

Easter Sunrise

How Are You Taking The News?

April 5, 2015

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

Every first Sunday of February a very significant portion of America and a small portion of the rest of the world tunes in at around 6:00 PM Eastern Standard Time to watch one of the most watched spectacles of modern time --- the Super Bowl. Now anyone who watches the Super Bowl -- and especially those who don't watch the Super Bowl -- will tell you that while some games are good and some games are not so good -- the Super Bowl overall is a very forgettable event. If I were to ask you, for example, who won the last five Super Bowls -- with the exception of the sports trivia maniacs in our midst -- none of us could come up with five, maybe not even two. Instead for an increasing number of us the main attraction to the Super Bowl is the commercials. Let's admit it, it's the commercials. It's all about the commercials. More and more people are interested in is how creative can the advertisers and marketers get when it comes to getting across the message they want to get across about their particular product. Over the years we've had frogs selling beer, models catching Doritos between their teeth, Bob Dole selling a little blue bill, and horses saving puppy dogs and it all points to how creatively and ingenuously and manipulatively advertisers impart messages and images that they hope will remain indelibly etched in our minds. Often they are very successful. They have awards for such success. The Cleo awards --- handed out to those who show an exceptional ability to communicate the message that needs to be communicated.

Now if you were to ask one of these Cleo award winning advertisers to take a look at the story Carolyn just read to you --- the Easter story --- to comment on the particular strategy that God chose to impart what has been the most provocative, disturbing and liberating message ever conveyed --- Jesus Christ is Risen --- I am sure that advertiser or any advertiser would tell you that Jesus he got it all wrong. You don't have to be an advertiser really to figure out that if you are living in first century Palestine and your hope is to find some trustworthy spokesperson for your message -- the last person you think about appearing before is the very person Jesus appeared before. Mary Magdalene --- a woman, of dubious distinction, questionable morals and a checkered past. Everybody knows that if you want your message to have some semblance of credibility --- she is not the one you choose. Think about it --- Jesus could have appeared before Caesar, he could have appeared before King Herod or Pilate, he could have appeared before Caiphas the High Priest --- but no, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene. This is the one to whom the message was given --- "Go and tell the others what you have seen and heard ...". And so she goes. "I have seen the Lord!" she says. And the miracle of course --- is that this became the first sermon of the Christian Church. The first sermon of the Christian Church was delivered not by a seminary graduate which puts my job in jeopardy ... not by an inner-sanctum disciple ... not by Peter, not by James or John or Andrew --- but the first sermon of the Christian Church ... the first exposition on the good news of the resurrected Christ, the first witness to the news of Jesus' resurrection was delivered by Mary Magdalene. "I have seen the Lord."

You know, outside of Jesus' resurrection itself ---perhaps the greatest miracle of Easter --- is that God chose the least likely candidate to be the bearer of the greatest news that has ever been borne. "I have seen the Lord." Not just the greatest ... but the most stunning. "I have seen the Lord."

A dead man come to life --- how do you take that kind of news?

Bruce Larson in his book *Living Beyond Fear* tells of years ago reading about a judge in Yugoslavia who had had an unfortunate accident. While standing in his bathtub he had reached to turn on the bathroom light and was electrocuted. His wife find found his body sprawled on the bathroom floor. The town doctor was called and the judge was pronounced dead. The custom in that town was to place the body of the deceased in a room under the crypt in the town cemetery

for one night before burial. So the judge's body was placed there while friends and family prepared for what was going to be a very, very sad funeral. In the middle of the night, however, the judge came to. After a while he figured out where he was ... he went to leave and made his way to the gate of the crypt --- outside of which stood the guard --- "Could you open the gate please?" Hearing and seeing the dead man come to life, the guard did what any good guard would do --- he ran. Fortunately, he returned in a while with a friend and they released the newly revived judge. The judge's first thought was to call his wife and tell her he was alive, but he got no farther than, "Honey, it's me," when she screamed and fainted. Next he went to the houses of several friends who all thought he was a ghost and refused to let him in their houses. Finally, in a last desperate measure, he called a friend in a distant city, who had not heard of his death, and who interceded for him with his family and friends and vouched for his resurrection.

"I have seen the Lord." How do you take that kind of news? I think that is the question of Easter --- how do you and I take news of Mary Magdalene? A message so provocative, so disturbing, so liberating, so surprising, so hard to believe --- that it doesn't matter who delivers it --- it's either true or it's not. I mean if I stood here this morning and said, "I have seen Elvis" --- it wouldn't matter that I was a pastor or a complete stranger --- it is a message so provocative that it stands on it's own --- it's either true or it isn't. (It's not, in case you were wondering.)

