Sermon for Easter 2012 Year B

“So they went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” Was probably not what we expected to hear this morning. Yet as we discussed in this room back on January 29, Mark is a pithy story teller. He tells us what he believes his listeners need to hear to be inspired, to seek more and then to do more. Think of the new Coke commercial where the condemned man is allowed his final request of a drink only to follow that fulfilled request with an expectant “and.”

Each of our four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - have a slightly different take on the discovery of the empty tomb, and a slightly different tale to tell about those who encounter the resurrected Christ. These accounts do not line up in lock step recounts one to another, nor should they, for as any good detective can tell you stories that exactly align from one witness to the next are just that - well rehearsed stories, not what the witness really experienced. Failure for stories to line up word for word are all around us. Yet in the end we know that does not diminish their truth. Consider this story that some here may recognize.

Michael was a young man who battled mental illness and addiction. Though loved by his family, his choices led him to live much of his life on the streets. For years, he had chosen repeated homelessness rather than the requirements of living at home with his family. One winter’s Sunday morning in 2001, Michael got up to go to church at a place that had welcomed him in the past, St. James Episcopal Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. However, when he arrived the church was empty. Baffled he searched around and found a man locking up the church who explained that everyone had gone down to the big hotel on the river to worship with other Episcopalians from all around the Diocese since this was their annual convention. Michael’s face lit up as he exclaimed, “I bet my dad is there!” Michael’s father was a priest in the diocese, so when the other man heard his father’s name he drove Michael down to the convention. Michael’s father was both taken aback and delighted as the son who had been gone for so many years slid in beside him in the midst of glorious worship. After the service father and son together with Michael’s stepmother had lunch and caught up on so much that had happened since they were last together.

Michael’s birthday, March 27, was just around the corner so his father asked, “Michael what can we give you for a present?” Without hesitation Michael said, “I need shoes.” Michael explained that good shoes made all the difference in his life since life without a car meant that he had to walk everywhere. So they went and got him a pair of good tennis shoes, size 10½, from the nearby store. Michael asked to be dropped near the place he now lived. As his father drove away, both father and stepmother watched the son’s receding figure in the rearview mirror and sent up prayers of love and protection for Michael. Later that spring, Michael found his way back to Chattanooga and the church his father now served, St. Francis of Assisi, Ooltewah. For the next year and a half, Michael became part of the life of this church. His father, The Reverend Buckley Robbins, remembers happily the amount of time and work Michael gave in helping build and plant that path we call Pilgrim’s Way.

Meanwhile, back at St. James in Knoxville, a not so young man was feeling pulled to leave the life he had known and commit to following God in service to the homeless. Ron Fender decided to enter the Brotherhood of St. Gregory and leave Knoxville to serve at the Community Kitchen here in Chattanooga. His last Sunday at St. James in July 2002 was the beginning of a journey even he could not imagine. By November 2002, Brother Ron’s ministry had taken an unexpected focus that of caring for the feet of the homeless. He was invited to talk about this new ministry at the quarterly meeting of ECSET held at Good Shepherd’s on Lookout Mountain that November where Michael’s father heard him speak. No one knew that just three months later, on February 8, 2003, Michael would be found murdered in his apartment in downtown Chattanooga. This unspeakable heartbreak filled the community here intensely as this had been the very day that St. Francis was made a parish in the Diocese. For a long time grief dominated, even overwhelmed all those who knew and loved Michael, his father Buckley, and this church. Buckley, struggling with his grief, searched for some way to do something for his deceased son as that March 27 birthday approached.
One day he found himself in the shoe department at the nearby K-Mart. He went and picked out a pair of size 10½ tennis shoes. Clutching his new purchase he drove to Community Kitchen and found Brother Ron in his tiny office. Relating his story, he asked Brother Ron if he could use the shoes. As they were talking, a homeless man nicknamed Linus, as he always had a blanket with him, stuck his head in Brother Ron’s door and asked, “Brother, have you found a pair of shoes for me?” Brother Ron remembered that “Linus” wore size 10½ and said, “They just came in.” From that moment, Buckley knew that a special ministry could grow here at St. Francis. So he asked Brother Ron to come preach on Maundy Thursday. That night after Brother Ron and Buckley led the congregation in foot-washing, over 100 shoes, socks and foot care products were brought in and filled this wall. Brother Ron was in tears at the outpouring of love from this congregation.

How many here knew the story behind our annual Walk in Love Shoe Drive? How many of you were here in the early 2000’s as these events unfolded that led to this drive? The first time my husband drove Brother Ron Fender out for our Maundy Thursday service, Brother Ron explained that the drive was initially done by the church as a surprise for their priest Buckley Robbins. Buckley Robbins told me that the drive was begun as a surprise for Brother Ron. Regardless of who set out to surprise who, this is a powerful story of resurrection. This year we again collected over 100 shoes, sock and foot care products with help from some unexpected places. There is Buckley’s long-time friend who has also had a son die way too young and who sent four pairs of shoes on his deceased son’s birthday. There is the family who remains inspired by the way St. Francis of Assisi serves its neighbors and gave two car trunk loads full of shoes. And then there is the group at Garden Plaza in Collegedale who searched for a project in March to reach out to the community by joining us in collecting for Brother Ron. This past Thursday night as armload after armload of shoes were brought in and placed against this wall, Brother Ron wept in gratitude for the outpouring of love once again shown to those who have no home. Buckley Robbins, when told of the reach that this shoe drive now has from Ooltewah to Collegedale to neighboring states, gratefully reflected: “Michael would be so pleased to know that he lives on in this special way.”

Resurrection is about life that conquers death. We know that Jesus was raised because the women did not keep quiet forever in their fear. They did tell that the tomb was empty. Peter and the others did encounter their risen Lord Jesus. How else can we explain that the tongue-tied man who denied Jesus three times and then ran off in tears during Jesus’ trail ends up an eloquent preacher proclaiming Jesus’ after death appearances in the passage we just heard from Acts? So as we prepare to renew our Baptismal vows -- vows that have been made through the centuries by followers of Jesus, be they Roman Centurions like Cornelius or men and women of limited means who welcome the kindness of strangers, let us ponder: How are we entrapped by death? In what ways does death hold sway over us? How would we live if death loosened its grip on us? To what must we die before new life can come into our lives? What habits that harm the body and kill relationships with our God and our neighbor do we need to abandon? Where do we squander money, words, and actions, in ways that are destructive to ourselves and to others? What will new life look like to us?

We, who know and experience the power of Resurrection can bring new life to others in Jesus’ name. We just need to go and tell what those early followers learned: The tomb of death is empty. Jesus lives. Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

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