

HEARD IT ALL BEFORE

Matthew 28: 1-10

Easter Sunday SBCC 2005

I've heard it all before, and I bet you have too.

Poet Stan Steward heard it all before.

In his poem called, you guessed it, "Heard it all Before," he writes,

The soul speaks frankly.

Lord, Easter comes but once a year

And when it does –

What's new?

I've seen it on film

And I've watched it in dance.

I've heard it with sound effects

And sung it in oratories and rocked to a pop music beat.

I've contemplated symbols and meditated in silence

And participated in the longest and most elaborate liturgies.

I've even been a cast member in a dramatic presentation.

How many times?

How many ways?

I've heard it all before.

You've heard it all before too.

So how is the resurrection new for us?

How is it new for those of us who come from a world of TV, VCR and DVD programs, committee meetings and housekeeping, take out food and crunchy breakfast cereals, bank deposits, slot machines and homework.

And how is the resurrection new for those of us who come with wounds carefully concealed under flesh and fancy Easter clothing?

And what about those of us who come with loneliness as an uninvited companion hidden behind polite sociable smiles?

What about those of us who, in grieving, want most desperately to believe in resurrection to new life but cannot feel and live into it? Or what about those of us to whom the resurrection has never meant anything, but who come because that's what you do on Easter morning?

How is resurrection new for all of us, this motley collection of folks, who have, or course, heard it all before?

When I was a kid, and I imagine when you were too, Easter meant colored eggs, fuzzy ducklings, new clothes and a two legged creature with long floppy ears. We were too young, most of us to know about death, so Easter then was a celebration of spring. As teenagers, Easter became a time for some of us when we would arise in darkness to pray the sun up. We were beginning to understand that Easter was more than furry bunnies.

When we became older still, we began to reflect on death experiences that we had encountered in our growing years and we experienced the never againness finality of death as we lost grandparents, parents, spouses or children. Resurrection became something we ached for as we struggled to understand the meaning of death. But then our “feel good” culture told us not to dwell on the death stuff and in denying us the full bodied experience of grieving death we were denied the possibility and hope of knowing the victory of resurrection. So resurrection became something we talked about every Easter, and at funerals, but never allowed to live in us. We’ve heard it all before.

So another Easter rolls around and we are left feeling, as Stewart says:

*Not much! Stewart writes, I hope the clergy get it over quickly,
that sermons aren’t too labored or liturgies too long.*

*And mostly I hope the weather is good
so that I can enjoy the remainder of the holy-day, in ways that please me.*

Don’t get me wrong.

When services are scheduled

I’ll be there, I’ll do my part.

But Lord, don’t expect me to be excited

Or even slightly moved,

I’ve heard it all before.

But...the women at the tomb hadn’t heard it all before. At sunrise, laden with oils of burial and heavy hearts, the faithful and waiting women proceeded to the tomb to anoint the body of their friend. They knew what to expect.. after all, when you’re dead, you’re dead.

What a shock! What puzzlement, what bewilderment to arrive at the tomb to find the body gone. Who took it? Someone has taken the body of our Lord.

And then ...what joy, what all encompassing joy, to find that the one they believed was dead was not dead at all.

Jesus lives! Jesus Christ is alive! Let us go tell all of our friends.

Resurrection! Resurrection ... never heard before. Resurrection...never experienced before. A new thing had entered the world.

Death no longer had the final word. Life became victorious in Christ, through Christ, in you, in me, through God, the God of life and love and light.

Friends, you haven't heard it all before. Our God, the God of life, the God who raised Jesus Christ, is making resurrection happen now. And you know what? Every time resurrection happens it's new. Resurrection isn't limited to an event that occurred two thousand years ago. It's true. Jesus Christ was raised from the dead a long time ago and from that point resurrection power was unleashed in the world. And that power is boundless and that power is now!

That power was at work in the life of Emma Sutter. Emma Sutter is a woman from St. Johns, MI, who was tragically widowed, several years ago, just before harvest time. Emma's neighbor, local songwriter, Kitty Donahue, wrote a song about it. She sings as if from Emma's heart:

“They came from town to tell me
that my Jim had taken ill.
He was too young to die like that.
He was only forty-four.”

