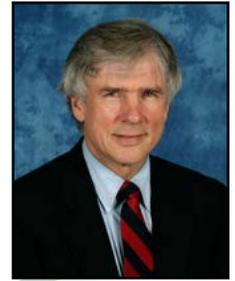




# Hear the Word

from Pastor Timothy T. Weber



Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send

## Third Sunday of Easter

April 15, 2018

### Bird Feeders and the Great Reversal

Luke 24:36-48

April 15. Tax time. Another deadline. Another obligation. Our lives mix duty, demands, delights, and disappointments in some combination called “life.” With all this stacked up, some cave in and ask what’s the point. Most motor on, hungry for some type of revival. Then there are those who feel shut out and forgotten and who thirst for another kind of revival—loving human contact.

A couple of years ago in the New York Times, one woman recounted how the fatigue in her marriage found revival. Some excerpts: “My husband was no longer the man I had married. He had become grumpy and short-tempered, acting as if life had dealt him a bad hand. He worried that our sons had been handed too much. Our marriage was facing the familiar strains of midlife. Our lives were busy with the inevitable commotion that forms the basis of any marriage today. We worked hard. We spoke less. We watched too much television. We spent many evenings answering emails and responding to texts. All of this was getting us down until he installed a bird feeder, an ugly contraption he bought on Amazon. (She then describes the slow transformation.) The bright green parrot appeared, cocked his head, studied us. We studied him. I glanced at my husband. He beamed in response, like he had just given birth. Soon our mornings became a bit more. We eagerly anticipated our winged visitors...the grumpy man’s face lit up, his stress lines disappeared...could this be a new him? We were parents once again, and he was the mother. The ugly bird feeder made all the difference.” The title of her piece: “How a Bird Feeder Revived My Marriage.”

We look for ways to revive our lives. Sometimes it’s a crisis that needs repair. Often it’s a search for something different—birdfeeder, a trip, gym membership, a new hairdo, remodel, meaningful conversations—with someone, someday. Over time, however, we discover the limits of all these attempts. We gain momentary relief, but it all seems never enough. Our symptoms in life are often cries that we need something more than revivals— something bigger and deeper— a life that grounds us, a light that leads us, a love that forgives us, a path that opens a brighter future, a touch that heals the past, a passion that sends us with service into the world, a purpose that summons us to wonders beyond this world. The word for this is not revival; it’s something like redemption.

This brings us to our Gospel for today from the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. The 11 disciples are huddled in a small room behind locked doors (the 12<sup>th</sup> disciple, Judas suicided a few days before), Jesus their leader was tortured and executed, and now these loyal disciples are being hunted. The prognosis is poor. Perhaps you know the experience when the hope you had, the dreams you built, the

plans you crafted all cave in and come tumbling down? This is a cancerous fear. God seems to have disappeared. No wonder the 11 disciples locked their doors. And then, without warning, quietly without fanfare, through these locked lives surprisingly comes the crucified one who now is different..something reversed. He had been taken away and buried. And now from his mouth comes something never expected again: “Peace be with you.” It’s hard for any of us to hear this when we are drowning in the soup of our fears. Nevertheless, when he is present, the doors once locked begin to crack open a bit, the air is different, the light peeks through, and we sense something new might be unfolding. Julian of Norwich in the 14<sup>th</sup> century penned this critical reminder. She wrote- “Jesus did not say –thou shalt not be troubled, thou shalt not be tempted, thou shalt not be distressed. But he said: thou shalt not be overcome.” When God promises peace, God goes to work in you, often slowly, quietly, powerfully. In the midst of all our noise, God’s music is being composed for you.. music that will not be overcome no matter how tightly your doors are locked.

The disciples have front row seats to the resurrection, more than you and I ever will have. We may think had we been in their shoes, for sure all our doubt would be cast away. But we overrate the power of evidence. They see. They hear. But they still think Jesus is a ghost. Jesus offers them more evidence. He ups the ante, calling on them to conduct a forensic exam. He tells them to look at his hands and feet. He wants them to see the marks of the cross. Surely this would do it. Nope. He invites them to touch him. Nope. Nothing is working. God must get frustrated with our hardness. They are using all their senses to grasp the evidence. Nevertheless, Luke writes that they were weakly joyful, still wondering and disbelieving. The evidence is really not working. Once again, deep faith is never about believing evidence or believing our beliefs. Our beliefs themselves can become idols which command our attention more than the experience of faith itself. Deep faith is about realizing the truth of our human brokenness and being broken open to the precious gift of the Spirit, and allowing God to go to work with us, in us, through us. The real evidence is not in our head. It is in our experience of the gift of the Spirit working us over and over and over.

