

Ahead of Us—Back to Galilee [Scott Kinder-Pyle]

Psalm 118:1—2; 14—24

Matthew 28:1—10

Jesus got his steps in. During his three-year time of active ministry, it's been estimated that he walked approximately 3,125 miles—with most of his footsteps falling on the one-thousand square miles of the region known as the Galilee of the Gentiles. And what's intriguing to me is that, according to Matthew's Gospel, in today's reading, the resurrected Jesus intends to go back there. Why? Why, after being put to death in such a public and shameful way in Jerusalem, return to the place of such meager beginnings? Why not show up on the doorstep of Pontius Pilate and say, *'Ta Da. Thought you had me, didn't you?'* Why not barge into the courtyard of High Priest Caiaphas, who accused Jesus of blasphemy, and tell him he's not so tough after all? Jerusalem is where the rehabilitation of a reputation needs to happen. It's where the confrontation and the turnaround need to happen. And yet—

“Do not be afraid; I know that you're looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him. This is my message for you.'”

And what's the message? The message, at least in part, is that Jesus will not be confronting Caiaphas or Pilate in the power-center of Jerusalem any time soon. On the contrary, is anybody up for a trip to Galilee? Let's go. Galilee, to be sure, had been Jesus' home territory for three decades. And many of his most intimate connections with the disciples were forged there. But my sense is—the Resurrected Jesus knows that Galilee is where questions are going to be allowed, encouraged and prompted—and where the fear of asking them will soon fade over time. So how about us? Wouldn't you like to tag along and explore some questions of our own?

I once heard a story about an ice cream parlor, and how while standing at the counter, waiting to pay for her ice-cream cone, a woman (maybe her name was Mary) noticed another customer entering and standing beside her, waiting his turn. It was *Paul Newman!* It was this famous actor with piercing blue eyes, and taken aback she stared at him from the side as he ordered his own double scoop... until finally, he turned and said ‘Hello!’ She couldn’t remember how or if she answered, but rushed outside and sat in her car, sort-of overwhelmed with the brush with celebrity. But then, regaining her composure, she thought, ‘What’s the big deal...’ and realizing that she didn’t have the ice cream cone that she had just paid for, she re-entered the store, hoping to see it waiting for her on the countertop or in the hand of the helpful clerk. Instead, before walking out the door, Paul Newman offered this broad smile and said, “You put it in your purse.”

Now, let’s make the leap: if you and I and this woman named Mary are utterly bewildered by a happenstance meeting with a famous personality, imagine the bewilderment that’s being described in all four gospel accounts. Matthew, as we’ve heard, mentions the combined feelings of “*fear and great joy.*” Mark 16:8 says the women “fled from the tomb for terror and amazement had seized them.” Luke 24 refers to they’re being “*perplexed*” in verse four, “*terrified*” in verse five and in verse 41, check it out, “*disbelieving in their joy...*” Then, not to be outdone, John’s Gospel depicts Mary as confusing the risen Christ with a gardener; and subsequently we have the story of Thomas and his serious doubts. The message, you see, is not ‘*Alright Everybody! Shape Up! Get with the Program!*’ What Jesus says is ‘*I’m going back to the familiar place of Galilee—and there I’m going to give you the space and the time to ask questions and to express your doubts.*’

Is the world ever going to change? Do we need to pay attention to all the chaos happening around us. Yes and Yes. But what won't help is if you and I come out of the Easter Experience believing without a doubt. Let me say that again in another way. Faith in Christ Jesus, without doubt, is not faith. Moreover, if Matthew 28:16–17 is preface to our mandate as disciple-making disciples, listen again: ***“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted”***—or another way to translate the Greek there is ***“they worshipped him while doubting...”***

“Easter is special,” says the contemporary politician.

“...and it's one of our favorite days. It's one of our favorite periods of time. We're honoring Jesus Christ... We're bringing religion back in America. We're bringing a lot of things back, but religion is coming back to America. That's why you see the kind of numbers that you see.”

And here we go again. What's new here. Just another politician, like Pilate or like Caiaphas, trying to manipulate the masses. Listen: on the day of Jesus' Resurrection it doesn't appear as if he is striving to *bring religion back*; and he doesn't seem very interested in the poll numbers.

When that first Easter Experience took place with the women at the tomb, the Roman Empire already had any number of gods and goddesses and they had the wherewithal to channel that religious devotion into guarantees of wealth, health and prosperity. Faith in Christ is not like that. Faith in Christ, in fact, ought to bewilder and disorient that kind of religion. ***“Suddenly,” says verse two, there was a great earthquake*** and then in verse nine, ***“Suddenly Jesus met them and said ‘Greetings!’*** Those two ‘SUDDENLY’S’ say everything we need to know—which is simply and mysteriously, God intends on RELATIONSHIP—AND IT’S GOING TO BE A RELATIONSHIP THAT KNOCKS YOU DOWN.

Fred Craddock, a well-known preacher in the Church of Christ, once told the tale of a congregation to which he belonged; and this church had a 15 year Easter tradition of decorating their sanctuary with 500 lilies. 500 lilies! Beautifully arranged in the shape of a cross! And each of these individual potted flowers had been given in memorial. That Sunday's insert included the names of 500 persons who had died, and those who grieved were asked to donate five dollars for each lily. And for fifteen years the tradition continued without a hitch.

Until there was a hitch. In the sixteenth year, a woman, intending visit a friend in hospital, wanted to take one of the lilies to cheer up the room. And after asking permission, she approached the bank of beautifully arranged flowers and chose one from among the 500. But then, with a shocked tone of voice she announced to those who had lingered in the pews, "They're plastic!" Well, the next thing you know committees are meeting and huddles of disaffected members are forming; and someone said, "But we gave five dollars for each lily; and if they're plastic they might be the same ones that were used last year, and the year before that." Someone else did the calculations: "over fifteen years at five dollars a lily—that's \$37,500 for the same lilies!" And so, the minister tried his best to defend the practice. He explained that the donated money had been put to good use in support of the transient population. And then, not leaving well-enough alone, he ventured a theological rationale. "After all, he said, "the plastic lilies are more appropriate to Easter because they always bloom. They never die."

Hmmm. Don't you wonder about that? Don't you have questions? I hope you do.

Jesus, a native of Nazareth in Galilee, died the other day. And he died because he wasn't plastic. He wasn't manufactured from a harvest of crude oil. He wasn't a petroleum product. He wasn't bought and he wasn't sold. He died. And because he died, he blooms.

It might be nice if you and I could pool our gas-money and work up the resolve to stand in the TSA lines at the airport, and to eventually make our way to Galilee. It might be nice. But it would also be a little disorienting because, once there, we'd probably spent most of our time in a bomb shelter.

We don't have to go to Galilee literally. We could die and bloom right here.