

Meet Me in Galilee¹

Sermon Easter 2023, Year A

Well: Happy Easter! Alleluia, Alleluia! The Lord is risen, He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

But...he is not here.

I said Alleluia, Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Yes, as the angel said to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who came to the graveyard, that may be, but he is not here.

But that's the whole point – I mean, how would we know – I mean, what did you say? Why are you sitting on that grave-closing stone all dressed in white, and telling us this? Did He not know that we were coming? The sun is barely up, no-one's awake, and you're telling me...what? He couldn't wait five minutes? He must've known we were coming. I mean, He basically told us to come. He told us after three days He would – I mean, that God would raise Him up, plus it was the Sabbath until last evening and we couldn't come in the night, it's not safe out, you know what the city is like, but we're here now and you're telling me, what? That He's not here? Well where in the he** is He, then?

He has been raised, said Mr. Clean there, dressed in white, sitting on a stone. He is not here. Go tell the others to meet Him in Galilee. He is not here.

Cry though they might, weep though they had to, the three women could from that young man no more information, nor from the keepers, shaken and stirred to the point of becoming “like dead men.” Nor had rest of the dead anything to say, much less their tombs. So they, who had come to anoint Jesus's body – what did they do? What could they do? They did as they were told and went away quickly “with fear

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and great joy,” two emotions that rarely go together, but then Matthew had to add something to Mark’s account; we can’t have these women running off *only* in fear, now, can we?

So off they went to tell the disciples, except they run into Jesus first – and how cool is that? Thank you for this update, too, Matthew. It reads way better than Mark’s original – and after running into him they held onto him, held onto his feet. This cannot be, they must’ve said to themselves, and yet here we are. I got Him. We got Him. Back. Somehow. No way we’re letting Him go again.

So what does He tell them? “Be not afraid,” but – and this is not said out loud – keep the joy. Go tell our friends, cowering wherever they might be, to meet me in Galilee.

That must’ve been quite a conversation. In walk Mary of Magdala and the other Mary – we’ll go with “Bethany,” where wait in grief sister Martha and brother Lazarus – and say, what? Um, Peter, James, John, everybody: we went to the graveyard, and the tomb was open. There was no body, just a dude sitting there looking like he’d been bleached who told us He was not there.

Really?

Really really.

Where did he say He was?

On His way to Galilee. Which is probably true since – and you’re not going to believe this – that’s what He told us Himself, a few minutes later, when *we saw Him*.

You saw Him. Alive. Standing right there. By His own grave.

Yes.

You’re sure.

We are. Saw Him and touched Him. Held His feet. Really.

Both of you?

Absolutely.

But He didn't come with you back here? Just headed up the road?

Yep. That's what He said.

Why would He do that?

Now that, He didn't say.

It makes sense, if you think about it. Jerusalem was where He died – where those who hated Him killed Him, and those who loved Him, mostly, ran away. Of the thousands cheering Him when He rode in on that donkey with her colt behind, two – two – make it to His grave to give Him a last farewell. Jerusalem is also where, as the gospel today says, the moment word of this reached the chief priests and elders, they bribed the soldiers to lie about it, say His disciples stole the body, don't for a minute say you saw that man get out of His own grave and walk away. We got your back; we'll even lie to your boss for you, in case he hears about it and actually gives a damn, which he won't. They went along with it, the soldiers. What the he** else where they going to do?

Jerusalem, to Jesus, was a place of murder, betrayal, and lies – not to mention at least two of his three temptations. No reason to meet His disciples there. No, meet me back where it all started, where I first read the words of Isaiah, today this scripture is fulfilled among you. Meet me back where we all first met, down by the sea and the ships that sail on it, the nets full of fish or empty, the cries of the gulls and the flap of the sails, the rope, the rigging. Meet me back where it was all green and new, all fresh and free. Meet me back home. Mary knows the way – Mary of Magdala, that is. Magdala's right down the road from Nazareth. The other Mary – of Bethany –

well, she'll be more than happy to be as far from Jerusalem as she can get and still be among friends. Yes, if you think about it, it makes perfect sense. Don't tarry in that hated, hateful Jerusalem. I'm done with that place and its temple, its vanities and its horrors, and so are you. Meet me in Galilee.

