

A GRAVEYARD FULL OF SURPRISES

Luke 24:1-12

April 12, 2009

(THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD)

**Kind and faithful is the Lord,
gentle is our God.
The Lord takes care of those who are helpless.
When I was in need, he rescued me ...
Lord, you have saved me from death,
(from the grip of the grave)
you have dried the tears from my eyes.
You have kept me from tripping and falling,
that I may walk with you in the land of the living.**

I had a great uncle who did that, I think. He walked with the Lord -- a kind old man who walked with God. But when he was younger he walked, I think, in a different direction. Every Saturday night, in fact, he would wobble and weave his way home from a little place called Paradise, believe it or not. The Garden of East Lynn, some people called it. And there he would sit with his friends and tell little stories and talk about things people talk about in Paradise, I suppose. And all of that talking left him parched and thirsty. And since they didn't sell

root beer in Paradise, he had to settle for the other kind. Without the root.

And evidently it took a good bit of this "rootless" beer to quench the man's thirst. So much, in fact, that it left him a little woozy and wobbly. So instead of walking home by the roadside -- where he might get whacked by a truck or a telephone pole, my great Uncle Robert would take a short cut through old man Gilkerson's hayfield to the graveyard there by the Methodist Church.

And at the other end of the graveyard, he would turn left and follow the creek right up to the back door of his house. And he would go in, take off his hat, and collapse in a heap on (or near) his bed. And he'd wake up about the time all the neighbors were coming home from church on Sunday. Which didn't bother him, really. Because, as he said, once you've been to *Paradise*, church just doesn't seem all that interesting.

But ... all of that changed one Saturday night. Uncle Robert went down to *Paradise*. And he sat with his friends, talking and laughing and telling his tales. And he worked up such a thirst that it took almost twice as much of the old Barleycorn Soda to wet his whistle.

And somehow he managed to wobble and weave his way through the hayfield and over the little fence at the cemetery. And he was headed for home. Because, he said, he felt a nap coming on and he wanted to be lying down when it happened. So he was walking along, headed for home. And it was dark that night -- so dark, he said he couldn't even see his hand in front of his face. And what he could not see that night was that somebody had dug a hole right there in the middle of the cemetery. A hole about six feet deep... they say. And Uncle Robert found it. He stepped out into the night and there he went. With a thud. Nearly scared the poor man to death. To fall in a hole in a graveyard in the middle of the night... Who wouldn't be scared? But ... he picked himself up, dusted off the seat of his pants, and started pawing at the dirt, trying to climb his way out of there.

The funny thing is he wasn't the first person to stumble into that hole that evening. For one of his buddies from Paradise took that same shortcut about a half -hour earlier. And he found it, too! Somebody had just dug a new grave ... right in the middle of the cemetery. And he had been hoping and praying that somebody would find him there. So when he heard a big thud right there beside him, it kind of startled him. But then he remembered that Uncle Robert took that

same path home every Saturday night. So, he thought, it must be him.

And, mind you, Uncle Robert knew that he had fallen into a grave. But I don't think he knew that he'd dropped in on a neighbor. So all of a sudden, as Uncle Robert was trying to climb out of the grave, he felt a hand on his shoulder. And a voice said, "You'll never get out of here." ✘

But he did. He did. ✘ Poor old Uncle Robert jumped straight up out of that grave and into a whole new life.

The next day was Sunday. And Uncle Robert was the first one there. And he sat up front, right under the pulpit. Because he didn't want to miss anything, he said. And from that day on, he was a kind, gentle, warm-hearted old soul.

It kind of reminds me of something that happened a few years ago. For, you see, I haven't always dressed this way. The truth is I used to wear a blue uniform -- with a matching blue hat and a badge on my shirt. I was one of the proud, the few ... a United States Cub Scout. And one day Mrs. Benear, our den mother told us, that Mr. Benear was going to take us on an overnight camping trip, not too far from East Lynn. And we were excited. This was the kind of stuff we just lived for (we thought). Oh ... I'll never forget it. We all climbed into his

Volkswagen bus. And off we went to follow in the footsteps of the great outdoorsmen who had gone before us -- Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett ... and John Wayne, of course.

When we got off the bus, we scouted out a little place down by the creek. And we put up our tents ... and cooked our own grub on an open fire, just like the pioneers, on the end of a stick. And when our weenies were done, we popped them into a Heiner's bun and covered them all with Mr. Benear's homemade hotdog chili. And then we speared our desert with the very same sticks and toasted marshmallows on the fire. And it was wonderful! Better than we ever imagined! We were men. We were. And we knew that, of course, because our moms weren't there. It was just us men, out in the wild.

