

Looking for Jesus

In the name of our crucified and risen Lord, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: This morning's Gospel reading is Matthew's account of the events that occurred on that first Easter morning. For followers of Jesus like us, it's happy news indeed. But if you're familiar with the accounts given by Luke and John of the same events, you see at once that Matthew only provides a broad overview of what happened. He skips a lot of the specifics: like the names of the other women who went to the tomb with the two Marys, and why they were going there – to anoint the body of Jesus with the spices they'd prepared, and how Peter and John also came to the tomb and found it empty, and how Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene at the tomb after everyone else had gone away. It's the same story that Matthew tells, but there's a lot missing. It's almost like Matthew wrote the *Reader's Digest* condensed version of the story. And for the majority of you who know how much I like to analyze and dissect all the little details of a Bible story, you must also know how frustrating it is for me to try to preach on a text that hasn't got any.

But it occurred to me that Matthew had something else in mind. It's like he's saying, "Look, I know you know the details. You've heard them many times. What I want you to do is to step back and see the big picture." And when we do that, there are a few things that really stand out.

First and most obviously is the fact of the resurrection itself. By leaving out many details and keeping the story very short, Matthew is highlighting and underscoring the most important truth that Jesus, who was dead and buried on Good Friday, *lives*. *He's alive*. He is no longer to be found among the dead. It's the same point that St. Paul emphasizes in his first letter to the Corinthians: Jesus Christ who died for sin has been raised again. It's the single most important truth in Christianity, because if it's not true then nothing else about the faith matters. You might as well go home because there's nothing the church has to offer you: no forgiveness, no reconciliation with God, no peace, and no life—not now or ever. But if he has been raised, as the prophets foretold and the apostles bear witness, then the Church of Jesus Christ has all that to offer you and more. By keeping his account brief, Matthew means to ensure that you not miss the central truth on which everything else depends.

Second, just hitting the main points allows the author to pull close together events that were separated by considerable gaps of time. I mean, who knows how long before the women arrived at the tomb did the earthquake take place and the angel who rolled away the stone and terrified the guards appear? It might have been several hours. At least we get the impression that the guards are long gone by the time the women show up. Still, by collapsing the timeline as he does, Matthew makes it easier for us to pick up on the important contrast he would have us see. Jesus has risen from the dead—literally in Greek the angel says *he was raised from the corpses*. Meanwhile those who tried to keep him in his tomb have become as dead men—again, literally *as corpses*. The point is that Jesus who was dead now lives while those who oppose that truth or refuse to acknowledge it are dead even while they live. That's still true today.

The third thing that emerges in Matthew's brief account, and this is the point I'd like to explore a bit deeper this morning, is that Jesus is not found where people think they will find him. No, instead he is where he said he will be. And that's where he calls his disciples to meet with him. We read that the women came to see the tomb. They were looking for Jesus. And we

cannot fault them for their sincerity or their devotion. But the problem is that they were thinking in purely earthly terms. After all, they had seen him die. They had watched while he was hastily prepared for burial and placed in the tomb. They had seen the heavy stone rolled over the mouth of the grave and heard it fall with a loud grinding thump into the groove that held it securely in place. So naturally, thinking in earthly terms, that's where they expected to find him still.

But Jesus had specifically told them that he wouldn't be there. More than that, throughout his entire ministry he had prevailed upon his followers to think in different terms. He told them repeatedly to not to focus on worldly wisdom and earthly appearances; but rather to trust in him, to seek the things that are above, and to view the present with a heavenly perspective. This they consistently and stubbornly refused to do. And the first Easter morning was no exception. Thus we find the women looking for Jesus in the wrong place. And the angel takes them to task for it. "He told you he wouldn't be here. Now, go quickly and tell his disciples where you *will* find him: in Galilee." Later Jesus himself appears and tells them the same thing. "Tell my brothers I'm going to Galilee. *That's* where we will meet."