But speaking about evidence, as you may know, much has been written trying to disprove the resurrection, and it is important to be thinking about the faith as well, from all angles. There are assertions that Jesus didn’t really die, but was unconscious on the cross, assertions that his body was stolen from the grave by loyalists (instead of rising), assertions that the news of Jesus rising was simply mass hysteria (instead of authentic post-resurrection appearances). And there are many other assaults on the news of the resurrection.

I find a few things interesting in this whole discussion. How in the world could anyone claim Jesus wasn’t really dead when he was the prime target of the Roman professional killers who killed with precision? Medical experts studying the crucifixion detail the unbelievable horror of that kind of death. Furthermore, if you were making up the story of the resurrection, you would want to make it a rock solid story. That’s not the case here. For example, women are witnesses to the resurrection in the Bible even though at that time, women were discredited as witnesses. Why would the writer promoting a hoax want to contaminate the story? In the same manner, why include the doubts and disbeliefs of the disciples if you really want to write a rock solid story? Then there was what could be called inter-rater reliability—Jesus appeared to a variety of people in a variety of places under a variety of circumstances—widespread exposure. And the mass hysteria argument? Masses don’t become hysteric; individuals do. Delusions don’t spread like that.

What is most convicting, however, is the story of what happened to the followers of Jesus across time as their lives were transformed, living with a new courage and bold commitment because something had shattered the boundaries of their expectations of the possible. Their passion set them on fire and they were ready to burn. Hoaxes are smoke. This was fire. And the fire of the resurrection was not stoked by believing the evidence. Rabbi Abraham Heschel reminds us of the trap of religion: “When faith is completely replaced by creed...when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living

fountain...the message then becomes meaningless.” The living fountain of faith. The dynamic, active, Spirit of God is here to usher us into this living fountain. All the prayers, the scriptures, the music, the sermons, the water, the bread, the wine—all these gifts are meant to shower us with the living fountain of the resurrection and to propel us into the wondrous reality of God’s world where our lives rise up, our minds sizzle with imagination, and our hearts are filled with dazzling love.

C.S. Lewis calls all of this “The Great Reversal.” Lewis said that the resurrection involves a reversal of what we believe is natural and fixed, true and unchangeable. What has been locked in life, the dead ends of hopelessness, can now be opened. Things that are feared can now be embraced in hope and faith and love. The lost are found. Resentments soften. The Great Reversal is not just an event, but is the history God working with us. God, in grace and glory, shrunk down into the wee baby of Bethlehem. Gods don’t do this, except in the Great Reversal. Jesus’ stories reverse our expectations--the first will be last and the last will become first, the proud will be brought low and the humble will be exalted, the outsiders are invited to the inside—the poor, tax collectors, outcasts, sinners, women, children. The no name Christmas shepherds are the first to the manger of Bethlehem. The derelict prodigal son is given the embrace of forgiveness. The Great Reversal of God stretches far back into time, describes the life of Jesus, is the core of the Christian life we are summoned into, and is at the heart of the Great Surprise when we will experience death not as a sinkhole, but a doorway into the wondrous and mysterious and indescribable love of God.

The Great Reversal may trigger anger amongst those who want this world to stay the same, tucked away in castles of power and privilege. The Great Reversal may spawn disbelief amongst those who don’t believe in surprise and wonder and the God who made them. The Great Reversal may unleash anxiety amongst those who like to predict and stay in control. The Great Reversal may upset those unwilling to extend themselves in compassion to those who hurt. The Great Reversal might be an offense to those who refuse to forgive and who insist on maintaining their right to be resentful. The Great Reversal indeed upends our balance and results in motion sickness. One of the challenges of being Christian is to be able to tolerate the motion sickness of God’s Great Reversals.

So, we go back to the Gospel lesson. In spite of the evidence, the disciples are hesitant. We humans have a very hard time embracing the imbalance, mystery, and wonder of God’s Great Reversals. In spite of our reluctance, Jesus continues. So what happens next? Being Jewish, Jesus acts like he’s at the deli and asks the disciples if they have something to eat, whereupon they give him a fish sandwich. Some have said this was another attempt by Jesus to give evidence that he was real, not a ghost. Jesus is in a pickle—to use another deli term. I think Jesus is after a bigger point than trying to prove he is real as he eats the sandwich. The Great Reversal is that this God who ascends to the indescribable heights of our imagination is the same one who descends to the unspeakable depths of our despair. The birth in Bethlehem descends Jesus into the manger. The cross on Gogaltha descends Jesus into our dying. His request for lunch in this moment descends Jesus into our daily, ordinary life. And we can easily forget that our Lord wants to walk with us in our ordinary comings and goings, not just in times of crisis. God is the upside down God—expected to be far beyond us, God reverses it all, and is with us in the deepest of our depths and in the simplest moments of our little lives.

