

Resurrection Life

Ruth Hatfield's son Tommy loved to eat tangerines – at every meal if she'd let him. One day she found him flicking seeds onto the floor, and scoldingly said, "Why don't you plant them in that geranium pot instead?" Tommy did just that, and in a few weeks tiny seedlings were sprouting from the soil. Ruth transferred the tallest one to its own pot and continued to look after it. For twenty years she treasured this living reminder of her son, now a petroleum geologist stationed on the *Ocean Ranger*, the world's largest oil rig off the coast of Newfoundland. Yet, the six-foot tall tangerine tree never had a single blossom that entire time.

On the morning of February 15, 1982, the family received news that the *Ocean Ranger* had sunk with heavy casualties in a great storm. Tommy was among those missing and presumed dead. The grief and sorrow that Ruth felt was unbearable – how could her son disappear so suddenly without a trace? She was inconsolable with despair. She dreaded the coming of Easter that year, a celebration of eternal life after such a devastating loss.

Then a miracle happened. Her visiting granddaughter ran into the room on Good Friday morning, "Grandma! You won't believe this, but Tom's tangerine tree is full of blossoms!" It was true. On Easter Sunday they opened fully, their fragrance filling the house. Doubt and hopelessness were replaced by joy. Someone had responded with a message that got even better in the following days. Four tiny tangerines appeared despite having no pollinating insects in the house. Over the next two months they ripened so that the family could enjoy the tasty fruit on Christmas Day. Its seeds were planted for Tommy's tree to continue living for years to come.

The story of Jesus' resurrection is at the heart of the Christian faith. Despite skeptics dismissing it as legend and myth, and rationalists believing it to be a metaphor of new life, all four gospels culminate their account of Jesus' life and work with his conquering of death in

resurrection. In fact, without experiencing this event, there would have been no Good News to spread around the world. The disciples would have remained fearful and in hiding, not transformed into the bold and courageous proclaimers of the risen Lord we know took place. The apostle Paul explained this in his letter to the Corinthian church, “And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless...you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.” (1 Corinthians 15:14,17b,18,20a) No other world religion offers grace to those seeking God’s fellowship, salvation and eternal life through Jesus’ death and new life.

But it didn’t start out that way. “Saturday evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went and purchased burial spices so they could anoint Jesus’ body.” (Mark 16:1) Unlike the Egyptian practice of embalming the dead, Jews honored the natural decay of a body with the use of fragrant perfumes. But the women had a problem – a huge stone rolled over the tomb’s entrance. Despite their grief and emotional fragility, they clearly realized what they faced in carrying out their plans.

“Very early on Sunday morning, just at sunrise, they went to the tomb. On the way they were asking each other, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ But as they arrived, they looked up and saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled aside.” (v.2-4) God provided the answer to their dilemma. He can also provide the answer to the big stones that still block our understanding of the joy of resurrection. What are some of those?

- stone of unbelief. There’s plenty of proof in scripture from people who actually saw the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ, “God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this,” said Peter (Acts 2:32). Paul wrote, “He [Jesus] was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve.

After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.” (1 Corinthians 15:5) We don’t need to doubt the truth.

-stone of ignorance. As we read scripture, pray for guidance in learning the message God has for us through his word. We don’t need to be out of touch with his will for us.

-stone of blindness. Our eyes must be open to the needs around us, those that we can help. We don’t need to be unseeing as God opens opportunities to serve.

-stone of familiarity. The Easter story should make a difference in our lives. We don’t need to remain indifferent to the wonder of resurrection, but enlightened and transformed as the early church was, knowing we serve a living Lord who is eager to give us new life.

Continuing the story, “When [the women] entered the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side. The women were shocked, but the angel said, ‘Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn’t here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this was where they laid his body. Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died.’” (Mar 16:5-7) Why would the angel tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee, a three-day journey northwest of Jerusalem?

Because that’s where it all started. One of the major themes of Mark’s gospel is the misunderstanding by Jesus’ followers of his mission and intent. They needed a familiar place to look at everything through fresh eyes. Galilee would bring it all back. They could revisit all they had experienced there, able to make better sense of it, gaining a deeper understanding of what it means to be resurrection people. Where Jesus fed the crowds, gave sight to a blind man, healed a leper, blessed the children, and raised the dead, Galilee would give them a sense of recognition that this would be their mission, too.

Mark concludes his gospel in a rather strange, unfinished way, “The women fled from the tomb, trembling and bewildered, and they said nothing to anyone because they were too frightened.” (v.8) Indeed, most bibles have alternate endings that were added by later authors who felt Mark’s account didn’t end properly. But there’s good reason why he may have decided to leave it with the scene of the women running in fear from the empty tomb. That’s where we often find ourselves, and need the assurance that comes later that Jesus is alive and has been with us all along. Mark’s ending lets us finish the story of resurrection in our own lives.

A composer got into the habit of working late into the night to get a composition to the point where it sounded finished. This meant he slept during daylight hours, upsetting his wife to the point that she decided to do something about it. At the normal hour of waking, she would go to the piano and play his new music up to the very last note. Then she stopped and waited. Sure enough, this woke her husband who came downstairs with new ideas of how to end the piece and continue on from there. In no time at all, she had gotten him onto a schedule that both could live with.

Just as the composer was inspired to create a new ending, we can be inspired by the ending of Jesus’ story to go forward in our lives. It took less than 50 years for the once-defeated and fearful men and women to spread the news of the resurrection around the world. Jesus’ radical mandate to love each other, his offer of direct connection to God, the healing grace of his death and resurrection changed not only those 1st century disciples, but those ever since, including us in the 21st century. When the risen Savior takes up residence in our hearts, shaping, changing, renewing, and transforming, the story that Christ is risen continues. Our hopes and dreams, our fears and failures become part of the incredible drama we live out to its ending - that death isn’t the final word, but new life in Christ.

There are only two possible responses to the resurrection. The first is, “So what?” That leaves us alone with our fears and a persistent sense of uncertainty, “Did the resurrection really happen? Can I ever have new life, too?” The second response is, “So what happens next?” This calls us to believe the Good News, to faithfully imagine our lives free from fear, to live lives of forgiveness, of grateful response, of joyful service in anticipation of God’s promise that nothing in life or death can ever separate us from God’s love.

In 1917 Henri Bisette of Sherbrooke, QC, went off to war leaving behind his love of four years, Emilie Chevrier. One day in April, 1918, Henri’s family received word that their son was “missing in action”. Emilie was devastated, taking this message to mean that he had died. For years afterward, she continued to treasure the letters he had written to her. But in 1921 she met Joseph, a kind, caring man whom she married and moved to Ottawa. They raised a family of four children before he passed away. Emilie, at age 60, retired to her hometown of Sherbrooke.

One day while talking with an old school friend, Henri’s name came up. The friend was certain she had heard that he had purchased a farm north of Trois-Rivieres in the 1930s. Shocked at this new information, Emilie decided to investigate. When she arrived at the farm and knocked on the door, none other than Henri stood there, greatly aged, but still handsome as she remembered. Overcome with emotion, forty years of separation melted away in a moment. Shortly after their reunion, they were married. Death really had given way to resurrection.

Resurrection is something we can experience here and now: forgiveness and fellowship with God, a life of courageous and fearless service, of doing ministry and mission in the name our risen Lord, believing in the promise that death has been defeated forever. Amen.