But they still don't get it. If at this point we bring in what the other evangelists tell us, we know they didn't pack up and go to Galilee at once as they were twice told to do. No, on that first evening of Easter, they're still in Jerusalem. There Jesus appears to the whole group of disciples, save Thomas. But even after that, they're still in Jerusalem a whole week later when Jesus shows up again, this time when Thomas is with them. You have to ask, why are they still there? They should have left. They should be in Galilee by now. Why don't they go meet Jesus where he told them he'd be?

Now to be honest, I don't know what it was about Jerusalem that they were so reluctant to leave. Maybe it was the history and grandeur of the place. Maybe it was its religious significance. Maybe for those reasons it seemed to them a more appropriate place to meet with the risen Lord than the comparatively rural and rustic setting of Galilee. I don't know. But for some reason they seemed bound and determined to remain – as if they were bent on seeing Jesus there rather than where he told them to go. I do know this: the appearances Jesus made to his disciples in Jerusalem were very brief. He'd show up, say a few words, and be gone again. It's not until they actually went to Galilee like he said that they were able to sit down and spend some quality time with him. That's where their relationship with the risen Savior really began to grow.

And this is important for us because we too, like a lot of other people, are still looking for Jesus. We want to be with him. We want our relationship to grow. But a word of caution is needed. There are many guides out there who say they want to help people find Jesus; but all too often, they direct them to look in the wrong places. And knowing as we do that even the first disciples had some trouble in this regard, we'd be foolish indeed to suppose that somehow we're above being tempted to look for Jesus in places other than where he said he will be. With that in mind, allow me give you a few examples of what to watch out for.

First there is what's been called the quest for the historic Jesus. This has been what's been driving a lot of liberal Christian theology for the last two or three hundred years, and it's the basic assumption behind most of the programs about Jesus that you'll see on TV and the articles you'll read about him in popular magazines. The idea is this: there's no denying that Jesus of Nazareth had more impact on the world than any other person who ever lived. And yet here's a guy who never wrote anything, never ruled a nation or commanded an army, who spent most of his brief ministry hanging out with a handful of Galilean fishermen, and who died at fairly

young age. So the big question is how could one man with so little going for him affect the world so much? Who was he really? What did he really say and do? And you have to understand that the people searching for Jesus this way assume from the outset that what Scripture says about him is false. They say it's an unreliable document. They claim that the New Testament was written hundreds of years after the fact by the evil institutional church which added all kinds of legends and miracle stories to pump up the image of Jesus and make him seem to something more than just a man – like, I don't know, maybe the Son of God too? They say we have to very scientifically peel away all those layers of accumulated myth to get to the genuine, historical man at the core of it. And mind you, they do this with great sincerity in the belief that they are presenting the world with the *real* Jesus. The trouble is that after removing everything the Scripture says about him, there isn't much left. And apparently it never occurs to them that Jesus had the impact he did on the world precisely because he did and said the things recorded about him in the Bible – not the least of which is that he rose from the dead; a truth they deny. And so like the women, they are looking for a Jesus who's a corpse. And because they keep searching the graveyard, they never do find him.

A second very common attempt to find Jesus – one that's more likely to attract what would be considered the Bible believing side of the house – is to go looking for him in the things of this world. This is the Jesus of good health, prosperity, and success; and you know that you found him if and when you are enjoying these things. He's the Jesus of preachers like Robert Schuler, Joel Osteen, and Joyce Meyer to name but a few of his many disciples. He is a Jesus whose kingdom is definitely of this world, if not now as some say, then as others proclaim in a soon-to-arrive millennial kingdom in which his followers will reign with him on earth over the wicked and unbelieving. For their loyal service they'll be rewarded with fat salaries, fine houses, and expensive cars. And if this Jesus sounds to you more like the Santa Claus of commercial America than he does the crucified and risen Savior from sin, good: there's a reason for that. This Jesus is in a very real sense "an American idol". Nor should it surprise you that this Jesus hasn't got much to say to people who are poor or suffering. He is strangely silent in hospital rooms and has nothing encouraging to say to grieving families burying a loved one. When tragedy or disaster strikes he seems to disappear altogether. Poof! He's gone. It's because he wasn't really there to begin with.

