

Explore the Bible: Where Is Jesus?

March 29, 2017

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 16 focuses on Matthew 28:1-15.*

After Mom died, I remember wondering for the longest time where she might be. I trusted she was in heaven. But, for the first time in my life, I didn't know exactly where heaven might be.

She died too young, at 54, when I was only 31. Her death had not been expected. So many things seemed out of order about her leaving us so soon. Most of all, my entire life, when I wanted to see or talk to Mom, I knew where to find her. At a minimum, I could pick up the phone and call her. Now that she was in heaven, I had no way of contacting her.

One day, I found myself gazing up at a massive cumulus cloud pasted on the canvass of the deep blue sky. I wondered if that was where heaven might be, just on the other side of that cloud. It's disorienting when someone you always loved suddenly is taken away.

My entire preaching career, I had assured people of the hope of heaven. I had described it as a place where believers would travel after death. Now, I found myself in something of a predicament, created in no small part by what I'd promised others about heaven. I didn't know where heaven actually is located. Was it a place, after all, where I could travel to see Mom, in this moment?

Wanting to see Jesus

That's why, when reading this text, it is very easy to empathize with these two women, both named Mary, when they went looking for Jesus. Whatever

other motives may have been theirs, it's not at all difficult to believe they wanted to see Jesus one more time. Wouldn't we all?

Yet, when they arrived at Jesus' last known location, he was nowhere to be found. The angel assured them as much: "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised" (vv. 5-6). The angel went so far as to invite them into the tomb to see for themselves.

What must those words—"He is not here"—have sounded like to those women? Surely, they shot like electric bolts through their bodies.

They couldn't have known it at the time, but those two women actually were the first missionaries of the gospel, the kingdom of God come on earth. First, the angel instructed them to go find the other disciples and tell them Jesus was not in the grave, because, "He has been raised from the dead" (v. v. 7).

Then, for reasons that are God's and God's alone, Jesus made an appearance to a select few over the next several days. Now and then, when faith wanes, I've wondered why Jesus hasn't made himself physically present to me so I could believe more strongly.

A mystery to be celebrated

Yet, as time has gone by and life has been strange and hard at times, I've come to discover that faith, true faith, doesn't need physical evidence to be real. Not having seen Jesus, we are forced to discover the true nature of faith. Faith is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be celebrated.

Faith is not found in the answers but in the questions. We don't need faith for what we can see. We need faith for what we cannot see or prove empirically, to ourselves or anyone else. It was in their wanderings and wonderings that the two women were demonstrating their faith. In other

words, the fact that we even wonder where Jesus might be demonstrates at least embryonic faith.

We may sometimes feel cheated, as though the disciples got a break we have not received, because they got to see the post-resurrection Jesus. Yet, listen to Jesus' promise to the disciples, including all who someday would be his disciples, not long before his crucifixion: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29).

Unanswered questions

Again, faith is not found in solving a complex problem. Faith is found in celebrating the mystery of our unanswered questions.

The young son of a very bright engineer made a profession of faith one Sunday. As the day of his baptism grew near, his father came to see me, his pastor. He was troubled by the fact that his son was going to be baptized when he never had been baptized himself.

As we visited, he told me that he had too many unanswered questions about God. He didn't believe he could trust God until he had answers to all his questions. He looked stunned when I confessed that I also had many unanswered questions. I told him, if we could not trust God until all questions had answers, I was in deep trouble.

With eyes wide open, he asked, "You mean I can believe in God without knowing answers to all my questions?" Right then and there, he committed his life to Christ. The next Sunday, I baptized father and son in the same water at the same time.

Where is Jesus? He is not here. He has been raised! We won't find Jesus in heaven until we first find him deep in our own hearts.

“‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,’” (John 20:29).

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