Emma was left with three daughters, unharvested fields, and lots of pain. All of life seemed to have died with Jim and as Kitty Donahue's sings from Emma's voice:

“Mary bore a Jesus
Jesus bore a cross
And these shoulders of mine
Can't carry on one more loss,”

The day after the funeral, the neighbors showed up. They were seven tractors strong, and they harvested Emma's fields. And the resurrection in that gave Emma the courage and strength to step back into life.

Friends, we haven't heard it all before. Our God, who raised Jesus Christ is making it happen now.

A Lansing friend of mine, Melanie Morrison, a Untied Church of Christ minister, tells a story of attending church in the Netherlands on Easter morning. The service was in Dutch which she couldn't understand. She kept hearing the word “opstanding.” She says she finally forsook her pride and asked the woman next to her what it meant. “Resurrection,” came the reply. To Melanie the word “opstanding” sounded like “standing up” in English. That was something she hadn't heard before. So she began to ponder the meaning of the word. When we speak of resurrection we say “Christ is risen.” That means Christ stood up. If we think about Jesus literally standing up that brings resurrection down to earth, doesn't it? Too often resurrection becomes a distant theological concept – not like something as dynamic as the physical act of standing up from death to life.

So, if we think about resurrection as standing up, then we can recognize that the gospels are full of resurrection stories. Remember the woman who walked bent over for eighteen years? Her disability rendered her unable to look into the eyes of people who she cared for, or of anyone for that matter. What would have been an ordinary trip to the market or to the well became occasions of ridicule and great physical and emotional pain. And then one day at the synagogue, not a place where she usually found much solace, there was this man named Jesus. And you know what he did. He held out his arms and laid his hands on her. “Stand up,” he said. She had never heard such a voice before, a voice which gave her the hope she really could stand up and so she did. She stood.

Resurrection happened.

Do you remember what the prodigal son said from the depths of his life's decay? He said, "I will rise and go to my father." He chose to stand up from death to life.

Do you remember what Matthew the tax collector did when Jesus called him to discipleship? In spite of the fact that many had asked much of him, Jesus asked in a way he had never heard before. So he stood up, of course, and followed Jesus.

Resurrection happened.

What other stories of people standing up do you remember in the Bible? As you think about that this week, think also of the people you know who have stood up from death to life. Resurrection happens each time someone sheds an addiction to drugs or alcohol or any of the other things that overpower us and leave us imprisoned in living graves. Resurrection happens each time someone extricates themselves from an abusive relationship. Resurrection happens when after the death of someone close to us, we experience the peace and certainty of knowing that they are still with us. Resurrection happens when people in third world countries, which actually are two thirds of the world, come together in Christian base communities and find hope and life amidst deathly oppression. Resurrection does not look only beyond the grave to a time when we will be "raised in glory." Resurrection calls us to choose life now, to stand up now.

*Heard it all before? Again our poet asks.
 Maybe if it is some sentence you're thinking of,
 But if meaning is what you seek
 This Easter is very new.
 At no other point in your life
 Has it's message confronted you as now it does
 And never before has it meant to you what it can mean now,
 At no previous point in your life
 Has the resurrection of God's own dear Son
 Had so much significance for the dilemmas
 Of your living and your dying.
 But the choice is yours,
 And if you want to, you can hide behind the cliché
 "I've heard it all before."*

Friends, those of us who choose resurrection choose to stand up and hear something never heard before. We choose to see in ways never seen before. We choose to touch as we've never touched before.

Let's stand up and hear the crying of the child with the distended belly in Africa and Central America and close by. Let's recognize that child as our child and let us be assured in our resurrection faith that we can feed that child.

Let's stand up and see that the dirty unkempt man with the wild look in his eyes is our brother. Let's recognize that we need not fear our brother nor be offended by him. And let us be assured in our resurrection faith that there's a place for him with us, in our community. Let's invite him in.

Let's stand up and touch the one, now widowed, who longs for the simple touch of a friend. Let's recognize that we were given to one another to touch, to hold, to comfort, to love. And let us be assured in our resurrection faith that in touching we are touched and in loving we are loved.

So, let's stand up, my friends, to hear to see, and to touch as we never have before. With our resurrection faith we can do so with assurance.

So stand up. As Stewart writes from the voice of God this time,
*We can move into encounter this Easter time.
And outside the empty tomb on Emmaus Road
We can talk as I have talked with others
And together we can move into the future
Where all things change
Except my Calvary love,
And the fire I'll put inside your heart.*