

Easter Sunday

FRED CRADDOCK TELLS ABOUT THE TIME HE WAS AT EBENEZER BAPTIST CHURCH IN ATLANTA, MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S PASTOR HAD INVITED HIM. THE TIME HAD COME IN THE SERVICE FOR FRED TO PREACH. HE WALKED UP TO THE PULPIT, OPENED THE BIBLE, AND WAS ABOUT READY TO READ THE GOSPEL.

BUT BEFORE HE COULD GET STARTED, THE PASTOR, SEATED UP FRONT, STARTED TO SING. HE JUST STARTS SINGING. THEN THE OTHER PASTORS JOINED IN. THEN THE PEOPLE STARTED SINGING AND THE MUSICIANS WENT TO THEIR INSTRUMENTS, THE PIANO AND THE GUITAR AND DRUMS, AND IN NO TIME THAT CHURCH WAS ROCKIN. THEN, AT A CERTAIN POINT THE PASTOR PUT HIS HAND OUT, AND THINGS GOT QUIET, AND FRED STARTED PREACHING.

AFTERWARD, FRED SAID TO THE PASTOR. "THAT SHOCKED ME A LITTLE BIT. YOU DIDN'T TELL ME YOU WERE GOING TO DO THAT." THE PASTOR SAID, "WELL, I HADN'T PLANNED TO." FRED SAID, "THEN WHY DID YOU DO IT?" HE SAID, "WELL, WHEN YOU STOOD UP THERE, ONE OF THE ASSOCIATE PASTORS LEANED OVER AND SAID TO ME, "THAT BOY'S GOING TO NEED SOME HELP."

THESE WOMEN AT THE TOMB NEEDED SOME HELP. "WHY ARE YOU LOOKING FOR THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD?" WHEN THE WOMEN WENT TO THE TOMB OF JESUS, THEY CARRIED THEIR GRIEF, THEY CARRIED THEIR PAIN, THEY CARRIED THEIR ANGER, AND THEY CARRIED THEIR DESPAIR. WE KNOW THE SEARING PAIN OF LOSING A PARENT, OR A SPOUSE, A CHILD, OR A FRIEND. WHEN THE WOMEN ARRIVE AT THE TOMB AND STEP INSIDE, THE BODY OF THEIR LORD IS MISSING. THE WOMEN DID NOT SHOUT, "HE IS RISEN!" NOR DID THEY BREAK INTO A VICTORY DANCE. THEY WERE BAFFLED AND COULD NOT MAKE SENSE OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED.

WHEN WE BREAK INTO SONG AND SING TOGETHER, "CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY," OUR HOPE PERMEATES THIS SANCTUARY. BUT ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL OF LUKE, ON THAT FIRST EASTER MORNING, JOY AND HOPE WERE NOWHERE TO BE FOUND.

BUT THEN, SOMETHING UNEXPECTED PIERCED THE DARKNESS. SOMETHING HAPPENED THAT WAS DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE. LUKE WRITES, "SUDDENLY TWO MEN IN CLOTHES THAT GLEAMED LIKE LIGHTING STOOD BESIDE THEM. THE WOMEN WERE TERRIFIED AND BOWED THEIR FACES TO THE GROUND, BUT THE MEN SAID TO THEM, "WHY DO YOU LOOK FOR THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD? HE IS NOT HERE, BUT IS RISEN."

THE TWO MESSENGERS FROM GOD DELIVERED HEAD-SPINNING NEWS THAT LEFT THE WOMEN TERRIFIED, YET AMAZED. THE WOMEN DASHED OFF TO TELL THE DISCIPLES WHAT HAD HAPPENED, AND LUKE SAYS: "BUT THE MEN DID NOT BELIEVE THE WOMEN BECAUSE THEIR WORDS SEEMED LIKE NONSENSE."

REMEMBER THESE WERE THE COURAGEOUS WOMEN WHO STOOD BY AT THE CRUCIFIXION. THEY WERE THE FAITHFUL ONES WHO WENT TO THE TOMB TO PERFORM ONE MORE SACRED ACT.

