



Sermon of April 4, 1999



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"THE DAY LIFE INCREASED"

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 28:1-10

The Antiques Roadshow has become one of my favorite television shows. If you haven't seen it, you should know that it is simply a group of appraisers who travel around the country, rent out convention centers and civic auditoriums, and people by the thousands bring in some object they have found in their house, or at a swap meet, for appraisal.

Someone will bring in an old clock, a watch, a vase, or a painting, almost anything. The conversation between the appraiser and the owner of the object is recorded. The appraiser will ask for some history on the object, like where did you get it. If you bought it, they want to know how much you paid for it. If you inherited it, they want to know something of the family history.

Then the appraiser will talk about what he or she knows about the object, the artist, the date it was created, the general market value of the genre. Then comes the moment the owner, and the audience, are waiting for, the appraiser reveals how much the object is worth at an auction today.

My favorite appraisal was when a woman brought in a strange looking object. She had no idea what it was. It was metal. It looked something like a hat. It had a pointed head, but with no brim. The metal was embossed with a military scene. She found it, she said, wedged into a ceiling joist in the attic of her house. She didn't know what it was, had no idea what its value was. The appraiser identified it as an Italian Renaissance processional helmet, valued at something like \$250,000. The next day I climbed into my attic.

I think the popularity of the show is because we all have the fantasy of finding some treasure hidden in our house.

There is a wonderful lesson here, worthy of a sermon. In fact, there is a rabbinic tale similar to this. It is about a man who left his house to find a treasure. He wanted to find the meaning of life, something that he couldn't find in the hum-drum existence of his own life. So he started on a journey to find a great treasure.

The first night he slept out under the stars. Before he climbed under his blanket he took his shoes off, and put them in the road pointing in the direction toward which he was heading. Then he went to sleep. That night a prankster came along, took the man's shoes and turned them in the opposite direction. So when the man woke up the next morning and put his shoes on, he started out in the direction from which he had come.

He travelled some distance, and then noticed a house that looked strangely familiar. He went inside the house and was greeted by a family that also looked remarkably like his family. He settled down there and discovered the treasure that he was looking for.

The moral being, the treasure you are looking for is right here. You don't have to go searching for it, just open your eyes to see what you already have.

I was going to talk about that in another sermon, but then it hit me. I may never see some of you again. So I had better do it now.

But what I really wanted to point out in the appraisal analogy is the most fascinating part of the program for me. That is when the appraiser will hold up the object, and say, "Do you see this hallmark here?" Or, "Do you see this signature down here on the bottom?" Or turn it over, and say, "Do you see this mark? It means something significant." Or the date that is etched into the object. Then, because of the details, the appraiser will tell you things that you had never dreamed about. If he hadn't pointed out to you the subtle things, the things that we had overlooked, or things that we probably would consider insignificant, we would not have known the real value of that object. The value is found in the details.

And what I want you to see is that it is the same with the stories in the Gospel. There are four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They all tell the same story, the story of Jesus' life.

Each gospel records the story of the Resurrection, and each record of the Resurrection reads pretty much like the next.

If you were to examine them perfunctorily, you wouldn't notice the subtle differences between them. You would think that Matthew's version is just like Mark's, or Luke's is like John's. But if you know the details, if you can see the hallmarks, the signatures, the subtleties of coloration within the text, you know that each writer has produced his own version of the story, put his own twist to the story. What I want to do this morning is to point out one of those details in Matthew's narrative of the Resurrection of our Lord.

The main characters in the Resurrection story are always the same; the women. Mary Magdalene is in every gospel. In some gospels other women are listed, sometimes by name. But in Matthew, it is just Mary Magdalene and the "other Mary." She is not named. It is just Mary Magdalene and the other Mary.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrive at the tomb, find it empty. Jesus is not there. An angel is there, who says, "He is not here; for he has risen...tell the disciples to go to Galilee."

So they go looking for the disciples. The disciples are hiding someplace. The Marys don't know where they are. On their way down the road, Jesus himself appears to the two Marys. They recognize him. They fall down and worship him. He says to them, "Tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and I will meet them there."

Now that's it. That's the detail. "Tell my brethren." That is unique to Matthew. That is like some distinct mark on an antique, it makes it unique and more valuable.

Look at it again. Jesus is supposed to say, "Go tell my disciples." That is what you expect. That is what Jesus says everywhere else, in every other gospel. Throughout Matthew he refers to his disciples as "disciples." But here, Jesus says, "Go tell my brethren." This is the only place where that word is used. So we have something unique, interesting, and perhaps very valuable.

Now if I were an appraiser, and this story was an object of art, I would say, let me tell you something more about this word "brethren." In the world of the Bible, when a word like that appears in the text, as a surprise, you suspect that it is there to refer you to another story. The Bible does that all the time. There is a technical word for it, which I apologize for using, because you are not supposed to use technical words in a sermon. But if this were an appraisal, you would appreciate the rarity of what I am about to tell you by using this term. The term is "intertextuality." What it means is, that the meaning of one text is enhanced by the reading of another. The word "brethren" can refer to only one other story in the Bible, the story of Joseph and his brothers.