It's contested ground now – to some, Palestine; to others, Israel – but in Jesus's time it was simply country, or the country, a place up north. The cities were Roman or Greek – that is, new, and they didn't matter or mean anything. It meant as much to travelers from Jerusalem or Sepphoris or Caesarea or Damascus as Harford County and south Jersey mean to those of us heading from here to New York or Philadelphia. You might stop for some gas or a bite to eat, but you wouldn't linger. Things there are for the locals. Nothing much happens, but whatever does means something only if you know who's involved, whose parents those kids in the field belong to, whose little boat that is dragging a full net to shore. No, nothing much happened in Galilee, and those who lived there liked it that way. For Jesus and his earliest disciples, it was home. You want to see Him out of the grave, fresh and new, restored to you? Head on home. He might even meet you on the way.

In changing Mark's gospel the way he did, Matthew – or whatever author or team wrote these words down – took a mystery and gave it hope. Mark's gospel ends with something of a cliffhanger; Matthew's with peaceful closure, a command, and a good idea. Jesus and the A-team all go back home, meet on the mountain where He first called them to follow, and He gives them their next command. Start from here and go – well, not to Jerusalem, or not there only or even first. Go everywhere and teach the people what I have taught you. What people? All people? What have I taught you? To love one another, and remake all your relationships so that love like that is at the center of them. This way, we remake the world. I'll be there with you. You won't see me, but you'll know I'm there. My spirit will be with you. How will you know? You'll know. Every time you feel at peace, every time you feel no fear, every

time you know what to say and to whom, every time you feel that tingle move up your spine letting you know *That's right. There. There you go. This is it. This is the real thing*, you'll know: that's Me. That's who I am, and what I came back to tell you. Baptize them, teach them, and set them free. The people, that is. All people, everywhere. Free in body, mind, and spirit, just as I've set you.

Meet me in Galilee, indeed.

A couple of other things happen on that little mountain in Galilee where they met Him, Matthew's gospel tells us. Many believed in Him, it says, but some doubted – until He started speaking, that is. Also, they worshipped Him. They did not do this in Mark's gospel, even if you take into account Mark's longer ending, the one about being able to handle serpents and drink the deadly thing. Only in Luke's gospel, and in Matthew's, do we see the verb “worship,” slipped in there real quiet-like, as though obvious and of no great significance. I mean, we worship Him all the time now. Why would they not, there and then?

Why not? Well, because one worships gods, or more properly God, the One True God, alone, not every Tom, Dick, or Harry who comes wandering by healing in God's name or proclaiming God's kingdom has come among you and your sins are forgiven. When did Jesus become a god – or God?

When not, say the theologians, or more properly: one cannot become what one already is. Jesus was either always God or never ways – always divine, if it makes you feel better to say it that way – so what's different now?

It's not simply that He has been raised from the dead, though that's involved. It's that now He can be fully revealed, or God can fully shine through His body and mind here on earth, and leave His Spirit behind as it is in heaven to be with those who need it. The *Shekinah*, it's called in Hebrew: the presence of God, I Am Who I Am,

revealed in such a way that people can receive it and not be overwhelmed. As a certain hymn has it: “God in man made manifest.” (We would say “people,” even though that way you don’t get the rhyme.) All His disciples, back in temple-less Galilee, can see God manifest in Jesus as fully and completely as they are able to, and this for the first time. Oh, they’d known for years that God’s power and grace were with Him, but now they see, hear, and feel God’s presence. He is filled with it, and fills them with it, as much as they can bear, so that they can take that presence with them, that manifestation of God, to all the world and to all its peoples.

And it happened not in Jerusalem, not in Rome, not in Alexandria or Athens, but in Galilee, where He was from, where He was happy, and where it all began. Who is the poet who wrote, “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time”?² Of course God would show up there, and like that.

Meet me in Galilee, indeed. *Amen.*

Notes from 2020

For whatever reason, by whatever means, the God we’ve come to know and love and whose will for us, at least, we think we understand decided to do things this way. I have no idea why. I can speculate, and so can you, as people have for thousands of years about What Actually Happened? and What Does It Mean? Fights over what happened, what it means and what one may, or must, think about it pepper the history of our faith like so many holes the side of the vessel God made for us to sail on, holes through which the sea, as well as the light, can get in.

Questions about the reality and the meaning of the resurrection add one more, at least, to that long list of questions for which we don’t have answers, can’t have answers. All the history we have concerning them, all the profound elaborations we have that draw from them, remind us of nothing so much than that the mysteries at the heart of existence will not be solved simply because we want them to be, or by any means we possess and know how to use. At best, what we have before us in the resurrection of Jesus

² T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” V. (London: Faber & Faber, 1942).

is Paul's term for him: the first-fruits of them that sleep. This, to the grieving, is either a foretaste of the heavenly banquet whose menu we heard in Isaiah this morning – “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” – or a bitter reminder that God raised His only son from the dead but won't raise ours, nor our daughters, nor anyone else, not until the end, if there even is an end. What we know most of all this morning, as Mary and Mary did that first Easter morning, is that He is not here.