LUKE ADDS THAT PETER DASHED OFF TO THE TOMB. WE DON'T KNOW IF HIS INTENTION WAS TO PROVE THE WOMEN WRONG, OR IF HE WAS JUST PERPLEXED AND WANTED TO SEE FOR HIMSELF. WHEN HE REACHED THE TOMB, HE TOO, FOUND IT EMPTY JUST LIKE THE WOMEN HAD SAID. AND WHAT WAS HIS REACTION? LUKE WRITES, "HE WENT AWAY, WONDERING TO HIMSELF: WHAT HAPPENED?"

OF COURSE, IT WAS NOT LONG BEFORE THE DISCIPLES BECAME CONVINCED THAT JESUS HAD RISEN. IN FACT, THEY BELIEVED IT MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE THEY HAD EVER BELIEVED. THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE RISEN CHRIST WAS SO LIFE-TRANSFORMING, THAT THEY CHANGED FROM MEN WHO WERE TERRIFIED AND WHO DENIED THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS, TO BELIEVERS WHO WOULD BE PUT TO DEATH FOR THEIR FIERCE FAITH.

SINCE THE VERY BEGINNING, THERE HAVE BEEN PEOPLE SKEPTICAL ABOUT THE NEWS OF JESUS'S RESURRECTION. ON ONE HAND IT'S HEALTHY TO ASK QUESTIONS HOWEVER WE MUST ALSO BE OPEN TO POSSIBILITIES THAT GO BEYOND WHAT CAN BE PROVEN BY OUR FIVE SENSES. NO FIRST CENTURY THERAPIST COULD HAVE TRANSFORMED THE WOMEN AND THE DISCIPLES FROM FEARFUL DOUBTERS TO DEDICATED EVANGELISTS EXPLODING WITH GOOD NEWS. NO WISHFUL THINKING COULD HAVE RESURRECTED SUCH COURAGE AND HOPE FROM THE DESPAIR OF FRIDAY. NO LITTLE RUMOR COULD HAVE SPREAD AROUND THE PLANET AND LAST THROUGHOUT CENTURIES.

WE WELL EDUCATED CHRISTIANS OFTEN BASE OUR HOPE ON WHAT WE THINK MAKES SENSE. WE OBSERVE WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE WORLD AND MAKE A JUDGMENT CALL ON WHETHER OR NOT WE THINK THINGS ARE HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. WE LOOK FOR HOPE IN STATISTICS AND POLLS AND EXPERT REVIEWS.

WE BASE OUR HOPES ON WHAT WE CAN SEE AND TOUCH AND HEAR. BUT FAITH IN THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST SPURS US TO MAKE ROOM FOR WHAT WE CANNOT SEE...WHAT IS NOT YET, BUT WHAT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE WITH GOD. RESURRECTION IS ABOUT GLORIOUS LIFE AFTER DEATH BUT IT IS ALSO ABOUT TRANSFORMATION..THE TRANSFORMATION GOD CAN WORK IN US RIGHT HERE AND NOW.

SOME OF YOU MAY BE FAMILIAR WITH HORSE BLINDERS. HORSE BLINDERS NARROW THE HORSE'S FIELD OF VISION AND PREVENT IT FROM SEEING ANYTHING EXCEPT WHAT IS DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF IT.

PANASONIC MAKES HORSE BLINDERS FOR PEOPLE. THEY CREATED THEM FOR PEOPLE WHO WORK IN OPEN OFFICES AND MAY BE DISTRACTED BY WHAT'S GOING ON AROUND THEM.

FRANKLY, I'M NOT SO SURE IT WAS NECESSARY TO CREATE HORSE BLINDERS FOR PEOPLE BECAUSE MOST OF US ALREADY ACT AS IF WE'RE WEARING THEM. WE UNCONSCIOUSLY RESTRICT OUR FIELD OF VISION. WE LEAVE LITTLE ROOM FOR SURPRISE. WE LEAVE LITTLE ROOM FOR SOMETHING UNEXPECTED TO HAPPEN. WE LEAVE LITTLE ROOM FOR GOD TO OPEN A DOOR WE'VE NEVER NOTICED. WE LEAVE VERY LITTLE ROOM FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE WHICH IS OFTEN SIMPLY THE "NOT YET."

