

Starting Over in the Galilee

^{NRS} Mat 28:1 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."⁸

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

^{NRS} Mat 28:16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Last summer a man named Ed Salau attempted to climb Mt. Rainier. There's nothing special about that. Every year thousands attempt the 14,411 foot giant. What's different about Ed is that he made the attempt with only one leg. Ed is a marine and served as a first lieutenant in Iraq. His leg was destroyed when a rocket propelled grenade blew into his Bradley fighting vehicle. If you're interested in recreating Ed's effort at home, you can try holding one leg and then making over 8,000 uphill lunges. Then once you master this, you can add on a 40 pound pack.

Salau headed up Rainier as part of his work with the Wounded Warrior Project, a not for profit working to bring resources and hope to thousands of men and women injured in the line of duty. What they do is they bring people back to life by bringing them back into activities they never thought they'd be able to do again- like skiing,

backpacking, and mountaineering. Before his injury Ed loved to ski- but after his leg was taken he knew could forget about that. But he was wrong. Through the wounded warrior project he was back on the slopes with his sons. And he said he realized if he could *that* on leg- what else might be possible?

He believes in the project so much, he works full time with them now. But it's not work he ever thought he'd be doing growing up. Ed grew up in New Jersey and like a lot of active kids he struggled in school. Finishing in the bottom 5% in his high school class, his options weren't great. And then got into a little trouble, and everyday life was starting to get complicated fast. Then, he saw one those army ads with the guys climbing up walls with face paint and flying helicopters and driving tanks and it hit him. Why not the military? Things weren't going well for him. He loved being active. Why not?

And at first it seemed like a perfect move. He had been looking to get out- to escape. He was looking for that sense of purpose and meaning and honor- and in the Marines in Iraq it seemed like he had found it. All of the boringness, the messiness of everyday life in New Jersey- all the mediocrity- he was able to get away all this. Now he was part of something bigger than himself- part of something that seemed so much more and black and white than normal life. In the Marines he said he saw himself as a good guy fighting against the bad guys. In real life, everything was hard- everything was a mess. In Iraq- life seemed so much more interesting, and so much more clear to him. In Iraq everything was going great for Ed- until that one terrible, hot day.

I think Ed's story- this story of moving from small towns to the big time would have made sense to the disciples. I think this is what it must have felt like for the

disciples when they left behind the messiness and the mediocrity of the Galilee and they headed into the big, exciting adventure of Jerusalem. Ed went from New Jersey to Iraq. The disciples went from the Galilee to Jerusalem- and the change was night and day.

I mean that scene last Sunday, Palm Sunday, we're just kind of playing around with palm fronds hoping nobody pokes anyone's eye out- I'm thinking of you, Scott Cameron. But the Gospels describe hundreds, thousands of religious pilgrims lining the roads, screaming themselves hoarse and waving huge branches, braches that symbolized military power and victory. Jerusalem was the big time- with huge bad guys like the Herod the Great, the baby killer of Israel, and towering good guys like King David with whom Israel believed God made an everlasting covenant. Jerusalem was larger than life, it was dramatic and grand.

And it was such a relief from the backwaters of the Galilee where Jesus spent his entire ministry. The Galilee is nothing but tiny Jewish villages and the occasional small Roman city dotting a rural landscape. All of Israel looked down their noses at the Galileans. And I have to tell you, when folks without flush toilets look down on you, you really are pretty low on the cultural totem pole. Now they did have a hippodrome, a small stadium for horse racing, but this little exception actually drives home the point. The Galilee didn't have a proper stadium or even a theater- just this ancient version of nascar or a tractor pull.

But worse than any of this, the Galilee was known to be a mixed up, confused kind of place with Jews and Romans running into each other all the time. Archeologists tell us Galilean towns had signs with Greek just mixed in with signs in Aramaic like a crazy quilt. And we might think Galilee as a kind of early Benetton commercial is great,

they're all there living together singing Kumbaya- but none of their friends did. Isaiah disparagingly refers to Galilee as Galilee of the Gentiles, basically saying Galilee was so mixed up, it shouldn't even be considered part of Israel anymore, not *real* Israel anyway.

So Galilee was this small, boring, and confusing kind of place. So you have a little success there- big deal. The real show was in Jerusalem- Jerusalem was the adventure. And they finally escaped boring, old Galilee and made it to Jerusalem, and everything was going great- until that one, terrible, hot day when Jesus cried out and breathed his last.

This contrast between the Rocky mountain high of Jerusalem and plain Jane Galilee- it's a big deal to Matthew. Luke and John remember the disciples just hanging around in Jerusalem. But not Matthew. Matthew remembers them going back to Galilee to meet Jesus. The angel makes sure the women at the tomb know they're supposed to go back to Galilee. And then, when they run into Jesus they hear it again. And that's kind of funny, isn't it- I mean of all the things Jesus could be talking to them about, he's giving them Mapquest directions, he's reminding them of what they already know- which is that they're all supposed to go back to the Galilee.

Luke and John are sensible- they know a big movement deserves a big starting place, they leave out this humbling step down to the Galilee. But not Matthew- no Matthew remembers them going back.

Now going back like this- this must have been hard for the disciples. I mean once you've made it to the big time, once you have everything all figured out- you don't want to

go back to where you started, you know? I think this is why the angel and Jesus repeat themselves. They kept telling the disciples to go back to Galilee over again because they know the disciples really don't want to go back.

