

"Second Act"

"Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Is it possible for one's life to have a second act?

As the sun rose on that Sunday morning, Jesus' disciples assumed that there would be no second act for them after the shameful manner in which their first act ended. Even though they had sworn that they would stand by Jesus no matter what happened to him, at the hour of his greatest need that had all abandoned their Lord in a moment of fear and cowardice: *"Then all the disciples deserted him and fled."* (Matthew 26:56). None of them stood up for Jesus when he went before Pontius Pilate and was condemned to death; Peter went so far as to publicly deny any relationship with Jesus three times, until he heard the rooster crow and *"remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly."* (26:75). None of them were there at Golgotha *"when they crucified my Lord."* The only persons who were present to witness Jesus' suffering and death on the Cross were *"many women ... looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee."* (27:55-56). The first – and at the time seemingly only – act of Jesus' life ends when Joseph or Arimathea *"took [Jesus'] body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock."* (27:59-60). For the disciples, their relationship with Jesus appears to be finished, and their act ends with those who were once his closest followers cowering in fear, defeated and disgraced, with no expectation of a second act or another chance to show their loyalty to their crucified Lord.

As the dawn of that Sunday arrives, two of the women who had stood by Jesus in the final hours of his life – *"Mary Magdalene and the other Mary"* (28:1) – went to see the tomb. They came merely to continue their vigil at the place of his burial, with no expectation that they would have access to his corpse since a guard had been posted at the tomb. They came in obedience to the command of the Torah to serve as witnesses (*"... only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained."* – Deuteronomy 19:15). Unlike in Mark's account, the women do not wonder *"who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"* (Mark 16:3), nor do they come to complete the traditional Jewish anointing ritual, since Jesus' body had already been anointed (*"By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial."* – 26:12). Even though they had not abandoned Jesus at the hour of his passion and death, for these women the first act of Jesus' life is finished, and they also had no hope or expectation of a second act.

But when the women arrive at the tomb, another earthquake occurs, similar to the earthquake that shook the ground at the hour of Jesus' death (*"The earth shook, and the rocks were split."* – 27:52). As the earth shakes outside Jesus' tomb, *"an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow."* (28:2-3). The appearance of this angel reflects descriptions of divine beings in the Hebrew Scriptures (*"... his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire."* – Daniel 7:9), but is less than the splendor of Christ that is revealed at his Transfiguration (*"... his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."* – 17:2). In contrast to the soldiers at the Crucifixion who had declared that *"truly this man was God's Son!"* (27:54), the guards at the tomb are filled with fear that causes them to shake and become *"like dead men."* (28:4).

But the angel's presence is not meant to instill either fear or doubt in the women at the tomb; his words offer both comfort and the proclamation that Jesus' death is not the end of the story for Jesus or for any of his followers:

- “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” – 28:6-7.

Even though he has been raised from the dead, the angel still identifies Jesus as “the crucified one,” which indicates a completed act with ongoing consequences. Jesus’ crucifixion was not a temporary episode in the career of the Son of God, *“a past even to be nullified, transcended, or exchanged at the resurrection for heavenly glory. Even as the risen one, he bears the mark of his self-giving on the cross as his permanent character and call to discipleship.”* (M. Eugene Boring). The two women fulfill the Torah commandment to serve as witnesses to the Empty Tomb (*“Come, see the place where he lay.”*) and are commanded by the angel to carry the message to the disciples, making them not only the initial witnesses at the tomb but the first bearers of the Easter message that *“he has been raised from the dead,”* and that Jesus’ disciples are to leave Jerusalem and follow the Risen Christ who *“is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”* Galilee is the home region for both Jesus and his disciples (Peter is identified as one of Jesus’ followers because of his Galilean accent: *“Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.”* (26:73), and the people in Jerusalem at Pentecost are amazed and astonished, asking *“are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”* (Acts 2:7-8). But “Galilee” in Matthew’s Gospel is not merely a geographical location; the Evangelist earlier identified it as “Galilee of the Gentiles,” where *“the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”* (4:16). As Jesus’ ministry to all people begins in this place, so will Galilee be the location from which the mission of the church to *“make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”* (28:19-20) will begin.

The women who came to the tomb out of obedience to the Word of God in the Torah now depart in obedience to the Word of God proclaimed by the angel; they leave the tomb *“quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.”* (28:8). As they are on their way to share the Easter message with the disciples, *“suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’”* (28:9); the women are not only the first witnesses of the empty tomb but also receive the first appearance of the Risen Christ. They are already en route on their mission when they are joined by the Risen Christ, *“a paradigm of Matthew’s understanding of the reassuring presence of the risen Christ in the missionary activity of the Church.”* – Eugene Boring):

- “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” – 10:40.
- “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” – 18:20.
- “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” – 28:20.

