

March 31, 2024 @ Trinity Bixby
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Matthew 28:1-10, Colossians 3:1-4

Christ is risen! *Christ is risen indeed!* That's been our Easter call and response for generations. Whenever I pictured what this meant as a child, I pictured something like a see-thru Jesus, sitting up out of the body, that remained wrapped in cloth. But the Angel that speaks to the closest of Jesus' followers – the women who came to the tomb that first Easter morning – that angel tells them, “Jesus is not here! He has risen, just as he said! Come, see the place where he lay.” There is no body here, because Jesus did not rise as a spirit – but wholly himself. When he appears, to the women, and later to the men, he proves that he is physically there, by being touched on the feet and hands, eating food – fish and bread – and drinking wine. But, he seems to appear and disappear, even as he invites everyone who follows him to meet him in Galilee.

You see, there are two words in Greek that refer to the resurrection – the first being “*anastasis*”, and the second “*egerthe*”. In John's Gospel, when Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life,”¹ he uses “*anastasis*” for resurrection. It means “to stand again” or “re-stand-up.” The prefix “*ana-*” means up or again, and “*stasis*” is the word for standing still, or standing strong. But the word that the angel says to the women that first morning is not “*anastasis*” – but “*egerthe*,” which means to wake, to rouse, to arise from sleep. “You're looking for the crucified Christ,” says the angel, “but he's not here – he woke up! Look, that's where he was laying down.”

Christ “woke up” from death – from the long sleep. In so doing, in appearing to groups of people who knew him, starting with the Marys and other women gathered early on that first Easter morning, he showed that death is not the end. That heaven and earth are closer than we previously believed. That to be raised up doesn't mean up and out of the atmosphere, but awakened to new life, eternal life, a connection between now and then.

¹ John 11:25

Paul picks up on this theme in his writings, and in Colossians, he writes, “Since you have awakened together with Christ, seek the above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” He is referencing directly the experience of baptism of believers – of dying to our lives before, and being awakened, being raised in Christ. He’s urging followers of Christ to... well, follow in Christ’s Way! You’ve woken up, now look up! Look to heaven, seek the good, reflect Christ in your actions, in your lives.

Although we talk about heaven being up – “raised up to heaven,” the “celestial choirs” and “God on high” – we’re really talking about heaven as being inaccessible to us. No matter how high we build buildings, or how far we throw space ships into the solar system and beyond, we’ll never reach heaven. It isn’t that kind of up. Instead, heaven and earth seem to coexist, for God is “with us always” and Christ, after awakening from death, pops in and out of contact with those who know him.

To me, this seems less like ascent and descent from the sky and space, and more like someone popping into and out of dimensions we cannot perceive. We perceive the world in three dimensions – length, width, and depth. We’re aware of a fourth – the passing of time – but cannot easily conceive of a world outside our perceptions. Yet, as our grasp on mathematics has expanded, we’ve needed to make calculations in more than three dimensions to make sense of our universe. Even without being able to understand, to comprehend the space, multi-dimensional math has been shown to hold together. And, interestingly, the way that mathematicians refer to directions in fourth-dimensional space is by using the Greek – *ana* and *kata*.² Up-down, left-right, fore-aft, *ana-kata*. Even if you can’t picture exactly what this means – and I don’t think any of us really can – it’s helpful to know that, at any time, we are connected to this “space above” our own.

And maybe, just as there are times that it is easier for us to see in three dimensions – when it is less cloudy, or when we’re high up – maybe there are times that it is easier for us to perceive through *ana* and *kata* – to see glimpses of heaven,

² Charles Howard Hinton, “The Fourth Dimension,” 1993 edition (1904)

intersecting earth. The Celtic Christians called this phenomenon, “thin places” – where the barrier between heaven and earth is thin enough to perceive something. Thin places were sought out – but they were different for each person, and some only appeared occasionally. Yet, when they were perceived, when people took the time to pray, to connect – it was a powerful boost to those seeking comfort. One concept from this was that, no matter what, if you sat quietly and really listened, you could hear the heartbeat of God.³ That no place was too far from heaven, no matter how “thick” the world seemed, to block out the presence of God. These Celtic Christians, then, marked these thin places with crosses, to remind them to “seek the above.” The crosses continue to be used as landmarks, to help travelers navigate the wilderness and the villages and the cities. Here in Tulsa, Bixby, Jenks, and Broken Arrow, we’re likewise surrounded by crosses, given the number of churches our cities have. I encourage you to pay particular attention to those crosses around us – maybe use them as a mental nudge to “seek the above,” to say a quick prayer or to just take a moment to experience God’s presence. “Seeking the above” can be a quick moment, but it can also be through intentional acts of service, mindfulness and attention to the world and others around you, or even asking the question “What would Jesus do”?

I’d like to share with you a particular translation of Colossians 3:1-4. This is an English translation by Sandra Hack Polaski, and I think it may add to your understanding of these concepts. Her goal with the translation was to provide the pithy-ness in English, rather than a full explanation. As you listen, you may want to practice listening for God’s heartbeat in this moment!

*Co-raised then with Christ, seek things above,
Where Christ sits at God's right hand.
Consider what's above, not on the earth;
You died! And your life hides with Christ in God.
When Christ your life appears,
Then you also with him will appear in glory.*

Does it make a difference for us to “seek the above”? After all, despite being

³ John Phillip Newell, “Celtic Christianity” (1986)

baptized into Christ's body, despite our best efforts to live in Christ's Way, we still suffer, we still experience pain, and we still find sin separating us from God. We are still human, experiencing human things. But, we remember that Christ bore the worst of what humanity can do. God knows our pain, because Christ bore our pain. And, remembering that there is "nothing in life or in death that can separate us from the love of God,"⁴ we know that God's heartbeat is always with us. That we are an Easter people – for the cross is empty, the tomb is empty, and Christ is "with us always."⁵ Christ, we affirm, lived and died and awakened for us. Christ continues to waken us from our earthly slumber, and calls us to join in the resurrection even before we physically die. When we "Seek the Above," we affirm the reality that heaven and earth are here, together. We recognize that the resurrection gives the whole world hope – not just for a far-off time, but for here and now. As we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,"⁶ we can finally see that the kingdom of God is not far off, but here with us. That God's will is already being done, that the Kingdom of God's Children – the Kin-dom of God, if you will – is already with us. And we can live into it, every day of our lives.

As we begin this season of Eastertide, this time of remembering the resurrection appearances and the wonderful hope of resurrection, we are called to raise our heads after the time of bowing them for Lent. We can seek "thin places" in our everyday lives, seeing the Living and Awakened One at work in the world. We can work together as the body of Christ, bringing visions of the kingdom of Heaven to those the world has cast aside. For, as Christ has shown us, death is not the end, and heaven is woven throughout the world.

May you seek the above, knowing that God is always with you. May you seek the awakened Christ, serving him by loving your neighbor and yourself. And may the Holy Spirit fill you and bless you, as you bless others, showing that "the above" is always around you, always has been, and always will be. Amen.

⁴ Romans 8:38-39

⁵ Matthew 28:20

⁶ Matthew 6:10