Third and finally, another misdirected attempt to find Jesus is to go looking for him not in the *things* of this world, but rather in the *experiences* it has to offer. Not long ago I got a phone call from *Acquire the Fire*. It's an outfit that does what they call a national youth ministry. "We want to help kids find Jesus", the caller assured me. "Well, that's a noble goal", I said. "Tell me, what do you tell kids about Jesus?" I was looking for a theological statement of some kind. I wanted to know what kind of Jesus they were helping the kids find because there are a lot of different versions out there – and the vast majority of them are not the Jesus of Scripture. His answers were very evasive. Getting him to say anything definitive was like pulling teeth. It was like no one had ever asked any theological questions about their group. What little he did say after I'd asked a lot of very probing questions painted a portrait of a Jesus who was more Taskmaster than Savior – more like a scowling cop looking over kids' shoulders while tapping a baton in the palm of his hand to keep them from behaving badly than the Savior from sin that they need.

Well, I could see that the conversation wasn't getting anywhere, so I asked, "Okay, can you tell me how it is that you help kids find Jesus?" Ah, this is where he brightened and got excited. "Why", he said, "we have pyrotechnics, and fog machines, and laser light shows, and great bands, and some really, really powerful speakers." "Oh," said I, "who are your speakers?" I was thinking that if I knew who was going to be addressing the kids, I'd have a pretty good

idea what they'd be saying. "No, no", he said, "I meant great big speakers that really blast the music at them. Kids like that." "I'm sure they do", I said, "but what has any of that got to do with finding Jesus?" Now let me make it clear that I haven't got anything against upbeat music, laser lightshows, or having fun. The problem here is that they're brainwashing kids to confuse the euphoria and excitement of the rock concert atmosphere they create with a genuine encounter with Jesus. They're dealing with Jesus in the same way Amway gets its sales people excited about selling their products or a pep rally gets fans excited about a ball game. And having been around the block, I know that often the outfits that do this sort of thing go out of their way to denigrate and ridicule the way Jesus has been successfully coming to his church and making faithful disciples for two thousand years. That's old, they say. That's boring. To reach the kids we have to do it in a way that will really touch them. They have to feel it. The trouble is that when you connect Jesus to a feeling – especially to a feeling that's artificially created by a lot of loud noise and high-tech wizardry – you fool people into thinking that if they haven't got the feeling then they haven't got Jesus. And the thing of it is, in order to create that feeling again the next show has to be bigger, brighter, louder, and better because if it's not, if I don't feel the rush, then, "That was lame. I didn't feel like Jesus was even there." Hmm. Maybe it's because he wasn't. Or maybe it's because what little of him was there was telling you to look for him where he said he'd be.

For the disciples on that first Easter, he told them to go to Galilee – yes, old, familiar, dusty, boring Galilee that lacked all the luster and glory of the exciting city of Jerusalem. But that's where he met with them – where he told them he would be. And that's where he built them up in the faith and taught them, equipping them to take his saving Gospel to Jerusalem and from there to the whole world. And he told them to make other disciples of people from all nations by bringing them to where he said that he would be found. No, not in Galilee, not anymore; and certainly not in worldly wisdom that seeks to demythologize Jesus, or in the *things* of this world, or in the *experiences* of this world. Rather he said, "Baptize, and I am with you. Teach my Word as I have taught you, and I am with you." "Where two or three gather in my name, there I am with you." "When you eat this bread and drink this cup, I am with you."

Dear saints of God: Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] May the risen Lord Jesus give us the grace and wisdom to set our hearts on things above and to seek him always only where he said that he would be found. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!