

“You’re Invited to a New Beginning”

(Matthew 28.1-10)

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Introduction

When we left this story on Friday we were at an execution... and the Jesus Movement had failed. They *did* follow Jesus to Jerusalem, but when the moment of crisis came... they ran away. Their fear was too strong and so they chose self-protection over picking-up the cross. On Friday the Jesus Movement is absent – (apart from a small huddle of grief-stricken women in the distance) – it’s failed.

But look at where we begin the story in our First Reading today. (Acts 10.34-43) It’s the lead disciple Peter – (you’ll remember him... he’s the one on Thursday night who publicly denied ever having known Jesus... *three* times) – Peter is standing up in front of a crowd, in the courtyard of a Roman centurion, proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ, Lord of all! Clearly, something’s happened! And get used to it... because this brand of story is repeated as the opening reading on every Sunday through the season of Easter. ¹ Stories of the Jesus Movement serving it up... to the Temple elite... to Rome... to anyone who’ll listen. They’re in Jerusalem, in the streets, amongst the crowds whether at the temple or the markets... indeed wherever there’s a gathering of people... saying, *‘This man Jesus of Nazareth, who **you** killed, is the Christ... the Lord of all!’* And it doesn’t matter what the authorities do... they threaten, they jail them, they even kill some of them²... these followers of ‘The Way’ won’t stop.

They’re *following* Jesus... risking their lives to spread the vision... and if it means accepting execution (‘picking up their cross’)... then they’ll do it.

Something BIG has happened here. The difference between where our story finished on Friday and where it begins today is huge. Something’s happened! The movement that had failed is back... even when their master has been eliminated... they’re back and operating with a courage and vitality like never before.

¹ For the first 6 weeks... and then we focus on the Ascension for the last week (7).

² Starting with Stephen.

What Happened – Christ is Risen

Something's happened all right... and as people of faith we know what it is – the Resurrection!

The established order could execute Jesus of Nazareth, but they couldn't extinguish the Christ... the Son of Man. The tomb can't contain him. And now the risen Christ is out there... alive... present to those who love him... roaming around stirring up more trouble than ever before. (It's a nightmare for the authorities!) He's doing just what he said he'd do³ – he's breaking open the prisons that were once people's lives, and setting them free!

That's what's happened! The Resurrection changes everything – it's *the* BIG event...

But there's something else too... Something else happened...

What Happened – The Disciples Started Again

The Movement, the disciples, came back from their failure... they pushed through their fear, their guilt... and they started again. They dusted off the shame and this time... this time... they *do* pick up the cross and follow. This is critical to the story.⁴

On the Sunday those faithful women go to the tomb. *Matthew* has no idea *why* they do it⁵ but something in them won't let the hope of Jesus go. So they go to the tomb... and it's empty! *Matthew* dresses the story up with an earthquake, collapsing guards and an angel... who delivers specific instructions. The women go back and tell the men... the inner circle... In the other gospels, the men not only leave the safety of their locked rooms, they run to see.... but in *Matthew* it's all a bit formal and bland. And that's poor story-telling... because *this* is a real earthquake... the men that had a day previous run away, now run back into the action!

³ "The Son of Man comes... to give his life as a ransom for many."

⁴ Although we rarely speak of it.

⁵ He obviously doesn't think much of Mark's reason – that they went to anoint the body – so he says nothing but the very lame, "they went to look at the tomb."

Amongst the angel's words is the instruction for the disciples to *'go back to Galilee'*... that's where they'll see Christ again. *Matthew* is copying *Mark* in this⁶, but it's an odd detail... For in the resurrection appearances – taken across all the gospels – it isn't by any means agreed that that's what the disciples did.⁷ Yes *some* of the appearances *are* set in Galilee, but the others are in Jerusalem, and when the book of *Acts* takes up the story, they're in Jerusalem and look like they never left. So we wonder if *'go back to Galilee'* is really saying, *'Go back to the beginning... to where we first met... and make a new start. Don't despair – this time you will find the courage to pick up the cross and follow me to the end.'*

It would make sense... because whether they ever physically returned to Galilee or not, this fresh start, this new beginning... is exactly what the disciples make. They come back to the Movement, to the following of the Way of Jesus, with more passion and courage than ever before.

Certainly, without the resurrection event the story *is* done and dusted... over... and Jesus would at best have been a small footnote in Jewish history (if remembered at all). So the Resurrection *is* the BIG explanation of *'what happened'*. But this too is true and it matters – the disciples returned and tried again. Yes, of course this change of heart is the work of the Holy Spirit. But something good and true in these ordinary women and men said YES. These people who share all our human weakness and fear... this movement of poor uneducated rural labourers who had found it all too much and run away... now decide they have enough courage and enough faith to try again.

Judas

And this is where poor Judas Iscariot features once more...

His work of betrayal was terrible, but was it any worse than the betrayal, the running-away of all the others? Was it unforgivable? If Judas had presented himself in repentance before the risen Christ what would have happened? Christ would have forgiven him and called him to 'start again'. There can be no doubting this.

⁶ Luke changes it and John doesn't mention it at all.

⁷ Only *Matthew* has it this way in a neat but very unconvincing ending to the gospel.

But Judas doesn't – he hangs himself in shame and remorse. This act is worse than the betrayal. And in this Judas is THE failed disciple... and the story of his failure highlights the courageous choice of the others.

What Happens Next

So, what happens next? The Easter stories *are* all over the place like a dog's dinner – they don't tell us what we'd like to know. And when *Acts* takes up the story from the ascension onwards... the story of the early years of the church... the record is more ordered but certainly not the careful history we'd try to write today.

Nonetheless, we know enough, and we have the simple observable historical fact, that the church grows and spreads like a tough vigorous weed. Despite the shame of Good Friday, the Jesus Movement did not fail. Its heartbeat blipped for a day or two, but it didn't die. It branched out through the Empire with great courage; it endured significant opposition and persecution; it flourished without the backing of the rich and powerful elites... and it went places that no one would ever have thought possible.

The Christian missionaries were clear about 'how and why'... Christ was risen, Christ was alive and present with them, his Spirit in them... what was there to be afraid of? But looking at them from this place – the lukewarm half-hearted church of the 21st century and aware of my own participation in this our current failure – I want to say to them, '*Yes... but you also had the guts to come back from failure and shame and try again.*'

Church and Personal

We honour and ritualise this movement of *making a fresh start*... every year in the church.

On Maundy Thursday as we end the liturgy, we pack everything up... we symbolically close the church down and turn off the lights. On Good Friday we meet in desolation – Jesus is dead and the movement has failed. The last action is the priest 'fleeing the scene' – no ordered procession but he or she leaves in disarray... running away.

But on Easter Sunday, emboldened by the Resurrection, we have the courage to return... and make a new beginning. The flowers are back, the sanctuary is decorated and the candles and linen fresh; we ring the bells and the cross sits prominent proclaiming... this is our Way! We're starting again.

Conclusion

Today... after everything we've experienced – procession, meal, execution and failure – today we're invited to make a new beginning. The question of Holy Week and Easter isn't *'Do you believe?'* but *'Will you be part of this? Will you join this Movement, walk this Way? Will you make a new beginning?'*