Then there is another reversal of sorts. Jesus opens the scriptures, the holy book of the community with its saturation of commands, and summarizes it all, trims the scriptures to one thing—God’s suffering, radical love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Period. It all funnels to this story. We can use the Bible to bolster points, defend arguments about many things, and find pathways for living. And we can also make gods out of all sorts of material within the Bible, quite apart from the substance of the Gospel. The core of the Biblical story is much more serious and central to our human condition. Lee Strobel nails it when he says, “Jesus Christ did not come into this world to make bad people good; He came into this world to make dead people live.” And I might add, not other dead people—US dead people! Because we underestimate our brokenness in our self esteem culture,

we underestimate the critical necessity for life saving redemption. A revival won't cut it. A repair won't do it. Recitation of holy beliefs won't make it. A reversal gifted from the redeemer is the only alternative. Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century put it succinctly. He declared that "the bible is the cradle that holds the Christ; without him it is nothing more than wood and straw." The dead are being called forth to rise up and live in the light and wonder of God. Which brings us to our final point.

The living fountain of the Great Reversal is not "Do you believe in the resurrection?" The Risen One of the open tomb is asking the disciples-- "Is the resurrected one resurrecting you?" Not are you believing the resurrection, but are you being the resurrection? Witness, proclaim, forgive—these are the actions Jesus underscores in our story from Luke. These are the actions of the open tomb. The philosopher Nietzsche said that we should live life in such a way that we would be willing to repeat the same life eternally. The eternal life of God's people forever and for now is to shine as resurrected ones. We don't have to wait. The future resurrection is resurrection now. We are being resurrected now to be living fountains of the resurrected one and living servants of the crucified one. Specifically, there is one action that Jesus lifts up as a sign of the Great Reversal---forgiving sins. Why? We know firsthand the pain of this world on the global stage and most intimately, in our own relationships and those close to us-- the sorrow of fractured relationships, the power of resentment to destroy, relationship wounds that never heal. The essence of sin is estrangement—separation when connection is the core of creation—estrangement from the living presence of God and from the loving connections with each other. No wonder Jesus lifts up forgiveness as the critical task in redeeming the creation. The creation might simply and clearly be defined as a "network of relationships." When those relationship are bent, the broken, and beaten down...forgiveness becomes the essential repair, the connective tissue for the relationship fractures in creation. And, if there is any action which best shows how new life can come from that which is dead...it's the life of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the resurrection is action—death being transcended by life. This was the center of Jesus' life and the reason he was crucified..he worked to heal relationships that others declared unwanted and untouchable.

Here is an example of a very published story that came to our attention in the last week. Last Sunday, 27 year old Patrick Reed captured one of the most coveted honors in sports—The Masters crown in golf at Augusta. He put on the winner's green jacket at the 18<sup>th</sup> hole with his wife Justine, but painfully absent were his father and mother, Bill and Jeanette, and his younger sister Hannah. Patrick and his wife Justine had not spoken with his family since 2012 when Patrick and Justine were married at age 22 and Patrick's parents thought they were too young to get married. Parents and sister weren't invited to the wedding, and the flames of the family feud exploded. In 2016, Patrick's parents tried to attend one of his tournaments, and Justine told security to not allow them on the course. Over the years, missles were exchanged via Facebook—Justine called the parents "terrible" and sister Hannah called Patrick a "stranger" unlike the brother she once knew. The fissure of the feud grows deeper. For sure, things are always more complicated than what we know.

The point is that this story is our story as well. So easily, relationships can be broken for a lifetime. Examine your life. Look at all the Biblical stories. Over and over we see relationships broken by greed, resentment, jealousy, and self interest. We see relationships where some cast out others in order to protect their power. We see anger fueled because things have become unfair. We see hatred burn others into extinction. We see people giving up because they are not wanted. We see suffering when mercy has died. And we feel God's broken heart and weeping tears. No wonder forgiveness is the fullest expression of the Great Reversal in the creation linked by relationships. Our calling is not just to believe the resurrection, but to BE the resurrecting ones—instruments of God's love that calls life out of death. Let the light of God's glory and grace shine through you as the sparkling, resurrecting children of God. You and I have been blessed to be living fountains of God's Great Reversal. May it be so. Amen.