

“Going Deeper”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 150 New Testament Lesson – John 20:1-10

“Listen, my child,” said (St. Francis). “Each year at Easter, I used to watch Christ’s resurrection. All the faithful would gather around His tomb and weep, weep inconsolably, beating on the ground to make it open. And behold! In the midst of our lamentations, the tombstone crumbled to pieces and Christ sprang from the earth and ascended to heaven, smiling at us and waving a white banner.” St. Francis said this as he witnessed a truth that’s most clearly visible in our mind’s eye, in our heart of hearts. He continued, saying, “There was only one year I did not see Him resurrected. That year, a theologian of consequence, a graduate of the University of Bologna, came to us. He mounted the pulpit in church and began to elucidate the Resurrection for hours on end. He explained and explained until our heads began to swim; and that year the tombstone did not crumble, and, I swear to you, no one saw the Resurrection.”¹

It’s not the “knowing” that leads us on our spiritual journey. It’s our spiritual journey that lead us to knowing – knowing Jesus; knowing Jesus, risen; Jesus, working in our lives and in the lives of those we love.

I can’t prove to you that Jesus’ tomb is empty this day, but I can assure you that Christ is risen, and if Christ is risen, well, then the tomb is empty.

If you aren’t dead certain that Christ is alive, if there’s any doubt in your heart, the place to begin is not with the facts, but with the journey. It’s the journey that makes the facts come alive; the journey allows us to make sense of this world in which we live.

It’s your spiritual journey that will lead you beyond the struggles we all face to the blessings we all crave, regardless of the facts, regardless of what you know you know about this world and how things work.

In our New Testament lesson for today, Mary Magdalene is the first to be confronted with a real down-to-earth problem, a struggle that sets

¹ Nikos Kazantzakis’ Tale of St. Francis, quoted by John Shea in Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography (Chicago, Ill.: The Thomas More Press, 1978), 69.

her on a spiritual journey toward a real, bona fide miracle, the miracle of the risen Christ active in her life.

John tells us that "Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple....and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb...'"

Can you imagine going to the gravesite of a loved one and seeing that somebody took the body? I mean, that's what Mary sees. Someone took Jesus' body! That's a fact, from Mary's point of view. That's as far as she went in the beginning.

What are some of the facts of this world that keep people from going deeper in their spiritual journey? Maybe you're convinced that prayer only makes people feel better; it doesn't really make a difference in the end.

Or maybe you're like, I don't have time for church most Sundays; there's not enough there for me; I work too hard all week – for many people, that's a fact.

Or maybe you're certain there is no real Heaven; it's just a nice thought that people cling to before they die – fact? Maybe, maybe not? Seriously, this is the place to come and find out, the place to come to go a little deeper in your spiritual journey.

So what holds us back? Well, remember what Mary said to the disciples – that "they have taken the Lord" She just assumes that there is some outside force working against them. Similarly, aren't we sometimes just certain as can be that there's some outside force getting in the way, when really, it's often us standing in our own way.

What is it that seals off from the miracles that God is ready to work on our behalf. What are the stones in our lives that have rolled back over the tomb, blocking us from going deeper, from seeing visible evidence of God's presence in our world and in our lives? What stones get in the way of our spiritual growth?

Maybe it's the stone of indifference, no motivation to take the next step; or worse yet the stone of arrogance, being so overly sure of what we know we know that the possibility of anything new just dies away.

Maybe it's the stone of bad habits or compulsive behaviors, which really just block us from being in the right place at the right time. Guilt, insecurity, misunderstanding, and grudges can all get in the way of our spiritual growth and God's hidden blessings.

And there's only one way to get around these stones – these boulders – in our lives. And that's to go deeper in our spiritual journey, in spite of the facts – in spite of how real our guilt and insecurity is, how valid our grudges are, how much our bad habits seem to be all fun and fulfillment, when really they're not.

Despite any stone that's blocking our spiritual progress, God is beckoning us to go deeper – to look deep into the whole that only Christ can fill in our lives, and in that, to come away with a knowledge that goes beyond the facts – a faith that can break down any barrier to God doing a new thing in our lives – in your life.

But, for us to experience God's blessings, we need to work with God in life, we need to go deeper in our spiritual journey until we see that God is on our side, that God is bringing good things to life.

The story goes that a guy named Jacob finally gets fed up with life. He's working two jobs and still he can't make ends meet. He's so desperate that he decides to ask God for help. He goes to church and begins to pray: "God, please help me, if I don't get some more money I'll never make it. Please let me win the lottery."