We didn't know it then, of course, but we were just over the hill from what some folks back home call "the government cemetery." And when Mr. Benear told us that, we kind of wished that he hadn't. Because it was awfully dark that night. One of those nights when the moon and the stars are nowhere in sight and you can't even see your hand in front of your face. And the word around school (from the older kids) was that the government cemetery was haunted.

None of us believed that, of course. Because we were Cub Scouts. And Cub Scouts are strong, and brave, and courageous. They are. So they just don't buy all that stuff about boogers, and goblins, and witches and such ... At least, not during the day. But at night, when it's dark, it's hard to remember what you believe. ☹️ So that night we all huddled together there in our tent. And some of the fellows told ghost stories -- not to be funny or mean or anything like that, They were just passing on information. And some of the stories were about things that had happened just over the hill in the Government Cemetery. There was, in the very center of that big old graveyard, a statue of a soldier. And the soldier was riding a big grey horse. And late at night, they said, when it's really dark ... you can hear that horse whinny and neigh. As if it was a ghost. But we were Cub Scouts, mind you... so we didn't believe it.

But that night, as we lay there with our sleeping bags pulled over our heads, we heard an old hoot owl let out a hoot. And it sounded just like a big stone horse had just come to life. So we huddled together as close as we could (the way real men do when they get real scared).

And one of the fellows, whose father was the pastor at the Baptist church, started reciting the 23rd Psalm. And just

when he got to the part that says, ***“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,”*** an old hound dog howled at a porch light or something. And somebody jumped up and said, “It’s a werewolf!” And that did it. Six little cub scouts, all tougher than nails, shot out of that tent as if we’d been shot out of a gun. And we went straight into Mr. Benear’s tent. Nearly gave the poor man a heart attack. And we all huddled around him, six little boys, just as close as we could. And the dog howled again. And the hoot owl hooted. But we weren’t afraid ... because he was there with us.

Imagine! Finding comfort (and strength and assurance) in a graveyard, of all places! When everything is so dark.

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Mary Magdalene walked with the Lord. A kind and compassionate woman she was -- who walked with Jesus and all his disciples. But (like Uncle Robert) there was a time when she walked in a different direction. And then she met Jesus and everything changed. Because Luke says Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary -- all the things that left her broken and bruised and hurting inside. And all that kept her from being the person God created and called her to be no longer had control of her life. She was free -- as if she stepped from the darkness into the light. And into a whole new life. And all because of Jesus, mind you.

And then he was gone. Nailed to a cross like an outlaw, he was. Like someone who’d done something vicious and brutal. And that was it, mind you. Jesus was gone. And Mary was there. She was there when it happened. She was there when they took his body down from the cross and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud. And she was there in the graveyard when they laid him to rest.

And by that time the sun was sinking and the sky was growing dark. And the Sabbath -- the Passover Sabbath -- would begin at sundown. So Mary and the others went home to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, even though their hearts were breaking.

And on the Sabbath they waited. But early on Sunday, while it was still dark, they went back to the graveyard to show their respect and to give their friend Jesus a proper burial and anoint his body with spices and oils. But when they got there the grave was empty. The stone that sealed the entrance was gone and the tomb was standing wide open. And when they went in to see what had happened, it was empty. The grave -- the tomb was empty. And the body was gone.

And that's when it happened. All of a sudden two men in clothes as bright as lightning stood there beside them. It nearly scared them to death! And then they heard them say, "Why do you look for the living here? In a graveyard of all places? Among the dead? He isn't here," they said, "Jesus is risen!" And poor Mary Magdalene, and Joanna and Mary were so confused and so afraid that they couldn't say anything. And the messengers -- the angels -- said, **"Remember. Remember how he told you he would rise. It was while he was with you -- in Galilee,"** they said. **"He told you that the Son -- that he -- must be handed over to sinful people and nailed to a cross. And on the third day he would rise..."**

And they remembered. He did say that. He did! And they ran back to tell the disciples and all of the others. And they told them all about it. That Jesus had risen...

But they didn't believe them. Nothing they said made sense to them. It was all just some story, they thought -- like the one we heard about a stone horse in a graveyard that comes to life when it's dark. And besides, Peter even went to the tomb to see for himself. And they were right. It was empty. But that didn't mean he had risen. It just meant that somebody had taken his body.

Ah, but you know the rest of the story. How Jesus walked with Cleopas and his companion that day to the little town of Emmaus. And how they finally recognized him at the table that evening when he took the bread in his hands and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. And by the time they had run back to Jerusalem to tell all the others, the disciples were already saying, **"It's true! It's true! Simon Peter has seen him, too!"**

And then all of a sudden Jesus was there. And you'd have thought they had seen a ghost, says Luke. They were terrified.... And then they heard him say, **"Peace be with you. Don't be afraid."** And that day they stepped out of the

darkness and into the light. And because they did the world will never quite be the same...

