

Stepping out and Crossing the River

One day three men were hiking and unexpectedly came upon a large raging, violent river. They needed to get to the other side, but had no idea of how to do so. The first man prayed to God, saying, "Please, God, give me the strength to cross this river." Poof! God gave him big arms and strong legs and he was able to swim across the river in about two hours, after almost drowning a couple of times. Seeing this, the second man prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength and the tools to cross this river." Poof! God gave him a rowboat and he was able to row across the river in about an hour, after almost capsizing the boat a couple of times. The third man had seen how this worked out for the other two, so he also prayed to God, saying, "Please, God, give me the strength and the tools and the intelligence to cross this river." And poof! God turned him into a woman. She looked at the map, hiked upstream a couple of hundred yards, then walked across the bridge.

On the first Easter Day, it was the women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary and others) who remembered that Jesus left a map. The map was his prediction that he would be arrested, tortured and crucified; and rise again. When they saw the empty tomb, they put that experience together with the map provided by Jesus' words and they discovered a direction for their lives. They were the first to step out and cross the river from despair over the death of Jesus to trust in the resurrection of Jesus. And they immediately went to the apostles and began to preach: "Jesus is not among the dead. Jesus is alive!"

But preaching doesn't always produce immediate results. If we read on, the next verse tells us that the eleven men closest to Jesus were not impressed. "This story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:11). The Greek is very strong at this point. It really means something like: 'they thought it was utter rubbish'. These same men had heard the same predictions by Jesus. They should have been ready to believe. They weren't. Instead, they shrugged, poured some more coffee and continued to read the Sunday paper.

Why didn't Jesus' closest male friends believe the first report of his resurrection? Was it because they discounted women and did not accept their evidence? Yes. Was it that the news that Jesus was alive was just too good to be true and they couldn't take it in all at once? Yes.

But maybe something more was going on with them. Perhaps they resisted the Easter story. After Jesus died, maybe they wanted to go back to business as usual. Maybe they wanted just to be eleven guys who followed a tragic hero for a time. It was great while it lasted, but it all ended badly one Friday. So, maybe they would form an alumni association called "Eleven Cynical Men" and gather annually to remember Jesus. The End. Close the book of Luke.

But that was not the end. Some things happened to them. Quiet, ordinary, unglamorous things. Easter things. Jesus appeared in a dining room one night. One morning Jesus cooked breakfast for them on the beach. A couple of them were walking down a country lane, all bummed out and depressed. A stranger joined them, opened up the map of the Scriptures and, when he broke bread with them, they recognized Jesus.

Once they recognized Jesus, they too crossed over the bridge from settling for the way things are to devoting their whole lives to the way things will be in the Kingdom. They were no longer the eleven who stayed behind and reminisced about the way Jesus did things. Now they went out to do those things. Their life became a great adventure, filled with preaching, healing, arrests, beatings, shipwrecks and a joy that no one could take away. They were on fire. They knew what life was for.

When like the disciples we learn to step out and cross the River we will live our lives knowing that

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1. The Resurrection Present us with the Best Case Scenario: There is a popular book these days called The Worst Case-Scenario Survival Handbook. It is "the indispensable guide for surviving life's sudden turns for the worse. Survival experts provide illustrated, step-by-step instructions on what you need to know FAST." And what do you need to know? "How to deliver a baby in a taxicab; how to escape from killer bees; how to survive if your parachute fails to open," etc., etc.

But, as useful as that information is (and it is), the Church has never given a lot of guidance about how to survive the worst case scenario. Rather, the Christian life is about living the vision of the best case scenario whose foundation is in Easter. The

only thing worse than not surviving is to survive and not to know why. Helen Keller, the blind and deaf woman who made history by learning to overcome her disabilities was once asked if there was anything worse than being blind. She answered, "Oh, yes!" There is something worse than being blind. It is being able to see and not having any vision."

Last night at the Easter Vigil I noticed something. The first prayer that is said is about the new fire with which the Paschal Candle is lit. And the first thing we ask for in that first prayer at that first Liturgy of Easter is that we would be inflamed with new hope. Then a little later on we pray: "As we worship you in sincerity and truth may we shine as a light in the world." We are here today to burn with the desire for the Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven – the best case scenario.

2: Because as Christians we are to live in light of the best case scenario we are to be a people of hope.

Resurrection is about hope, of course. It's the hope with which some of us have laid our dearest ones to rest in the everlasting arms of our merciful Lord this past year. It's the hope that informs our waiting and watching as some of us prepare for that same day of parting. It's the hope that keeps us going on the way. But that hope of the resurrection is not about individual survival. It is hope for the best case scenario – the transformation of the world, which is God's overarching plan for his creation.

St. Augustan, our patron Saint said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the ways things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are." Easter will enflame us with anger at all the conditions in the world and in our social order and in our personal lives that diminish the children of God. And Easter will enflame us with courage to speak and act so that the world will know that death does not have the final word.

One man who stepped out and crossed the river and learned to live a hope-filled life was the man people in AA know as Bill. He was one of the movement's founders. After spending years in the grip of alcohol he came up to the turbulent river and decided he wanted to live on the other side. This is what he discovered.

"In my own case, the foundation stone of freedom from fear is that of faith; a faith that, despite all worldly appearance to the contrary, causes me to believe that I live in

a universe that makes sense.

To me, this means a belief in a Creator who is all power, justice and love, a God who intends for me a purpose, a meaning and a destiny to grow, however little and haltingly, towards his own likeness and image. Before the coming of faith I had lived as an alien in a cosmos that too often seemed both hostile and cruel. In it there could be no inner security for me. After I received the gift of faith I saw the universe to be lighted by God's love; I was alone no more."

Like the women, the disciples and Bill who stepped out and crossed the river to live their lives on the resurrection shore, this Easter we are called to do the same. On this shore we can live hope filled lives because we in the light of the best case scenario.

As you stand by the river, what side of the shore are you living on today?