So Mary stands before us and says, "I have seen the Lord." How are you and I going to take this news? Because how we take it will in fact make all the difference in the world. How we take the news of Jesus' resurrection will make all the difference in the world --- because, you know, when I look at the Easter Story and I see lots of befores and afters. I see lots of changed people. When I look at the Easter Story I see a woman who has been told all her life to be silent ... I see a woman who has given everyone reason to believe that she is not to be believed ... that is the "before". And when I look at the Easter story I see this Mary Magdalene who didn't have to be afraid about what anyone thought of her. She had seen the Lord and that's all that mattered. The first preacher of the Christian Church --- it made all the difference in the world.

When I look at the Easter Story I see a group of frightened, sniveling, paranoid men hiding away in the recesses of Jerusalem --- that's the before. But when Mary comes to them and tells them that she has seen the Lord --- all of a sudden these men are no longer frightened or sniveling or paranoid or hiding --- it's not long before they are preaching from the rooftops. It's all how you take the news, you see.

When I look at the Easter Story I see Caesar ensconced in his Golden Roman Palace ... and I see Pilate ensconced in his tribunal chair ... and I see Herod ensconced upon his royal throne ... that is the "before" --- but I don't see them there anymore, do you? I don't see the Roman Empire anymore, do you? You see, it's all a matter of how you take the news.

What an incredible opportunity you and I are given every time that Mary runs to us and says, "I have seen the Lord." Every time we hear her witness --- we are given the great opportunity to believe it or not believe it. And to believe it means we don't have to be afraid anymore. Did you hear that? We don't have to be afraid anymore!

You don't have to be afraid to live and you don't have to be afraid to die. And that is good news because some of us here today are afraid to live. You are afraid to live. I mean really afraid to live.

You can't live in Sarasota and not be aware of and impressed with the performance of Nick Wallenda - Sarasota's very own high wire act. Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, skyscrapers, you name it and Nick has walked over it. Now I don't know how he does that and I am not particularly interested in trying to find out. But here is one thing he said, "If you think you can fall, you're more likely to." It's the secret of high wire walking. When you're on the wire - the worst thing to take with you is the fear of falling.

You know a lot of us put a lot of our energies into not falling. We are motivated by a fear that we are going to fail. Those frightened disciples hiding up in that room had put all of their energies into not falling. And that is no way to live. But when Jesus walks out of that tomb --- and when Mary says, "I have seen the Lord" --- and when they took the news to be true --- they never lived to fall again!!!! Oh, they fell from time to time. But they never lived to fall. Everyday back up on the high

wire of the glorious kingdom of God. They never feared failure --- because at the end of the day there was the resurrected Christ. At the end of **life** there was the resurrected Christ. It's how you take the news.

Think of what you might do if you weren't afraid to fall. Think of the amazing things you might do if you weren't afraid to fall!! How many times did you fall before you learned to walk? More than anyone can count. But you're walking. Babe Ruth hit 714 homeruns and one of the reasons is that he wasn't afraid to strike out --- and he did, 1330 times. R.P. Macy failed seven times before his store in New York finally caught on. John Creasey was rejected 743 times before he published his first book. He published 562 afterwards. You see, when Jesus walks out of that tomb we learn that life here is just a prelude. It's just a prelude ... a warm-up for eternity. And we don't have to be afraid to live ... because we are going to be living for a long time!!!!

And that is the other piece of good news --- the other piece of good news ... is that we don't have to be afraid to die. When Mary tells us that she has seen the Lord ... we are given the great chance to believe God is a God of both the living and dead. That the God who embraces us now ... will embrace us even more fully beyond the grave. When Bishop Warren Chandler of the Episcopal Church was dying he was talking to an old friend who sat with him at his bedside and his friend asked, "Do you have any fears of crossing over the river of death?" To which the Bishop replied, "All my life I have believed and preached that my Father owns the land on both shores. Why should I be afraid to cross?"

In a church I once served after a funeral I had conducted the widow came out of the church with a more than expected radiant smile and a chuckle under her breath. She was holding the hand of her granddaughter. I inquired about her smile and giggle. She said her little granddaughter had just a week before been to a wedding. And so when the funeral was over the little girl had turned to her grandmother and asked, "When do we get to throw the rice?" Not a bad theology. You see, when you take the news of Mary to be true, you don't have to be afraid to die. He owns both sides of the river.

So how are you taking the news? Because how you take the news makes all the difference in the world.

Because you know what? The world desperately needs people who aren't afraid to live and aren't afraid to die. The world needs people who so believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ ... who are so assured of his victory over death ... who are so convinced that their life is going to last a long, long time in the here and beyond --- that they are not afraid to live and die in the here and now. The world needs some Mary Magdalene's who aren't afraid --- even though they have been given no voice ... even though they have been given no credibility --- they are not afraid to say, "I have seen the Lord!" The world needs some disciples ... a lot of disciples ... who aren't afraid to go out into the world and tell the good news. The poor need people who aren't afraid to be with the poor. The sick need people who aren't afraid to be with the sick. The lost need people who aren't afraid to be with the lost. The world needs people who aren't afraid to fall.

And that is the news ... the good news. We don't have to live to fall anymore. Oh, we will fall from time to time. But we never have to live to fall again. Because Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!