

*Telling Bering's Resurrection Story*

*Easter Sunday 2008*

*John 20: 1-18*

*March 23, 2008*

Happy Easter to you all! I am thankful that there are several versions of the first Easter morning in the gospel accounts. One reason is that it allowed us to start our early Sunrise service *after* sunrise this morning. In the other accounts (but not in John) the women go just after sunrise! If we had to be authentic to John our sunrise service would be a pre-sunrise service. No thank you! But there are other interesting differences. Perhaps the two most interesting differences are that Mary goes alone to the tomb and that Jesus makes a post-resurrection appearance to her right there at that scene. Now I question the factual accuracy of Mary going alone to the tomb. I don't know too many women that go alone to the restroom, much less than to the grave of Jesus of Nazareth!

But seriously, John's version featuring a solitary Mary makes for a more existential version of this encounter. She goes looking for and mourning a corpse (how was she to open the tomb by herself?) and finds the living Christ. None of the other accounts have such an intense, personal encounter. Peter and the "other" disciple also appear, but they seem detached, only there to verify that Jesus' body is no longer there and then to return to their homes. Mary for some reason remains weeping, because of the grief she feels for the loss of Jesus' body. Mary finally looks into the tomb (now again alone) and sees (unlike the two men) that there are two

angels at the head and foot of where Jesus had lain. They ask why she is crying and she says because of the loss of the corpse. The risen Jesus asks her the same questions. Jesus reveals himself to her and says that she cannot hold on to him for he has yet to ascend to the Creator. She is instructed to go tell of Jesus' ascension to the Creator. Jesus and the angelic beings seem to be gently communicating to Mary that she should no longer be weeping for the corpse of the past. At the same time Jesus tells her not to hold on to him.

So many of our visitors to Bering are like Mary, coming alone for the first time. The church for many has long been kind of a corpse in their life, lacking life and vitality, if not openly cold to whom they are. Church has represented darkness, not light. They are often very emotional about remembering the loss of their relationship with Jesus because of the attitude of the institutional church. They come expecting to witness a corpse and walk away finding life and Spirit. I expect they want to hold on tightly to this new experience of our liturgy, amazing music and the acceptance that they feel, maybe for the first time. I have heard stories told over and over again of coming to the communion rail and hearing their name said with the phrase "Welcome home." Maybe that has happened to you?

As I think of Mary that first Easter and I think of the experience of the visitor to Bering, I can't help but think the same thing. The questions of the messengers at the tomb and of the instructions of Jesus suggest to me the same thing... ***We should neither hold on to the dead corpse of the past, nor are we allowed to grab hold***

***completely of the future life of Christ. What are we left with? We are left with the ever-dynamic story of the present work of the living Christ (repeat).***

The concept of “resurrection” and how we are to interpret its meaning is difficult but vitally important for the Christian. Resurrection has a complex and different set of meanings for differing communities of faith in our tradition. We have creeds and other statements that we make, but it is the way that we express hope as a local community of faith that animates the life of Christ among us and best expresses what we mean by resurrection. Some churches do that through their evangelistic witness. Some mega-churches do it through television ministry and powerful, praise worship. Some express it through their pastoral care for their members and other individuals in community. Here at Bering I think we do it in a unique way. I’ve described that as the *wounded healer*, one that expresses itself in one-on-one compassion or as a witness of social justice and action. Our resurrection story is one that promotes healing in the face of sickness; second chances for lives shattered by bad church experiences; an offering of a new family of choice when biological families place conditions of love upon us that result in rejection; and persistent hope for change in the face of brutal injustice. That’s our family album of resurrection.

Our Bible is a multi-generation, family album of the household of faith. It presents story after story in brutal honesty of the family of God. What it preserves are the stories, the ancient texts. Frankly, what it lacks are the photos, the visuals to tell the full story of what actually happened. What we have to fill in the blanks is our collective imagination, in the form of classic art, like the Durer woodcuts that adorn

all of our worship bulletins of the week. We have the music of our hymnology to help us memorize the sounds of praise and complaints. But we lack photos to share both our joy and our pain.

