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3/23/08

Family Gathering

Matthew 28:10

In January of 2002, a massive weather system moved through Central Mexico bringing unusually cold temperatures in the low 20's. This storm had a devastating impact on Monarch butterflies which migrate to Mexico from Canada and the United States each winter. At the two largest wintering sites in Mexico tens of millions of Monarch butterflies died. It was an unprecedented disaster. Entomologists gathered there to see for themselves the magnitude of this tragedy and to estimate the death toll. They found gray-carpeted acres of decaying wings. They began to measure the depth of the layers of dead butterflies so they could estimate the number which had perished.

When they reached down through eight inches of dead butterflies they found something they did not expect to see. They found a layer of living Monarchs which had been protected from the freezing rain by the ones that had died. This proved to be just enough to restore the species over time. Buried beneath layers of death they saw hope for survival and a future for the species.¹

In Matthew's gospel we read that the tomb of Jesus had been constructed to contain him under many layers of death. It was carved out of rock and sealed by a huge boulder. The tomb was guarded by soldiers who had been instructed by Pilate to make it as secure as they could. Matthew's account makes it very clear that there could be no question of a body being missing or stolen given all these layers of death dealing security.

And yet this gospel tells us that the two Marys decide to go and see the tomb. When Matthew uses the word "see" he is warning the reader that something important is coming. These are the same women who followed Jesus from Galilee to Golgotha and saw him teach and heal. They saw his crucifixion. Because they saw those events they have now come to see the tomb. It is as if they suspect that God is not finished with Jesus or the hope he has planted in them. Going to see the tomb is the only way they know to pursue this unfinished business.

Their journey to the tomb is interrupted by an earthquake. When the ground moves the layers of death are peeled away. The great stone is no match for God's earthquake. The Roman soldiers are powerless before this force. These women who have already seen so much in Jesus' life and ministry that they never expected to see are once again confronted with a surprising reality. They see for themselves that Jesus is no longer contained by his securely guarded tomb. An angel tells the women to spread the word to the disciples that they will see him in Galilee (Matthew 28:7).

The disciples are instructed to leave the big city of Jerusalem and return to familiar territory. Galilee was where they grew up and learned to make a living. It was the region they met Jesus and answered the call to become disciples. It was in Galilee that most of Jesus' ministry took place. Most of what they knew of Jesus they learned in Galilee.

It is in this familiar territory that they will see the resurrected Christ. But this time everything will be different. When Jesus speaks to the Marys he refers to the disciples as brothers, "go and tell my

brothers to go to Galilee (Matthew 28:10).” Nowhere else does Jesus describe himself as a brother. The resurrection has transformed his relationship with his followers. No longer is it based on the hierarchical Jewish model of rabbi and disciples. A new family has been created where each one is a brother or sister to Jesus and where each one can learn to be a brother or sister to all God’s children.

The call to go to Galilee is an invitation to a family gathering. Galilee is the place where a new kind of family can be formed. This family will embody the grace which was at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. This family will keep alive everything Jesus enemies tried to kill. This family will embrace the hope of the resurrection knowing that every layer of death has been peeled away.

The nature of this family can be seen in the experience of Lebanese Christians who were caught in a devastating war in 1982. Kenneth Bailey is a Presbyterian minister and teacher who was evacuated from Beirut as the Israeli tanks were rolling into the city. What he remembers best about those days was a conversation that he had with a Lebanese church leader as the layers of death were piling up. He writes:

On our way out of Beirut, I was privileged to have a brief audience with Kerakin II, the Archbishop of the Armenian Orthodox Church. I said to him, ‘Your Grace, in a few days I will be flying to America. Do you have any word for me to take to Christians there?’ He thought for a moment and replied, ‘Our world is like the ocean, a violent storm is raging. But in the great deep all is calm.’ Kerakin II found the calmness of the great deep in the midst of the violent storm.²

The family gathering which Jesus called in Galilee was anchored in a hope which is deeper and stronger than any storm.

This congregation was assaulted by another kind of storm in 1873. The large building at Fourth and Monroe had just been completed when a devastating economic panic broke out across America. The church was saddled with a \$31,000 debt which could not be financed in that liquidity crisis. A congregational meeting was called at which it was explained that if the debt could not be substantially reduced a forced sale of the building would take place. It was a moment when hope was hanging in the balance. A financial storm of unprecedented proportions threatened to destroy everything the congregation had struggled to create in the first 48 years of its existence.

One of the elders was a man named E. B. Hawley. Like many others in the congregation he had lost most of his money in the Panic of 1873. When the subscription paper was passed to him Hawley stood up and said, “I have no money that I can contribute to this object, but I have two town lots that I will gladly turn in. And here is my watch. It’s about all else that I own.” In five weeks time, the money required was raised, the building was saved, and the congregation had a future once again.³

The family that Jesus created is firmly connected to the great deep where all is calm. Because Jesus takes us beneath every layer of death, we can live by the hope of the resurrection.

Endnotes

1. Noah Adams, “All Things Considered,” National Public Radio, February 12, 2002, referenced by Agnes W. Norfleet, *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2008, page 23.
2. Kenneth Bailey, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 10, 2008, page 14.
3. Address of D. S. Johnson, *Second Presbyterian Church Historical Data*, Volume I, C. L. Conkling, pages 151-152.