The day of the drawing comes and somebody else wins it. Jacob goes back to the church. "God, please let me win the lottery. My house payment's due, I've got three kids to put through college, and my car's on its last leg."

A second lottery drawing comes and goes and still Jacob has no luck!! Back to church he goes. "My God, why have you forsaken me!?! I've missed my house payment, the car's broke down, and the kids need sports equipment for school. Why won't you just let me win the lottery this one time so I can get my life back on track?" Suddenly there is a blinding flash of light as the heavens open and Jacob is confronted by the voice of God: "Jacob" says God, "Have a little faith and meet me half way on this one, buy a lottery ticket."

If we're going to experience the miracle of God working in our lives, we have to have a little faith and meet God at least half way. Scripture tells us that Peter and the other disciple more than met God half way. In setting out on their journey toward the tomb, John tells us that "the two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first." Can't you just see them racing toward the tomb, toward the risen Lord, moving as fast as they can?

John continues, saying, the other disciple "bent down to look in (the tomb) and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in." While Mary allows "the facts" to seal her off from God, the other disciple simply holds back.

And often we hold back, too, don't we? What are you holding back on, right now? What are you missing out on in life? What might be possible if, instead of holding back, we approached our own spiritual journeys with the same sense of excitement, commitment, and pour abandonment shown by Peter when he approached the tomb of Jesus, the actual site of Christ's resurrection? What might God lead us to achieve or overcome by going deeper in our spiritual journey?

Scripture tells us that when "Simon Peter came ... and went into the tomb ..., he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself."

That's what we're missing out on by not going deeper: actually seeing evidence of Jesus alive and working in the world – Jesus, having rolled up the burial cloth, which logic tells us no grave robbers would ever have been so careful to do.

For anyone here uncertain about the fact that Jesus rose from the dead and is at work in our lives, there's your proof – the rolled up cloth. And that proof – like all the other historical evidence of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection – gets you nowhere.

It gets you nowhere, in and of itself. Because whenever we approach Jesus with proof, we're actually holding back our faith, we're going backwards in our spiritual journey – literally, approaching our journey backwards.

It's not facts that lead to faith, but rather it is our faith that finally allows us to make sense out of the facts, allows us to go beyond the facts of this world to the hidden blessings of God. We know this by what happens next at the empty tomb of Jesus. John tells us that when the other disciple finally went into the tomb, "he saw and believed; and as of yet they did not understand the scripture, that (Christ) must rise from the dead" – he saw and believed before he understood.

Logic is what tells us that we need to know and understand before we believe. But Scripture tells us that the disciples saw and believed before they understood. It turns out that understanding and knowledge about Christ, it's only accessible through faith.

That's what's really necessary in our lives for God to work miracles: faith. First we step out in faith that Christ is actually working in our lives and then we come to believe. And in that belief, the facts of this world begin to make sense to us in a deeper and more meaningful way.

This is why, for Christians, the Old Testament is understood in a richer and deeper way through the lens of Jesus, life, death, and resurrection. I'll touch on that more next week.

But for now, if you're not seeing evidence of Christ, if you're not experiencing the miracles of the living God, you might look to see what stone is blocking your view, what habit or thought or feeling is keeping you from going deeper in your spiritual journey.

No matter how involved you are in this community of faith, we can all go a little deeper when it comes to our spiritual journeys. Scripture tells us that it was "on the first day of the week while it was still dark," that the disciples came to believe in the risen Lord, came to accept – and expect – the miracle of God alive and active in the world, even right after their darkest moment, Jesus on the cross.

If there is any darkness in your life, maybe, just maybe, the light can be found on the first day of the week – on a Sunday, or on whatever day and time you're able to come alongside a community of faith, a gathering of fellow seekers, willing to journey with you a little deeper in our search for the risen Lord. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We gather, O God, in your presence to rejoice in the light of the empty tomb. The stone has been rolled away both from the mouth of the tomb and from the depths of our hearts.

We have learned to live in the power of the risen Christ. We have grown daily in the presence of our risen Savior.

Some of us, however, have also found ourselves in a long winter of the soul. We have struggled to breathe in the chilly wind of adversity.

We have been unable to grow anything in the barren fields of doubt and fear. We have trembled and shivered as we have struggled to sense the warmth of your love.

We come to the empty tomb with an expectant hope in our hearts and the prayer of faith on our lips. We are confident that you are about to do a new thing, O God.

We believe that the stone which we struggle to move ourselves, is about to be blown out of its ruts. We look for an encounter with the risen Christ, and to that end we rise up in worship, and wonder, and faith, in you.

We praise you, Mighty God, and thank you for your blessed son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.