And the disciples were right to nervous. Because it doesn't go well when they make it back. Now this story at the end, the one we call The Great Commission, I know it sounds great. The church loves this story about Jesus sending the disciples out and telling them he'll be with them until the end of the age. I had a professor who told us we should always end our baptism liturgy with this story, and he would always look up into the air and affect this weird, overly dramatic, breathy voice saying, "And remember, lo, I am with you, until the end of the age". I always had to bite my hand not to crack up. For him it seemed to be this big, almost romantic moment. But honestly, think about it in context, there wasn't anything great about this commission to the disciples. In this moment they realized Jesus was sending them back to Galilee and that he wasn't going to be leading the way anymore.

Now it's bad enough to be back in the Galilee, they've left their Starbucks to go back to these little nothing towns with one gas station attached to a fashionable restaurant named "Eats". But can you imagine, can you see the looks on the faces of the disciples when they realize they have to say good bye to Christ not once now but twice? And then they're just supposed to go back to do doing what they were doing, all that teaching and healing- only now they're supposed to be the ones taking the lead? What kind of Easter is that? This isn't a Great Commission- this is a hard, even a terrible commission.

And you know, I think we're more comfortable with Luke and John than we are Matthew. I think part of us wants Easter to be a kind of Jerusalem experience without the messiness of Galilee. We want a big, happy moment, where stones are rolled away from tombs, and everybody's happy again, and we can forget about all the frustrations, the pettiness of normal, everyday life. We'd like to believe the resurrection somehow cancels out all our troubling Ash Wednesday and Good Friday mistakes and doubts. I think this is why we always go a little over the top with Easter. I, for instance, have spent way more time on this sermon than normal...in spite of the fact that last week when I didn't preach, I can always count on a few of you to tell me, "Hey, best sermon ever, Pastor!" 😊

No, there's a part of us on Easter that really wishes faith could somehow save us from the smallness, the complexity, the chaos of our lives. Like if we just believed the right things and acted the right ways we wouldn't have to feel so lost so much of the time. There's a part of us on Easter that wishes we were like Dorothy on the wizard of Oz, that if we just close our eyes and wish and believe and pray hard enough, that whatever's broken inside of us or in our family or our country, we might finally get it fixed for good and then go about our lives with a big smile on our face. There's part of us that wishes our religion could be an escape from the world- to save us from our doubts.

But you know what? I'm glad Matthew remembers it the way he does, because I think the truth, the hard truth, is that Matthew is right. Jerusalem with all its drama, with all its grandeur- Jerusalem is fine now and again. But it's no place to live. And while

Easter morning may start in Jerusalem- it ends with Christ meeting us back in Galilee, back in everyday life. This is where Christ meets us and this is where he sends us- back into the confusion of our regular, ordinary, mixed up, small and glorious Galilean lives.

And while it's not obvious- this is good news. For while Christ does send us back to Galilee- we don't go back quite the same as before. Easter may not save us from the ordinariness of our lives- but it does change us. When we encounter the risen Christ- we go back out in the world alive again to how much is possible. We go back alive again to the wonder that while sometimes people don't change- sometimes they do. We go back maybe without the absolute certainty of Jesus with us, we don't have him figured out and in our pocket, we don't have a little bracelet with his name on our wrist that tells us what we're supposed to do all the time- but what we do have is his wild spirit at our backs, a spirit that blows behind and around and through us and leads us to places we never expected- places more full of joy and pain and love than we really planned for. And we go knowing even in our doubt, remember Matthew says some of the disciples doubted when they saw Jesus again in the Galilee, that even in this he blesses us and sends us out with friends to help along the way.

Easter changes us- we go back into our everyday, Galilee lives, but we go with our eyes wide open again. But this doesn't mean it's easy. It wasn't easy for Ed Salau. He writes about how when he came back from the war and back to New Jersey, back to his Galilee, how strangers would just come up to him and start talking to him about his leg. He says they'd just come up and out of the blue say, "So how'd you lose the leg."

And after staring at them for a minute in disbelief, he'll say, "Hi. My name's Ed. What's your name again?" But in spite of moments like this, it's in Galilee he's found all the meaning and purpose and honor he was looking for as a young man. He finds it caring for the people he meets through the Wounded warrior project, working with others learning to cope with the little, mangled Galilees of their new lives. He writes: "I keep thinking about all these kids in my command, 19-year-olds who came straight from some small town or inner city, often from difficult circumstances... They don't know what they're capable of in the first place; then they get hurt and suddenly they're back home looking in the mirror thinking they are less of a person. That's why I go to work." Now that's an adventure.

And you know, every once in a while, something beautiful surprises him, even in Galilee. He remembers being in a Dunkin' Donuts where this kid was just staring at his leg. The kid was just staring like children do. Finally, the kid's mother came up and asked Ed if he would talk to her son and tell him how he lost his leg. Ed jokingly got right in the kid's face and said, "Too much playstation." But then, when he told him what really happened, he said the boy got very serious, and said, "You got hurt being a soldier? I *prayed* for you. Our church prayed for you." And Ed said he was surprised to find tears running down his leatherneck face.

Christ rises in Jerusalem, but he meets us in Galilee, in our frustrations, in our bad habits, in our sometimes dysfunctional families, and in our hidden kindness and beautiful moments. And we come to this place not to escape real life, but to remember that Christ is alive and is meeting us there. Christ lives, he lives that we might have life abundant,

and not just on a cloud somewhere, some day- but today, this very day. For the risen Christ goes before us in Spirit now, and until the end of the age. **Amen.**