

The Final Word

April 12, 2020

Matthew 28:1-10

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found; was blind, but now I see.” We know these words well as the first verse of the hymn “Amazing Grace.” It’s a hymn we attribute to funerals, memorial services, and death in general. Nothing can shake a tear from my family, Katie, or myself quite like this song played on bagpipes. Ironically though, nothing in this hymn really reflects it being mournful, like a dirge. It’s not even in a minor key as most songs of mourning are. It’s in a major key, and if you look at the category our hymnal places to it, it says “Thanksgiving,” unlike the section in our hymnal labeled “Lament and Longing for Healing.” If we divided this first verse up into four distinct parts, parts one through three meaning through the phrase “I once was lost but now I’m found,” we would find that 75% of the verse is reflective of what happens on Good Friday. The gracious gift of God that is salvation for those who have not earned it in the hopes of drawing in all persons from all times and places into one, unified body; this is what the first three quarters of this verse are emphasizing. What of the fourth quarter, though? What of the phrase about seeing though we once were blind? This phrase, I would argue, has a greater tie into what Easter really calls us to do: to see.

In the reading for today, we are told that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to “see” the tomb. What needs to be understood though is that the verb here, “to see,” is not meant in reference to the physical sense of sight. Rather, it is being used in the sense of “to know” or “to understand.” These women, having followed and seen Jesus’ ministry, having seen him for who he truly is, are going to the tomb to understand, to “see” the resurrection fulfilled. Sure enough, they see it in both senses of the verb. As they are going to the tomb, they witness the stone being rolled away by an angel who then sits on the stone. They witness the guards falling/fainting “as if dead.” They physically see the empty tomb as the angel explains what has happened, and later physically see the risen body of Jesus, therein understanding that Christ has risen indeed. On top of that, they understand that it is his physical body that has risen and not just his spirit. As theologian Dale Allison points out, much medieval and modern literature on the subject of ghosts and spirits dictates that they do not have feet. So, the fact that both women grasp Jesus’ feet signifies this isn’t a ghost/spirit. Jesus body has been physically raised. Why is this significant to understand, though?

Consider for a moment what Jesus went through. In Jesus’ arrest, trial, and execution, he was abused, paraded, voted on, whipped, stripped, mocked, spat upon, struck by the crowd, crucified, stabbed with a spear, and tossed in a tomb. In short, his body has been through the ringer and then some. He has experienced the worst form of punishment at yet known to humanity at that point. However, even after everything that was done to him physically, he yet lives. As Warren Carter puts it, “Raising Jesus’ body enacts life in the midst of death, justice in the midst of injustice, wholeness in the midst of brokenness. It signifies God’s life for all bodies.” Put another way, although terrible things are done to some people’s bodies, those who inflict such pain do not have the final word. Even if it seems like the tyrants of this world have prevailed, God is the one who truly has the final word.

This is also significant to understand because, as the body of Christ, as the means by which God's work is done in the world, we are charged with doing much the same as God does with the resurrection. We are charged with not allowing the tyrannies of this world to have the final word. As Christians, we are charged not only to proclaim that Christ died and rose for our sins and to spread the good news that God loves everyone. We are charged with being the voice of God in this world, therein ensuring that the oppressed, the abused, the impoverished, the marginalized, all persons who have been "beaten" in one way or another by the system in which we live, that they are shown that this is not the end of it. God has had, does, and always will have the final word.

This final point, regarding the raising up of the oppressed and marginalized, is especially important when considering what these women are told to do. At the tomb, the angel commissions both Marys to tell the disciples that Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee and will meet them there. Then, on the way back to the disciples to tell them what they have seen, they meet Jesus, who gives them the same commission. "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." In that day and age, power lay with the men in all definitions of the word "power." However, the first apostles, those first charged with spreading the word "Christ is risen" were women. Just as power has been given to Jesus after having been shown injustice, power has been given to women first, to those who were without voice and power in that day and age. This is a provocative and powerful message, that though a person might be put down in some way, the powers of this world do not hold the privilege of the final word. Only God has that power, and all persons, no matter who they are, are to be afforded equality, justice, and peace.

In short, two women go to the tomb to understand that Jesus has been raised only to be brought to the realization that it is so much more than "his spirit is no longer with us." No, his body, the thing that was brutally beaten by a tyrannical system, has been raised, a sign that what once was is not now and what is now is not necessarily what will be. God has defied the laws of nature to prove that he holds ultimate power. With that understanding, they, the marginalized and otherwise powerless, are charged as the first apostles to spread the gospel, a powerful charge in and of itself. Therefore, we as Christians come to see on this Easter Sunday that, though things might look dire, though things might not be going the way we hoped, God has the final word, and God is yet to speak on these matters. Therein, we have hope not just for our own resurrection and salvation, but hope and peace that God is yet to have his final word. Christ indeed has risen, and with that rising comes renewed hope and peace, neither of which the powers of this world can put down or keep down. Therefore, as the body of Christ, let us exclaim that Christ has risen indeed.