And it all started when a handful of women went to a graveyard and happened upon an empty tomb. Imagine! Finding such joy in a graveyard of all places.

And the message, I think, was loud and clear. **In dying, Christ destroyed our death. In rising, Christ restored our life.** Or as Paul said, it means that **In all these things we will come out on top and will not be defeated. And all because of Jesus who loved us. I am absolutely sure,** he said, **that not even death or life can separate us from God's love now. Not even angels or demons, the present or the future, or any power can do that. Not even the highest places or the lowest, or anything else in all creation can do that. Nothing at all can ever separate us from God's love because of what Christ Jesus our Lord has done for us -- for you and me.**

A few years ago -- maybe eight or ten, I suppose -- a young woman got sick. And she did all the things people do when they have aches and pains, or find themselves feeling a little under the weather." But nothing helped. She didn't get better. She only got worse ... She wasn't a member of the church in Huntington, or even a visitor there. But she lived

next door -- just across the street from the church. A young woman barely thirty years old, who was lovely and bright ... and tenderhearted, I think. A blessing to everyone who knew her. And loved and adored by her family and friends. But her life ended too soon. And her death left a terrible empty place in the hearts and lives of everyone who knew her and loved her.

And they came together, trying their best to support one another and to care for each other. But the service was heavy... and their hearts were heavy. Because she wasn't there.

After the service we all went in solemn procession to the graveyard where she was laid to rest. It was here in South Charleston, mind you, at Sunset Memorial Gardens. And we stood at the grave and we prayed that age-old prayer that Christians have prayed by the graves of their loved ones for hundreds of years. **"Almighty God, into your hands we commend your servant, in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life."** But, mind you, their hearts were broken and their spirits were heavy and weighed down with grief. And I'm sure they believed the words that were spoken at the graveside that day. But when it's so dark and your heart is so heavy -- or when you're lost and lonely and

frightened -- it's hard to be certain. It's hard to remember what you believe. Because it looks like it's over. From all appearances, it was a victory for death. And the young woman was defeated, once and for all.

But something surprising happened right there in the graveyard -- in the cemetery, of all places. After the blessing, when the service was over, this young woman's family and all of her friends tried their best to comfort each other with words and tears and handshakes and hugs. And for some reason while they were doing this, I turned and looked back toward the grave. And that's when it happened. A butterfly floated down and came to rest on the head of the casket. And for a moment it sat there, perfectly still. And then it flew toward the sky...

A butterfly, mind you. An age-old symbol of resurrection -- a living reminder of Jesus, it was -- the One whose love brings new hope and new life to his beloved children. And for me, it was a beautiful reminder of God's love for this woman. And for all of us. A love that is stronger even than death.

But ... I didn't say anything to anybody about it. Because ... well, I'm always afraid that they'll haul me away in a little white truck, or tell their children to "stay away from that

man," or even worse think that I just made it all up -- that it was just a story, an idle tale. So I didn't say a word to anyone, except maybe Ann.

But then, about a month later, I decided to just do it. Just tell them. I mean, maybe it was all just a coincidence. And maybe it wouldn't mean anything to anybody but me. But maybe, just maybe, it might be something somebody would like to know. So I sat down and wrote a letter to the young woman's parents (who live here in Charleston, by the way. Methodists. Members of Christ Church, though I hardly knew them at the time.) I wrote to them and told them about that day in the cemetery and how the butterfly was a symbol of new life and how it reminded me that God loved Sarah, their daughter, so much that he gave his own Son to die on a cross for her. And if God loves her that much, then you can be sure, you can be certain, that he won't let anything take away the life that he gave her ... not even death....

A few days later, there was a hand-addressed envelope in the mailbox. It was a note from the young woman's father. And it said, "Dear Rev. Tom, I saw it, too. And I tried to tell myself it was just a coincidence. But isn't it amazing how God can take the little things around us (even things we chalk up to coincidence) and use them to bring us peace. And he did

that,” he said. “God let me know in his gentle way, that all is well. That Sarah is with him and he is with us.”

Imagine! Finding peace in a graveyard of all places. Ah, but remember, Uncle Robert didn’t just have an unexpected meeting in a graveyard one night. He went to church and he met Jesus there among his friends and neighbors, people who loved him. And six little cub scouts didn’t find safety and freedom from fear when we left our tent. But we found it because our leader, our shepherd was with us that night (even in the dark). And Sarah’s father didn’t find peace just because a butterfly came to rest on a casket. He found peace because it reminded him that Jesus, the risen Christ, was there with him.

And that’s what I want to say to you this morning. You are not here by coincidence. You are here because Jesus is here. Because Jesus is risen! And he is with you. Here. And now. And in him you will find safety and freedom and comfort and peace.

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This is the word which is given for you. Amen

**SOLI DEO GLORIA
BENEN, OBLSB**

