

ARE YOU RAISED WITH CHRIST?

April 24, 2011

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

Palermo, Italy is the hometown of Rosalia Lombardo. Rosalia is a beautiful little girl. She has a porcelain face with the finest, most delicate features. Across her forehead her blond hair curls, and behind her head those blonde tresses are tied up with a pink ribbon; a ribbon that matches her elegant dress. Rosalia is just two years old. She is forever two years old because, you see, Rosalia died of pneumonia. She died 90 years ago last December 6th.

When she died her father, a general in the Italian army, was so grief-stricken that he wanted to have her body preserved, perfectly preserved, so that he could keep her and treasure her forever. So he found an expert in new embalming techniques, one Dr. Alfredo Salafia. And Dr. Salafia took Rosalia's body, and he embalmed it, and then he placed it in a glass-topped casket. And to this day, Rosalia Lombardo lies in repose before the altar in the chapel in the catacombs at Palermo's Capuchian monastery. The monks of that monastery love Rosalia, and they care for her. So Rosalia sleeps in sweet, gentle death in that chapel.

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I always hated it when we had to go and visit Aunt Mary and Uncle Walter. At least I always hated it until I found the family Bible in their house. It was the most entertaining thing in that house for a kid. Can you imagine? It was an illuminated Bible. That means that the first letter of every chapter in that Bible was adorned with multicolored images in gold leaf. And it was an illustrated Bible. Through the pages were interspersed full-color pictures of the art of the masters, illustrating the scripture where they were placed. In that Bible the family history was written on pages that separated the Old Testament from the New. There were recorded all the family births, and baptisms, and marriages and deaths. And then, tucked inside the back cover, there were several envelopes: old, yellowing, brittle envelopes. And each envelope had a name on it: Mother, Father, brother Courtney, Uncle Will. And inside of each one, there was a lock of hair, a piece of each one of those members of the family – many of them long dead – a piece of them to hold on to.

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

You know, death is our most certain fate (as they say, none of us gets out of this world alive), but it's also our greatest fear. After my Mom's cancer was diagnosed, she had a phrase that she would say to us over and over again, so much so that it became her mantra. Her phrase was this: ***No extreme measures***. But, two days before she died, that phrase changed. And, in an unforgettably poignant way, she looked at me and said: ***I don't want to leave you guys***.

What does death mean to us? How do we understand it? And, maybe more importantly, how do we make peace with it? Well, there are several ways you know. We can deny death and its power. That's why we have a funeral industry in large degree; so that death becomes easier and

more beautiful. It's what Rosalia's family did, isn't it? They denied death by preserving her little body so perfectly.

So we can deny death and we can also avoid death. Maybe you've heard of the Bioscleave Fun House. Has anybody heard of this place: the Bioscleave Fun House? Well, it's not a big place. It's just a little house on Long Island. But it is painted with garishly brilliant colors, and every wall and every floor and every angle in the place is off kilter, and nothing matches up – so that you have to think about everything that you're doing and seeing in the house. And what the owners have decided is that if your mind is so overstimulated with every step and with every waking moment in this house, you could never die. So if you just live in a house like that, you can live forever!

Sometimes we obsess over death and it paralyzes us. It makes us stop, and there are people – yes, indeed – there are some people who have even, because they were so obsessed with death, committed suicide.

And then there are those who face it with disbelief and with grief. They face it.

After the sabbath, at the first day of the week, as day was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary faced death. Now remember, these two Marys were not members of Jesus' family. These two Marys had chosen to embrace Jesus. Jesus chose them to be His disciples and they chose to follow Him and to live for Him.

So these two Marys...these two Marys who had been chosen by Jesus and who chose Jesus to be their own...these two Marys...these disciples...went to Jesus' tomb at dawn on the first day of the week. Now Matthew tells us that they did not go to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body. Mark and Luke tell us that that's why the women went, but Matthew doesn't. He says they simply went to see. They simply went to absorb the horrible truth, the whole horrible truth of what had happened to their Lord, hoping against hope that it was all a bad dream. They went so that they could be close – physically close – to the broken and lifeless body of their Lord. They went to the tomb to weep and to grieve, not only for what had been, but for what might have been. They went so that they could pour out their love for Jesus; love that they knew now He could never again return to them.

In three short days, everything about the world that these two Marys knew had been changed. That is, you know, what loss and grief do to us. They change everything. They shatter our world. They disconnect us and make all things that once fit together disjointed. Our perspectives, our priorities – all that is precious to us – it's undone...it's different...it can't be right.

