

RUNNING TO THE CROSS
John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday—April 4, 2010

INTRO: A minister tells the story about the time he was asked to conduct a graveside burial service for a member of his church. The only problem was, the cemetery was more than an hour and a half away from the church and he wasn't feeling well, so he decided that instead of driving his own car, he would ride with the funeral director in the passenger seat of the hearse.

By the time they arrived at the cemetery, the pastor was truly sick with flu-like symptoms. Feverish and feel very weak, he made it through the service, but he was deathly pale and obviously not well. As they headed back home, the funeral director suggested the pastor stretch out in the back of the hearse since it was now empty. It had curtains and nobody would see him. The pastor decided to take him up on the offer and promptly fell asleep.

He awoke when the vehicle stopped. Taking a few minutes to fully awaken, he slowly sat up and drew the side curtain to see where he was. Suddenly he was face to face with a gas station attendant filling the hearse with gas.

Needless to say, the attendant was surprised and shocked to see a body in the back of a hearse rise up and stare back at him. With all the color drained out of him, and his eyes as wide as saucers, the attendant took off running, while the funeral director ran behind him, trying to catch up to explain the whole situation. (www.epulpit.net/080323, by Billy Strayhorn)

According to the Gospel of John, the very earliest response to the resurrection caused a similar reaction—there was a lot of surprised and shocked running around in the garden that morning.

First, there was Mary Magdalene. In the quiet darkness just before dawn, she made her way to the burial place of Jesus. She was the first to encounter the great surprise of the empty tomb, but she didn't immediately connect the dots to resurrection—that would come later.

In the pre-dawn shadows, the empty tomb did not strengthen her faith—instead, it increased her velocity! She picked up her heels and ran, sprinting away from the tomb to tell the disciples how someone had taken away the body of their Lord, and how the sad news about Jesus has gotten even sadder.

When she reached Peter and the beloved disciple, she no sooner got her story out of her mouth than they, too, took off running, legs pumping, breathing hard, faces flushed, running toward the empty tomb, running toward the gaping hole in the universe of human expectation left by the absent body of Jesus.

Why is everyone running in this story?

At one level, of course, the answer is obvious. Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple would probably say that the reason why they greeted this first Easter with instantaneous wind sprints is because of the fear and the excitement of it all, because they sensed intuitively that the moment was filled with electricity, dread and urgency.

Like people who have been startled by a sudden, sharp clap of thunder on a clear, blue day, they did not immediately know exactly what had happened, but they spontaneously responded by jumping up and letting their feet fly. Whatever it meant that the tomb was astonishingly empty, it surely meant they could not sit still...

...so they ran.

They ran toward the empty tomb, the empty cross—and the world has never been the same.

Since the first of the year at East Dallas Christian Church, we've been on the move with the holy scriptures, too. In January and February, we studied several of the biblical texts that told of people who tried to run away from God—who tried to avoid the call of Christ in their lives. As we explored those

scriptures about biblical runaway, we confessed that sometimes we are people who run in the opposite direction from Jesus and his call to us.

During Lent, over the last 6 weeks, we were invited to turn back toward Jesus, to join him on his Crosswalk as he slowly made his way toward that fateful week in Jerusalem.

This last week, we journeyed with him through a Parade of palms; a last supper with both saints and sinners; a trial, torture, and crucifixion that led to His death on a cross. Each step we took seemed to be more labored, and on Good Friday we listened to his last words as he hung from the cross and it felt like time stood still.

But today—today—as the sun started to rise and the light began to dawn, our pace picks up, and we find ourselves running with Mary Magdalene and the disciples as they make their way to an empty tomb, an empty cross.

We run toward the cross because even though it's original intent--the purpose for which it was initially made--symbolized

*the emptiness of human compassion,

- the scarcity of justice,
 - the paucity of peace and the lack of love—

on Easter morning God took that malignant tree and transformed it into one of the greatest gifts we have ever been given.

And so we run with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and strength and to grasp hold of the treasure that is the cross of Christ and the gift it offers us.

We run for the promise of new life—new life in the here and now. The empty cross is a symbol that **ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE** for those who love the Lord.

If you have felt the dead-end disappointment of unemployment—run to the cross and believe that God can transform your days with meaningful labor.

If you have felt the stone-cold lack of love in relationships—run to the cross and believe that God can transform your lives with life-long loving companionship.

If you have felt the emptiness of purpose for your life—run to the cross and believe that God can transform our world because of the unique gifts only you have been given to share.

If you have looked at the world and felt depleted by the hopelessness of war, of clergy sexual abuse, of bi-partisan bickering—keep running to the cross and believe that God will transform all these places of sin, suffering, and evil with His hand of justice and righteousness.

We run toward the cross because it symbolizes God's victory over the worst that the world can throw at us.

The writer of the book of Hebrews summarizes it best in chapter 12: ¹⁻³Don't you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish line with God. He could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls! (The Message)

This scripture reminds us that final, most important symbol of the empty cross to which we run is the promise of eternal life with Jesus beyond this world, beyond this life.

The finish line here on earth is only the beginning of a journey that will take us to best God has to offer—a realm of peace, and justice and joy that Jesus proclaimed, and which we celebrate today of all days, on Easter Sunday.

It is that promise that keeps us running forward toward the open arms of Christ.

Over 20 years ago now I conducted my first funeral. I was in my third year of divinity school and serving the First Christian Church of Waynesboro, TN, population 3000.

I was nervous as all get out—but the funeral service itself was one of great celebration for a woman who was a not only a saint of the church, but a pillar of that county seat town.

When the service was done, I went out to my car to prepare to drive to the graveside service which was to be held at the cemetery on the outskirts of town.

I had not known up to that point that there is a structure to the funeral procession. The motorcycle police lead the way to stop traffic and keep the procession rolling. The minister goes next, followed by the hearse, and then the family car—trailed by the rest of the congregation in the slow parade of headlights.

I was told to watch the motorcycle police officers, and when they began to move, I should follow.

And so I watched them, and when they began to inch their bikes toward the funeral home exit, I slowly began to follow.

The problem was—they were only moving into place to get a better angle at the street. Yet when they saw me begin to roll forward, they thought that meant it was time to go. When I saw them take off, I followed after them.

However, the driver was not in the hearse yet. When he saw us leave, he hightailed it to get into the car, and then sped a little faster than that hearse had probably gone in years trying to catch up. I looked back and realized

what had happened when I saw the hearse weaving around other cars trying to catch up to me.

When we all got to the cemetery, we all had to laugh. The deceased was a woman who had always been time-challenged—and everybody said that she would be late to her own funeral.

Sure enough, she almost was.

But that day we knew that she had, like Paul wrote in his second letter to his student Timothy, “fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.⁸ Now there was in store for her the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, awarded her on that day -- and not only to her, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

That’s the prize at the end of the race for all of us. That’s why we keep running.

Look—the empty cross is ahead of us.

On your mark, get set—go.

Happy Easter.