

“The Wager” GPPC 4-1-18
Isaiah 25:6-9, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Mark 16:1-8

Those of you who are sports fans may have some *passing* awareness of an event that’s taking place tomorrow night—something about a national championship in men’s college basketball. And for the first time since 2014, no teams from the Atlantic Coast Conference took part in the Final Four. And none will take part in the championship game, which, some of you may recall, UNC won last year. (See how I slipped that in?)

Though it’s technically illegal, many Americans like to bet on which teams will advance through each round of the tournament. And this year lots of predicted winner and loser “brackets” were busted, actually *demolished* with a few extremely unlikely upsets. Some folks lost a good bit of cash on their wagers. But then again no contest is merely a slam dunk. That’s the nature of the game. That’s how the ball bounces. Shoot! Oh, you can let these comments pass. No foolin’.

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As we look at the three biblical texts for this morning, we're going to suggest that Easter is actually a wager for us too, a wager much more serious than basketball, and with a payoff much greater.

Mark says three women showed up at the tomb to see Jesus on that first Easter morning. He'd been dead for three days. So they brought some spices to anoint his cold, dead, smelly body. On the way to the tomb they'd been asking each other, "So, who's going to roll away the stone for us at the entrance of the tomb." One Bible scholar says, "From a mundane perspective, the women's question is problematic, since it shows a lack of planning and forethought on their part." (Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, 795.)

I love that.

Of course, when you see your dear friend and Lord get crucified it tends to mess up your "planning and forethought" a bit.

These women, (God bless 'em; there were no men in attendance) these women did what we hope followers of Christ will do; they showed up. No excuses--they showed up to honor Jesus.

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And the enormous tombstone had already been rolled back. And when they went into the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and in Mark's droll recitation the women were "alarmed."

"Alarmed." Right.

But the young man, a messenger of God, said, "Don't be alarmed. You're looking for Jesus. He was crucified. He's been raised. He's not here. Look, there's where they laid him. But go tell his disciples and Peter he's going ahead of you to Galilee; you'll see him there, just as he told you."

So the women did exactly what we probably would have done. They fled from the tomb with terror and amazement grabbing them by the throat. And as Mark puts it literally in the Greek, "They said nothing to nobody, because they were terrified."

Terror and amazement were the natural response of the women, because dead people stay dead, you know. But did you notice part of the message the messenger gave the women? "But go tell his disciples and

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Peter he's going ahead of you to Galilee; you'll see him there, just as he told you."

It's amazing, isn't it? These disciples had been with Jesus for three years. They'd heard his teachings, seen his miracles, experienced his love for all people. But they'd all run away when things got tough, and church wasn't easy and fun anymore. And Peter, well Jesus had said Peter was going to be the Rock of the church. And Peter had said he was ready to die with Jesus. "Bring it on! I'm ready to go with you, Lord!" And then Peter had denied Jesus three times. "I told you; I don't know Jesus!"

So we could have expected a message from Jesus to the cowardly disciples and especially to Peter alright. "I got crucified. Where were you? I'm finished with you. I'm getting better church members this time."

But instead Jesus sent a message to the disciples and especially to Peter. "I'll see you in Galilee, just as I told you."

Have you ever been forgiven and utterly welcomed back by somebody when you'd done nothing to deserve it? This is what

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happened for the first disciples. Jesus died an agonizing death on the cross, giving his life for them, but they abandoned him. Yet he forgave them and welcomed them back.

And that's exactly what happens for you and me every day. Christ died for us, but as we sin we continue to abandon him. Yet he continues to forgive us and welcome us back. It is amazing, amazing grace. As a writer puts it, "Belief is believing in God; faith is believing that God believes in you." (Andre Dubus, "A Father's Story" in *The Times Are Never So Bad*, 165.)

We have not earned it, but the God we know in Jesus Christ loves us and believes in us.

And there's more about that in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. A professor says, "This is the earliest tradition of the resurrection of Christ preserved in the New Testament....When we celebrate the Easter faith, we may be assured that it represents one of the very earliest strata of Christian preaching and that it is a sacred message traceable to the very dawn of the Christian church." (Carl R. Holladay in *Preaching The Common Lectionary, Year B, Lent, Holy Week, Easter*, 154.)

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Neither Paul nor anyone else in the New Testament imagined that Jesus was just an intriguing mystic or a topnotch presenter or a strong TED Talk candidate who might provide a scintillating lecture of 18 or fewer minutes.