As the women *“came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him,”* Jesus echoes the angel’s reassuring words *“do not be afraid”* (a standard element in the appearance of the Lord and of angels throughout the Bible) and then amends the mission upon which the angel has sent them by instructing the women to *“go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”* (28:10).

My brothers. With these words, Jesus declares that there is indeed a second act for his disciples. The alienation caused by their desertion has now been healed from the divine side; the disciples may know that they again – still! – belong to the family of believers (*“for whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* – 12:50). The women who arrived at the tomb that morning to serve as mere witnesses to Jesus’ death and burial now *“become not only missionaries of the resurrection message, but also agents of reconciliation.”* (Boring).

We gather on this Easter morning not merely to remember an event from the past, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb in Jerusalem. We gather to rejoice that as there was a second act for Jesus' disciples in spite of their abandonment of our Lord, there is also hope for a new beginning for all of us who have wandered away from our Lord, who have turned our backs on God, and who have failed to love God with our whole being and our neighbors as ourselves. Our second act begins the good news that in Christ's death and resurrection is the message which gives us *"strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow."*

- "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly ... God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." – Romans 5:6-11.
- "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it." – Ephesians 2:13-16.
- "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." – 1 Peter 2:9-10.

We do not gather this morning to proclaim that "Christ *was* risen," as though his resurrection is merely a past event with no relevance to us today. The Easter proclamation is that "Christ *is* risen! He *is* risen indeed! Alleluia!" It is Christ's resurrection that is the good news for us and for all God's people that as there was a second act for those disciples who had failed Jesus in his hour of need, there is also a second act for us even though we continually fail to live according to God's Will.

If Christ's resurrection only had relevance for him, then indeed there would be no hope of a second act, a fresh start, a new beginning for us or for anyone who places their hope in Christ; as Paul says to the Corinthians, we would be *"of all people most to be pitied."* (1 Corinthians 15:19).

But we gather on this Easter Sunday to rejoice that the new life in Christ means new life for us: *"But in fact Christ has been raised for the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."* (15:20-23). As we gather on this Sunday of the Resurrection, we gather every Sunday throughout the year to celebrate the good news that as death was not the end of the story of our Lord and Saviour, neither was it the end for his first disciples nor for us who continue to follow Christ even though we too stumble, fail, and fall short of his expectations for his disciples. Because Christ lives, we who once were dead have been given *"a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."* (1 Peter 1:3).

- "Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yes, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past, but by the reality of Christ's power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past; that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus." – Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*.

All of us have stood in the place of the disciples. We have turned our backs on our Lord, abandoned him to pursue our own selfish interests or to follow other paths. We have disobeyed his commandments, misused the gifts with which we have been entrusted, and been poor stewards of both the church and the world which rightfully belong to God. Because of our sinful ways, we have no right to expect a second act, a future in which there is still hope that God will continue to abide with us and bless us. But as the waiting father joyfully welcomed his prodigal son back into his loving embrace, God proves his love for us in redeeming us from “sin, death, and the power of the devil” not by anything we might do but by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ:

- “He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is often quoted as once saying that “*there are no second acts in American lives,*” but his own life was a testimony to the fact that for many Americans – and people of all nations – there are indeed second acts, fresh starts and new beginnings for lives that once appeared lost and hopeless. No matter what may have happened in our lives before this day, no matter how far we may have strayed from God or how long we have been separated from God’s love, the good news of Easter is that there is indeed a “second act,” a new birth and a living hope that is ours in our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. The light of Christ that shines on this Easter morning is the light that shines before us when in Holy Baptism we are born anew through our baptism into the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, when God claims us as his children and bestows upon us the living hope that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” (Romans 6:5). Even when we fail to live as God’s holy people, even if we should abandon our Lord like his first disciples, our Baptism assures us that we are never lost or abandoned, for God continues to call us to “*return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” (Joel 2:13).

- “For we are called Christians because we can look to Christ and say, ‘Dear Lord, you have taken upon yourself my sin and have become Martin, Peter, and Paul, and have trodden my sin underfoot and consumed it! There I look for my sin and you have directed me. On Good Friday I still see my sin before my eyes, but on Easter Day a new person has been born. My hand has been made new and sin is seen no more. All this you have given to me freely, and have said that you have overcome my devil, my sin, and my death.’” – Martin Luther, 1530.

The disciples’ story did not end in Jerusalem as a failed first act. There was a second ahead of them in Galilee, where they would meet the Risen Lord and their story would continue. No matter what failures have marked our past, our second act is before us; we walk into our second act in trust and hope, rejoicing that “*Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*” Amen.