

Go Ahead

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009 Mark 16:1-8

Virginia Dare was the first child of European ancestry to be born in North America, August 18, 1587. Charles Blondin was the first person to cross Niagara Falls on a tight rope, back in 1859. Hiram Revels was the first African-American senator in 1870. Ironically, he took the seat formerly occupied by Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, who had resigned to become the president of the Confederacy. John J. McDermott was the winner of the very first Boston Marathon, in 1897. In 1912, Arthur Eldred became the first ever Eagle Scout in the Boy Scouts of America. Roy Acuff was the first person admitted to the Country Music Hall of Fame. And Libby Riddles, in 1985, became the first woman to win the 1,135 mile Iditarod dog sled race in Alaska.

We usually think of being first as a good thing, as it was for all the folks I've just mentioned. Indeed, as children, we vie to be first in all sorts of ways – first in line for lunch or recess, first on the rides at the carnival, first among siblings to choose the story to be read at bedtime, or first in the car so we can have that “special” seat. But kids also quickly learn that there are some situations where you definitely don't want to be first.

These are known as "you-go-ahead" situations. And these situations call for a certain delicacy, a degree of diplomacy, let's say. You see, if you seem too eager to let others go first, they catch on and realize that maybe they shouldn't be in such a hurry either. “No, you first,” they are likely to reply.

You know the kind of situations I'm talking about – like when there was only a spoonful of lima beans left, and your mom said, “Let's clean those up, kids.” That's when you would turn to your brother or sister and say, “Go ahead – you first.” Or at camp, in the early summer, when you went out to swim in the lake and you realized that the water temperature was probably still in the 60's, and a line was forming at the diving platform. You realized that it might be wise to let someone else find out just how cold the water was, so you would step aside and say, “Oh no, you go ahead – you first.” Or when your teacher in chemistry class gave you that assignment to describe the odor of the substance in the beaker, and you had a hunch that it smelled like a cross between rotten eggs and the gym uniform you had forgotten to take home for the last three weeks. Either you or your lab partner had to smell the stuff, of course, but you were only too happy to let your partner lead the way – “Go ahead, you first,” you said.

On this spectacular Easter morning, the scripture we read reminded us that we are blessed to have a “go-ahead” God, a God who goes before us, to blaze a trail and prepare the way for all of us to follow. In Jesus Christ, God even entered the very mystery of death itself. As one of the ancient creeds puts it, “He was crucified, dead and buried.” Jesus did what we are called to do. Jesus died trusting God. And Jesus’ trust was rewarded with resurrection.

The Bible is very clear that Jesus did this for us, that Jesus went ahead of us into the mystery, so that we might not be so afraid. Scripture calls his resurrection “first fruits,” implying that our resurrections will be the rest of the harvest. The Bible talks about Jesus being the “pioneer” who goes ahead, so that all who believe in him may share his glory. Jesus is the very embodiment, the incarnation of our “go-ahead God.”

If we look back into the Old Testament, we see God constantly going ahead. God leads Abraham out of the land of his birth toward a new and promised land. When the Israelites arise and throw off the yoke of slavery in Egypt, they go out led by a “pillar of cloud by day” and a “pillar of fire by night.” God goes ahead of them to guide and light the way. At the Red Sea and again at the Jordan River, God goes ahead and divides the water, so his people can cross in safety and into the land of promise. Even when the disobedience of the people leads to the fall of Judah and the people are sent into exile, God goes ahead of them to Babylon and gives them strength there to survive until God again leads them back to Jerusalem. God is always going ahead of us.

And so it is with Jesus in the 16th chapter of Mark’s Gospel. Early in the morning, the three women trudged to the tomb with spices, to finish the ritual of burial which had been interrupted by the arrival of the Sabbath. They wondered as they walked who would roll the stone away. However, when they arrived, it was already moved. Yet they saw no body, no familiar though lifeless form. Rather, they saw a stranger, a young man in a white robe, seated.

And do you remember what that young man – that messenger (some say, that angel) – said to them? He said, “Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” The message of Easter, at least in Mark’s gospel, is not just that Jesus is alive again, but also that Jesus is again going ahead of us, and is to be found not only in the past but in the future; not just in church, or just in our hearts, but out there, in Galilee; out there

everywhere – which is good news because (let's face it), we never know where life will take us.

Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, admits as much in his book, "Oh, the Places You'll Go," the last book published before his death. It is, as the title suggests, a book about the journey of life. Some of its opening lines are, "You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go."

But Seuss knew that it wasn't always that simple. We don't always get to choose where we want to go. Eventually, he admits it. He writes, "Wherever you fly, you'll be best of the best. Wherever you go, you will top all the rest. Except when you don't. Because, sometimes, you won't. I'm sorry to say so but, sadly, it's true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you. You can get all hung up in a prickly perch. And your gang will fly on. You'll be left in a Lurch. You'll come down from the Lurch with an unpleasant bump. And the chances are, then, that you'll be in a Slump. And when you're in a Slump, you're not in for much fun. Un-slumping yourself is not easily done."

You see, sooner or later, life takes all of us places we don't want to go. We get ill. Loved ones die. We lose jobs. Relationships end. These aren't places we want to go, any more than the people of Jerusalem wanted to go into exile in Babylon, where they were taunted and ill-treated by their captors. These aren't places we want to go, any more than Jesus wanted to suffer on the cross. Remember how he prayed, "O Lord, if at all possible, let this cup pass"?

The promise of God is not that we will never have trouble, or that we will always get to choose where we go. The promise of God is something else, something richer than that. The promise of God is that wherever we go, we need not fear finding ourselves all alone, abandoned – because God has gone ahead of us. The risen Christ will be there to meet us. The power of the resurrection will be available to us, because there is no place to go where that power does not reach.

It is easy to believe that in a beautiful sanctuary, decorated with flowers and filled with songs of praise. But we are called to believe it everywhere, every day. Easter is a day to celebrate and feast, but not just because something miraculous happened a long time ago. No, we celebrate and feast because we believe what happened a long time ago tells us something profound about the present and the future – that Christ is alive and waiting for us, wherever life takes us. Christ is

risen, and the power of his resurrection is available to us, by grace through faith, for all the changes and challenges that we may face.

Amen.