Clearly, He wanted it that way. Clearly, He wants it that way. Otherwise, He surely would've done it differently. In truth, of course, He didn't do it at all – Jesus, that is. His heavenly Father, that way God is that we experience as creator, designer, and imaginer, from whose hand in its beginning the world went, as one poet puts it, spinning – that God, God in that way, did it, taking the sting out of death as He did so, or at least the venom out of that sting. From the moment He gave up His spirit in shocked realization that He really was going to die – gasping “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” as the unrepentant thief, like the repentant, gasped to death beside Him – Jesus has just been along for the ride. This is all God's doing, God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, maker of all that is, and judge of all who live and speak with words, sacrificing Himself to Himself on that tree, much in the manner of the Norse father-god Odin – or maybe they learned it from the Christians, I don't know – in order to...

...well, in Odin's case, it was to gain wisdom, insight, the mead of poetry – for in poetry come all insights, and in poetry are founded all religions. Odin was willing to give an eye for it, all the better to see with his mind, apparently, and to create things in poetic form that were adequate to what he knew. Yet at the heart of our religion, the temptation to knowledge, particularly knowledge of such things as the difference between good and evil, is itself the temptation to evil. The sacrifice of Christ was meant to gain for God not wisdom, but love, through pain and loss.

Whose? His. Why? Because He, God, had made a mistake. He made beings that had the power to love, but also the power to hate. He made beings that had the power to obey, but also the power to disobey. He made beings who could create wonders and goodness, joy without end, but also who could create misery and torment for themselves and everyone else. That's us, if you're wondering. We. People, that is. He made us, human beings, in His own image, male and female from the beginning, equal in all genders from the beginning, but equally, dare I say it? Dare we admit it? Flawed – flawed because corruptible, flawed because deceivable, flawed because we had the power, the capacity, the tendency, even, not to be perfect. We had, have the capacity to excel, but also the capacity to just not bother, to be too damn cheap and lazy to, to do what no other creature has the power to do: become mediocre, but linger, or become wicked and endure. But we can – and we can because He made us that way.

While it may have been good at the time, over time we can see that it has not been good, or not only good. So He came to be one of us to see what that would be like, feel like, to be human – to be capable of sin, even if He didn't sin. He felt, He knew what it would be like, and He felt, He knew that because of what it would be like, He – and, with Him, it in Him – had to die.

What it is we say in baptism? That we die to self but rise in Christ? That, literally, is what happens from Good Friday through to Easter Sunday: God in human form dies. All that is corruptible in that human form dies with him. Forever, in pain, and lost. Stunned, abandoned, and alone. What comes back, what comes to life, is not that, not quite, Jesus but yet not Jesus, Christ but changed, renewed, the first fruits of them that sleep and are raised...and here memory must serve...are raised, and how does that go in *The Messiah*? “Are raised incorruptible.” Yes, that's it. We cannot be corrupted, whether by the worms that make a king go a progress through the guts of a beggar or by the desire to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil when we know we should not, for what would we do with that power? Good, but also evil. To get rid of that power is to know the power of redemption: all of that is gone – if we want it to be, and choose it to be. Humanity is redeemed, made perfect, set free, made...as it should have been, not as it was. He repented – God, that is. He made it right, when it had not been. We sinned, or our forebears did, but He made us able to, and should not have. What did it benefit Him or us that we were that way? What glory did it give Him? None – and He had to know that, which is why He died on that cross, and why, when He got up in that empty tomb, He did not wait, did not hesitate, but instead headed for home, for Galilee, for Nazareth, where it all began, to make up for what they had lost, His family, His people, His disciples, His fellow human beings, and to show them that it would all be well in time. They would be as He now was, in time – be raised incorruptible, and be changed.

The God who made us, that is, set us free from what was wrong in how He made us, and in what we did with it. That is the message of the Easter gospel this year, for all of us. He is not here? Nope. So where is He, then? He is everywhere, in every place a child cries, in every place a child laughs, redeeming us all, and making us whole.

Do not look for Him in a graveyard, Mary. Do not seek Him in a tomb. He is not here. He is everywhere but here.

So get moving. Go tell the others. They'll want to know. I promise. *Amen.*