No. The earliest tradition of Christianity is unified. Jesus really died, and he was really resurrected. And he really appeared to Cephas, to the twelve, to more than 500 hundred followers, to James, to the apostles, and then finally to Paul.

Jesus was resurrected in a new form of existence that was in time and space, yet no longer bound by time and space. He was distinct and recognizable. He had a face and a body, but he existed without the constraints we now experience. This is what we hope and believe will happen to all of us. And this is what the early church believed too.

The early church believed this not just as a fascinating bit of information but with a passionate commitment. So when Christians held funerals for their loved ones of course they grieved but even more they celebrated the resurrection that was coming. The funerals were filled with joy.

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And rather than abandon their faith Christians were willing to be burned at the stake, or flayed, or fed to wild animals, or crucified, or tortured to death in other inventive ways. Even today, in other countries Christians continue to gather as the church for worship, though they may be imprisoned, tortured, or murdered because of their commitment to Christ.

Over the centuries Christians put their lives on the line to stand against the Roman Empire's idolatry and cruelty, to oppose slavery in the United States, to resist the Nazis in Germany, to march during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, and to oppose apartheid in South Africa. Christians did not put their lives on the line because they thought Jesus was a pleasant sort of chap who said a few helpful things to make their lives easier. No. Christians put their lives on the line, because they believed that in life and in death they belonged to Christ. And they believed in Christ not only as the resurrected Lord of their lives but as the resurrected Lord of the Universe.

What about us? Do we believe that in life and in death we belong to Christ? Is Christ the resurrected Lord of our lives and the resurrected

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Lord of the Universe who deserves our regular worship, our full participation in Christ's church, and our daily devotion? Are we willing to be more faithful in our living even if it makes us uncomfortable?

Because finally we believe that the resurrection of Jesus is more than just one person coming back to life, as impressive as that is. It's also more than God forgiving and resurrecting us, as remarkable as that is. The resurrection of Jesus is actually the promise of something even bigger, even grander—the redemption of the universe.

As the Prophet Isaiah put it, God will “make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines...” [God will] destroy...the shroud that is cast over all peoples...he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of [God's] people he will take away from all the earth...”

It's not just that God will forgive us and give us a resurrected life. But God will swallow up death like a whale swallows a minnow. And God will do even more.

The 2003 movie “Antwone Fisher” is based on a true story. Antwone grows up in the Cleveland, Ohio area. His father is killed and

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his mother abandons him. And in his childhood he endures horrible abuse at the hands of some members of his foster family. At age 14 he leaves and survives on the street before joining the U.S. Navy. But Antwone is a terribly angry man with a volatile temper that gets him into fights and put in the brig. He is on the verge of being kicked out of the service when the navy assigns him to a skilled psychologist who patiently and firmly helps him unravel the cords of cruelty and pain that still clutch at him.

At his counselor's urging, Antwone confronts those who abused him, and he visits with his mother who abandoned him. Hard visits.

But he also gets in touch with extended members of his biological family that he had never known. One day he goes to see them. He opens the front door of a lovely home and he is amazed to see the house is packed with his relatives--young, old, and in between. They've thrown a surprise party for him and they're so excited to see him, everybody talking and laughing at once, hugs, handshakes, kisses. The children are holding handmade greeting signs.

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Then the double doors to the dining room are opened. There sit the matriarchs and patriarchs of the family around a table overflowing with food—ham, fried chicken, potatoes, vegetables, pancakes, desserts. A tearful elderly grandmother motions him over, takes his hands in her papery hands, looks into his eyes for a moment, and at last she says, “Welcome.” Then somebody yells, “Let’s eat!” And the feast begins.

The resurrection means forgiveness. It means a new kind of existence, a new body for us. But even more resurrection is the promise of something we strain for words and images even to describe. A great welcome home feast. A time when all tears are wiped away from all eyes by God. A day when there will be no more suffering and injustice and evil and death. A day when all will be right in the universe. A party to end all parties.

Life is always a wager. What are we betting on? Are you and I willing to wager our lives that the resurrection is true? Either Christians throughout the ages have been duped with the biggest hoax in history or the resurrection is the greatest thing that has ever happened. And the

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God of the resurrection calls for and deserves our faithful obedience as a church.

“Belief is believing in God; faith is believing that God believes in you.” The God who resurrected Jesus, the God who forgives us and daily gives us the chance to follow again, the God who will resurrect us and redeem the universe for the party to end all parties beckons. “I love you. I believe in you. Come on in. Welcome home.” Amen. ©Jeff

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