So, going to the tomb to try to make some sense of it, what happened instead was that, hearing and seeing what they saw and heard there, only added to their sorrow. When they arrived, there was an earthquake, just like the earthquake that had rattled their world when Jesus died three days before. And then an angel appeared, an angel who was white and bright like lightning. And the angel took the stone that sealed Jesus' tomb and rolled it away. And then the angel looked at the two women – at the two Marys – and the angel said:

Don't be afraid. He's not here. Don't you know? He has been raised. If you don't believe me, look at the place where He once lay. He's going ahead of you. He's going to Galilee. So, go quickly and tell His disciples that that's where you will find Him.

As they ran to do just that, to follow the angel's instructions, Jesus Himself met them! And He opened His arms and He said, ***Greetings!***, like it was the most natural thing in the world. And they grabbed His feet, and they held on tight, and they worshipped Him.

Is it true? Is it true? That's what they were thinking to themselves. Can it be that Jesus is raised from the dead, or is this encounter just the product of our overactive imaginations? That's why they grabbed His feet, you know, and they held on, literally, for dear life. They weren't going to let Him get away ever again.

Is it true? In the fifteenth chapter of first Corinthians the apostle Paul writes: ***But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.***

Is it true? For centuries we have held on to the Shroud of Turin because it appears for all the world to be an ancient photographic image of the resurrection. And now, with modern science, we have analyzed it, and we have carbon dated it, and we've tried to figure it out and to make sure if we can – with all of our understanding and abilities – that the thing is real...that it is the proof that we so much desire to have.

Is it true? This is the great question of Easter. ***Is it true?*** Is Jesus' body raised from the dead? Across the church, we can't decide what we'll say to that question. Some corners of Christianity make the bodily resurrection a non-negotiable article of the faith. It's a way we separate the true believers from the pretenders. But other corners of the church say, well, you know, that's just a superstitious fairy tale, and we have progressed beyond such fantasies.

Is it true? I have no scientific evidence to offer you today. I have no physical proof. But what I can tell you today is that that is the wrong question. The question is not ***Is Jesus raised from the dead?*** No, the question is ***Are you raised from the dead? Are you raised with Christ?***

You see, friends, the Easter good news of the resurrection confirms for us that Jesus is the One. It says to us that Jesus' death was not just a saving sacrifice. Rather, it says to us Jesus' life is the substance of our salvation. Jesus' character, Jesus' courage, Jesus' compassion, Jesus' convictions are the substance of our salvation. Jesus, for us, is the pioneer. Jesus is the model. And Jesus is the goal of true humanity.

So, are you raised? Are you raised with Christ? And what in the world does that mean? Well, the apostle Paul tells us. The answer to the question is found when our lives are filled with compassion, and kindness, and humility, and meekness, and patience, and persistence, and forgiveness, and love.

Are you, are you raised with Christ?

You know, the greatest transformation of the resurrection that we can ever experience is a transformation of our minds and our hearts. It's a transformation from narcissist to philanthropist, a lover of humanity...from narcissist to theophilist, a lover of God...from lovers

of self to lovers of humanity and lovers of God...from longing for a resurrection that is our ultimate possession; that is, a guarantee that we'll never die...to living the resurrection that is our greatest compulsion...a life given always for others, and for our God

Are you raised with Christ?

Remember what the angel said to the two Marys. The angel said: ***He's going ahead of you to Galilee...*** to Galilee...so stop looking in Jerusalem. Yes, this is where He was crucified and where He was buried, but He's risen in Galilee. Jesus is risen in the place where He lived and labored, where He laughed and cried, where He served and loved. That's where Jesus is risen. Just so, Jesus is raised for us where ***we*** live and labor, where ***we*** laugh and cry, where ***we*** serve and love.

Are you raised with Christ?

Who do you live for? Who do you labor for? Who do you love? You see, Jesus is raised when we are raised...here...today.

Are you raised with Christ?

As beautiful as Rosalia Lombardo is, she is hopeless...empty...dead...the exquisite relic of broken hearts. What are you holding on to...what am I holding on to...that is like Rosalia: beautiful, but hopeless...empty...dead?

The invitation of this Easter morning is to let it go. Let God raise you with Christ. Seek the things that are above, where Christ is and, when you do, Easter becomes real.

Is it true? Is it true?

Yes, dear friends, it is true! Jesus is raised! I cannot offer you any facts to prove it, but I believe it with my whole heart. As we just sang it: ***He lives within my heart!***

And I can offer you an abundance of faith that says it is true. It is true: as true as compassion that crumbles cruelty. It is as true as kindness that overwhelms meanness. It is as true as meekness that disarms arrogance. It is as true as patience that takes away disdain. It is as true as forgiveness that defeats revenge. It is as true as suffering that conquers indifference. It is as true as love that turns death into life.

Yes, it is true!

Jesus was raised in Galilee, and He will be raised in Green Bay today...if we answer this question, this one question with certain faith...and persistent hope...and everlasting love:

Are you raised with Christ?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Charles E. Mize
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Easter Sunday
April 24, 2011