraid." Words that evoke hope, words that are the first sign of good news. And that news follows quickly. "You are looking for Jesus. You won't find him in the tomb, because he is alive." The angel invites them to see for themselves, to tarry by the tomb just to make sure that death had not taken hold of Jesus.

This is what we've been doing in Lent, tarrying by the cross, learning what wisdom we can from the death of Jesus. It's a necessary stop, of course, on the way to resurrection. But it's resurrection morning and the news is out that Jesus is in fact alive. So... it's time to turn away from the tomb, time for the Marys to share the news with the rest of the faithful. And this is when they first see him... see him alive!

The turning away from the tomb is a turning toward the community. This is where I think we most experience the living Christ. The road to resurrection passes through community. It is not an isolated journey. Almost no one in the New Testament does anything alone. The reasons are too numerous to go into, but here's one: When I say, "Christ is risen," and you respond, "Christ is risen indeed!" something happens to faith. The individual testimony is encouraging, but it is the communal response that makes us feel so alive.

But the journey doesn't end with the community. Together, they return to Galilee, to the place where Jesus began his ministry among them. This too is a kind of remembering, a remembering that, like communion, looks forward. Even today, we return to Galilee, to the teaching, the healing, the feeding and the miracles. We do so because Jesus was always about new life, even before his death. He was always about resurrection, about choosing a different sort of path. These are not just reminiscences, but stories that goad us into action, words that enliven us today and tomorrow.

You, perhaps, have your own Galilee, that place where you first encountered Jesus. On the road to resurrection, these are always good place to return. These are places that recall God's goodness and love, that invite us to renewed commitment to the work of

Christ. For this is the new life, to continue the work of Christ: to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to restore what is broken, and to set free the oppressed.

But even this is not the end of the journey. From Galilee the disciples are sent into the world to teach and to baptize. And what does baptize mean but to invite others into this “dying and rising with Christ.” Resurrection began in the early morning with one act of love, to honor one thought to be dead. Resurrection grew with the discovery that the tomb was empty, that Jesus was alive. Resurrection was celebrated in community and rehearsed in the memory of Jesus’ presence among them.

But its meaning, its driving force is only revealed at the end of Matthew’s gospel. At his death, Jesus experienced the abandonment of God. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.” But his promise at the end is “Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This is the new life to which faith directs us: first to the knowledge that we are not ever alone, that Jesus will never abandon us, that God’s love will never fail us. Resurrection is the invitation for each of us to experience this truth in the midst of the realities and complexities of our lives. God is there when the dawn breaks even before we realize that Jesus is alive. God’s love sustains us even as we make our way to the tomb.

Resurrection Day tells us that we are made to be whole and well, that we are made for each other to sustain one another on the journey of life. It calls us to bless the world as Jesus blessed the world. It reminds us that there is hope, there is life. It lies behind us and before us. Resurrection is all around us. It comes at us from all directions and it stays with us even as Jesus said “to the end of the age.”

Christ is risen! ... Amen.