A number of you are facing recent loss this week of parents, of siblings, of loved ones. That is hard, I know. One of the tools that I have used to cope with the grief of lost love one is to look at photos of their lives during my time of grief. Photo albums help us to remember, to cope with, and to celebrate the hope of resurrection. In 1968 I lost my last grandmother to lung cancer. I was not quite eleven years old. Cancer was a very scary thing that my parents and other protected me from. I didn't get to say goodbye to my grandmother. Actually she was a fairly intimidating woman. She frowned often. I have strange memories of her – her breath smelled old and when she kissed me on the cheek I remember the feel of a couple of whiskers on her upper lip. It is a blessing that I received this past summer a family album that helps me remember her in her healthy and attractive days. I have this picture of her as a stylish young woman and this picture of her sticking her tongue out at the photographer that reminds me of her sarcastic wit. That takes the edge off my youthful fear of her.

I also have this family album of my former church family, a gift that I received when I left that church two years ago. There were some true, individual resurrection stories from that congregation. I think of this old picture of Julie Graham. She battled cancer for five years with courage I have never witnessed before. And at her deathbed I saw a peace come over her in her final days that could

only be placed there by the living God in the present moment as she took her final breaths. I saw the spiritual resurrection of Kathy. Kathy had grown empty spiritually because of the way the church had treated her over her sexual orientation. But when she was accepted again and invited into the ministry of music I saw her spirit soar. This picture captures that renewed contagious smile. That is a story of resurrection just as powerful as any empty tomb.

Now here's a story of congregational resurrection retold by the creative genius of Edward Albee. I received a copy of this in 1999. I lost that copy and I had to look everywhere to find a new one. But I did. It tells the story of a church which was barely surviving financially. But because of the passion of its pastor and laypersons it reinvented itself (another word for resurrection) -- or maybe it was God doing a new thing -- and created a phenomenal organization called Bering Omega Community Services. This family album has pictures of folk heroes like Esther Houser, Don Sinclair and Ed Cordray. Some pretty neat people, don't you think? I am so glad that we had a copy stored away in a closet, which we call our Heritage Room.

But what if I hadn't known to look in there? I would have missed it. I would have walked past it. I would have been like those men who looked in the tomb, didn't see what they were looking for, and went home. I WOULD HAVE MISSED THE RESURRECTION STORY. Friends, I don't want us ever to miss the resurrection story. That is why God is doing a new thing in resurrecting the history of our church in the form of a new display that I want to tell you about this morning and ask for your help.

We are creating with your help a permanent display of our 160-year history called the ***Heritage Hall***. This is the way in which we can tell the ever-changing, dynamic story of Christ's work in our church. Thanks to the vision and persistence of Mark Albright, who leads our Heritage work area, we have come to see that long hallway that leads from the back parking lot to the Sanctuary steps as a potential display area to tell the Bering Resurrection story. Picture that wall opposite our lovely courtyard, lighted by its track lighting and the sun's warm rays telling our 160-year story. We envision three beautiful panels with words and photos telling our history in three chapters: the first chapter is of the original downtown, German story. This was a safe sanctuary for German immigrants to worship God. The second chapter begins with the construction of this campus in 1922 and ends in the early 70s. It tells the story of a growing church faithfully witnessing to the social needs of the entire community, but finally shrinking with the flight to the suburbs. The third chapter tells the story of Bering that we are most familiar with – from the late seventies through the present period. It chronicles the church that reached out to invite the hippies and got the hairdressers; the community that taught Houston and the world how to love and care for those dying of AIDS; the community that led the crusade for full inclusion. It is a story filled with little resurrections, a story that not only witnesses God pushing away the stone of Jesus' tomb, but also God pushing aside the stones of injustice through this little church at the corner of Mulberry and Harold. Will you join us in completing the telling of this life-changing story? We will need your passion, your ideas and your finances. Today we begin to collect a special Easter offering that will conclude in early May. We need to raise a little over three

thousand dollars to do this right. I invite you today to tell Bering's Resurrection story – one that will be preserved for every soul who walks down that long hall. It's your story; it's my story; it is God's story.