You know the story of Joseph, with the coat of many colors. Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, the patriarch. Joseph, hated by his brothers because he was a brat, conceited, arrogant and self-obsessed. His older brothers, who had enough of Joseph, plotted to get rid of him. They dumped him in a well. When a caravan came along heading to Egypt, they sold Joseph to them, and he was taken into slavery in Egypt.

When I read the story of Joseph I am tempted to sympathize with the older brothers, because Joseph is such a brat, he needs to be put in his place. But what the older brothers did was hardly appropriate to the offence. Putting Joseph in his place is one thing, selling him into slavery is quite another.

You know what it is? It's betrayal and abandonment. It is exactly what the disciples did to Jesus, who after pledging their loyalty to him, saying, "We will never leave you," all forsook him and fled. And then he, like Joseph, was sold, for thirty pieces of silver, into captivity.

So, "Tell my brethren I will meet them in Galilee," reminds us of Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph was taken to Egypt. In Egypt he grows up, finds a new life, matures, becomes a different person, rises in prominence, and finally becomes the Prime Minister of Egypt. Then one day, it must be twenty-five years after he had been sold to that caravan, his brothers come to Egypt seeking relief from the famine that has spread throughout all the world, except Egypt. The reason it has not affected Egypt is because of Joseph's brilliant management of the country's economy. So nations now come to Egypt to ask for food.

Joseph's brothers come, ask him for food. They don't recognize Joseph. He has grown up now. They last saw him when he was a boy. Now he is wearing clothes of the Egyptian nobility. But Joseph recognizes them. He tries to deal with them incognito, and officiously, without revealing his identity. But his emotions get the best of him. He begins to weep. He rushes out of the room so that they cannot see him. Then he comes back in, and says, "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you betrayed."

Now listen to Jesus. "Tell my brethren, [who betrayed me,] that I will meet them in Galilee."

Joseph then sends his brothers to fetch their father, Jacob, who is aged, ready to die. Joseph wants to see his father one more time. He also summons the youngest son in the family, Benjamin, who has stayed with Jacob. There is a family reunion. Then Jacob dies. The brothers, fearing that now that the father is gone, Joseph will seek revenge upon them for what they did to him, fall down and beg for mercy and forgiveness. And in one of the most beautiful scenes in all the Bible, Joseph weeps again, and says, "Fear not, for am I in the place of God." Then these famous words. "As for you, you meant it for evil; but God meant it for good."

There you have it. Matthew wants you to think of the Joseph story when you think of the Resurrection. He wants you to remember this. "You meant it for evil; but God meant it for good." The Resurrection is God's answer to the evil of the cross. God met the worse that we could do with the very best that we could imagine.

It is just incredible. It is astounding the way God deals with us. He takes the evil that we do, he takes the crimes that we commit against one another, he takes the things that we should not have done, or the things that we did not do but should have done, he takes the terrible, ugly, cruel things that we do to one another, and to the creation, and says, "You meant this for evil; but I am going to redeem it, and I will give it back to you as something good."

No matter how much we mess up our lives, God is determined to redeem our lives. He pursues

us until he does it. No matter how worthless we may feel that we are, or how insistent we are in acting out this self-assessment of who we are, God is determined that someday we are going to discover that we are daughters and sons of God, and begin to act that way.

I came across a story told last Easter at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., about a woman named Diane. She grew up in a good and loving home: family outings, birthday parties, softball games, dance classes, even church. But for some reason Diane never felt OK about herself, especially when she reached adolescence. In high school the symptoms appeared: drugs, stealing, alcohol, staying out all night, lying about it.

The family was increasingly in crisis, trying to reach out to Diane, and at the same time, trying to maintain some stability in the family life, to hold on to the values that they believed in as a family. There were the rounds of counseling sessions, the rehab for Diane, tough love, tears, prayers. But the more her parents reached out to her, the more rebellious she became. Finally she ran away from home. She started living the kind of life that she now says she doesn't even want to talk about.

In her late twenties, things began to change. She talked about what had happened to her.

At first I felt my parents love was unnecessary. It was smothering love. Then as things got worse, I began to feel unlovable. I think I resented my parents because if I was unlovable, then I could do what I wanted and it wouldn't matter. But as long as I knew I was loved, I wasn't free to do my thing. So I needed to destroy their love in order to be free. But they never stopped loving me. Even when I got arrested, and they refused to bail me out of jail, I could see the pain of love in their eyes. Now I realize how much I needed their love, and that it was their love and prayers that kept me alive all those years. What amazes me most of all is that my worst could not destroy their love for me. 1

Something as deep and mysterious as the Resurrection of our Lord has many levels of meaning. But Matthew wants you to consider this one. It reveals a God whose love for us is like a parent's love for a prodigal child. Even if we reject God, God will never, never reject us. And if we do evil things, then God, out of God's love, will find a way to make something good come out of it.

What amazes me most of all is that my worst could not destroy their love for me.

As for you, you meant it for evil; but God meant it for good.

Go tell my brethren, [who betrayed me,] that I will meet them in Galilee, [to forgive them and give them new life.]

1 From Don Shelby

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,*

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