FAITH IN THE RESURRECTION INSTILLS HOPE IN US. HOPE KEEPS US MOVING FORWARD WHEN LIFE IS AT ITS WORST, WHEN THE FORECAST LOOKS DISMAL, WHEN A BETTER DAY SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE. HOPE MOTIVATES US TO KEEP LIVING EVEN WHEN THE DOCTOR HAS SAID, "I'M SORRY, THERE'S NOTHING MORE WE CAN DO." HOPE MOTIVATES US TO GET OUT OF BED AND KEEP LOOKING FOR A JOB AFTER MONTHS OF DEAD ENDS. HOPE INSPIRES US TO KEEP LIVING AND LOVING EVAN AFTER LOSING A PREVIOUS LOVED ONE. HOPE QUELLS OUR ANXIETY AND FOSTERS AN INNER PEACE EVEN WHEN WE MUST WALK THROUGH THE DARKEST VALLEY.

WHEN WE SING "CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY" WE PROCLAIM THAT THIS WORLD IS NOT ALL THERE IS. WE HAVE ANOTHER HOME, AN ETERNAL HOME, FAR GREATER THAN ANYTHING WE HAVE KNOWN IN THIS WORLD. HOWEVER, WE DO NOT SIMPLY SET OUR SIGHTS ON HOW THINGS WILL BE ONCE WE GET THERE. WHILE WE STILL WALK THIS EARTH, WE PARTNER WITH GOD IN TRANSFORMING THE WORLD INTO HIS KINGDOM ON EARTH.

AT THE END OF A PARTICULARLY LONG DAY, A FIRST GRADE TEACHER DECIDED TO SCRAP HER LESSON PLAN. INSTEAD, SHE HAD ALL HER FIRST GRADERS SIT IN A CIRCLE AND TELL EACH OTHER WHAT THEY WANTED TO BE WHEN THEY GREW UP. ONE BY ONE EACH CHILD PROUDLY ANNOUNCED THEY'D LIKE TO BE A NURSE, A BANKER, A TEACHER, A FIREMAN. THE LAST CHILD TO SPEAK WAS THE MOST TIMID BOY IN THE CLASS. HE SAID: "WELL, WHEN I GET BIG I'M GOING TO BE A LION TAMER. I'M GOING TO WORK IN THE CIRCUS. I'LL GET IN A CAGE FULL OF FIERCE LIONS AND TIGERS WITH MY WHIP AND MY CHAIR AND I'LL MAKE THE LIONS LEAP THROUGH HOOPS OF FIRE AND OBEY ALL MY COMMANDS." SUDDENLY, IN THE MIDST OF HIS EXCITING TALE, HE LOOKED AROUND TO FIND ALL HIS CLASSMATES STARING AT HIM WITH THEIR MOUTHS WIDE OPEN.

HE REALIZED THEY WERE FINDING IT HARD TO BELIEVE HE, OF ALL PEOPLE, WAS GOING TO BE A LION TAMER. EMBARRASSED, HE WAS QUICK TO REASSURE THEM. "WELL, OF COURSE," HE STAMMERED, "I'LL HAVE MY MOM WITH ME."

NO MATTER HOW CAUTIOUS, SHY, TIMID, OR INTROVERTED WE MAY APPEAR, EACH OF US IN OUR INNER RECESSES MAY BE A POTENTIAL LION TAMER. ANYONE WHO BELIEVES IN AND ENCOUNTERS THE RISEN CHRIST AND BECOMES AWARE OF THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN

THEIR LIVES, WILL FIND THE INNER STRENGTH, VISION, HOPE AND COURAGE TO LIVE AN ADVENTUROUS LIFE FOR GOD'S KINGDOM.

MAY THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTED CHRIST ROLL AWAY ALL THE STONES THAT WOULD US BACK AND KEEP US DOWN. MAY THE LIVING CHRIST LIVE ANEW IN US TODAY. AMEN AND AMEN.