

THE RESURRECTION AND THE BEATITUDES

A Sermon for Easter, April 4, 2010

Text: Luke 24:1-12

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”
(Matthew 5:6)

Three years before Easter, seventy miles north of Jerusalem, on a hill by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sat down to teach whoever would listen. About God, life, trouble, injustice, blessedness, disappointments, insincerity, piety, prayer, and so forth. He did not teach the way official, paid teachers teach. He was succinct. He was adamant.

He had their attention from the very beginning, when he said that *the poor in spirit* are blessed. Also, those who mourn . . . the meek . . . those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. So are the merciful, the pure in heart, those who make peace, and those who are persecuted for doing what is right. For good measure, blessed would be those listeners who would be reviled and persecuted and lied about on account of him.

What do you suppose they thought, when Jesus opened his sermon with such a mixture of claims, some counterintuitive and some contrary-to-fact? I don't think they believed him, but I think they were hoping he might be right. They thought more like this: “Blessed are the people who escape misfortune. Blessed are the people at the front of the line. Blessed are they who live in Jerusalem, near the temple. Blessed are large landowners, wealthy merchants, the elders of the people. Blessed are those who live to a ripe old age, free of disease. Blessed are those of whom everyone always speaks well.” In other words, they are blessed who *look* blessed.

Perhaps the best Jesus could hope for that day on the mount was that a few of those people would suspend their judgment long enough for him to be proven right. They would be very glad if he was telling the truth; but in the mean time they did not think of themselves as blessed, nor did they think they were meant to be blessed.

They were ordinary people; but they were probably disappointed in some way with their lives, or they wouldn't have gone out to listen to a new teacher. Yet why should they believe him? It was not up to them to decide who spoke for God! Might Jesus be one of those false prophets of whom Jeremiah said, “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace”? Was Jesus preaching a false hope when he said, for example, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied?”

Would they ever be satisfied . . . those who hungered and thirsted for righteousness? Was Jesus right about that one? Because that was a good description of how they felt, that day. They desperately wanted things to be better. To be right. To be good. So many things were wrong!

But what did *Jesus* mean by “hunger and thirst for *righteousness*?” I think if we look at the rest of his teaching, we will see that what he was preaching *against* was hungering and thirsting merely *to be satisfied*.

For example, Jesus told about a rich man who tore down his barns to build bigger ones, because now he had enough stuff for the rest of his life. He could eat and drink and be merry and rest, that’s all he needed to do, because he had what he wanted. He was satisfied, and that is what he had lived for, *not* the kingdom of God and his righteousness. He was a fool, Jesus said. He was like that other rich man who feasted by himself while poor Lazarus was at his gate, with dogs licking his sores. He was satisfied to be satisfied. In both those parables, the men wound up most unsatisfied.

To hunger and thirst *for righteousness* means to want for oneself *and* for the world, that—as the Lord’s Prayer expresses it—God’s name would be hallowed, God’s kingdom would come, God’s will would be done among us—so that all might dwell together in peace and unity. It means that I hunger and thirst to be all right, myself; but also that the whole world be filled with faith and hope and love. Jesus said, if you hunger and thirst *not* just to be satisfied, but that all should be as it ought to be, you shall be satisfied. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these [other] things shall be added unto you.”

Who would gamble their lives on that promise? And why? Was Jesus trying to sell them a bill of goods?

In our second reading, Paul writes “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

So, are we who have hoped in Christ to be pitied? Or are we blessed?

Easter gives us God’s answer to that question. We are blessed.

If Jesus’ story had ended with his crucifixion and death; if the women had gone to the tomb, found the body, wrapped it in spices, and gone back to Galilee, the word on the street would have been: the Beatitudes are wrong. For **no one** hungered and thirsted for righteousness as absolutely as our Lord Jesus Christ. And if all it got him was dead, then where was the blessing in that? He was to be pitied, and anyone who believed in him likewise.

But because the women did not find the body; because they were sent away by two men in dazzling clothes who said, “He is not here, but has risen”; because he later appeared to the disciples, as Peter told Cornelius and his family; because Christ **is** risen from the dead; you and I are compelled to go back to what Jesus said in that sermon, and believe it as truly as if we had heard it from God himself.

The world does its best to discourage and defeat us. Our experience teaches us things that are different from what Jesus said. But because he is risen, we believe that the poor in spirit are

blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. We believe that those who mourn will be comforted just as truly as Jesus' disciples were. We believe that the meek will inherit the earth. *And that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled!*

We believe that **we** are blessed, for Jesus has taught us that he readily gives "the blessing" to those who ask for it, imperfect and sinful though we be, beginning with the forgiveness of our sins. The truth about us is not how we seem to others; the truth about us is in the grace conferred on us by one who lived and died to make us children of God. We may not look blessed; but we are. And because we are blessed, we can live differently. Live in the world, but be shaped by Jesus' teachings.

We live in a world that is much different from first-century Galilee, yet we are not so different from the people who made up Jesus' first audience. We are not in ourselves great people. We want others think we are better than we really are. We do not count meekness a virtue. We are short of righteousness, but that is not our greatest appetite. And peace-making is for others. That is how they thought, and we are inclined that way as well. If the Beatitudes were nine commandments, we would not feel innocent.

But the good news of Easter came to disciples who had given up on Jesus; they were ready to bury him and move on. It was good news aimed directly at them. The good news that blessing is in God's hands; that he wishes to bless us who will trust in him; and that we may be emboldened by the resurrection to live every day as if the Beatitudes are true for us. We will be satisfied. We will see God. For Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.

