

# Covenant Word

## *Staring Resurrection in the Face*

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

*A Message by*

*The Reverend Shelton  
Jackson Shelton*

*Pastor*

*Sunday*

*March 23, 2008*

**Dear Friends,  
Thank you for wanting  
to read and study these  
thoughts more  
carefully. Please know  
that I do not take full  
credit for anything that  
may be contained  
within, because I may  
have read or heard  
something at some point  
during my pilgrimage  
and do not remember  
its source and thus,  
cannot give the rightful  
author his/her credit. I  
pray that you will find  
inspiration and  
encouragement.**

*Sarah Shelton*

The summer of 1961, I turned five years of age. Some of you will remember that it was the summer that my parents schemed up a family vacation that cured me of ever wanting to camp again. For you see, my mother had been invited to be a speaker at WMU week in Glorietta, New Mexico in August. August was also the month that my dad took off from preaching, and so why not have a touring car trip for the entire family?

It would be good bonding time for the oft-absent preacher and his four children...all that time in the car and then a week where we were totally in his care while mother was at Glorietta. (Oh, the extremes she went to in order to have some alone time!) It sounded like a good idea...four children, two parents, tent, bedrolls, food and our personal items all in one four-door Buick. Looking back on it, I realize how brave my parents were to think we would survive such an adventure!

There are many memories associated with this trip: Dad's protection of us from the bear in search of my birthday cake safely locked in the trunk of our car; the night it rained and we would watch the tent sag until Dad would push it up shouting, "Here it comes!"; my personal disappointment that the Grand Canyon was not a hotel; watching my sophisticated teenage sister, who shall remain unnamed but whose identity you may guess, chase after a big bundle of tumbleweed so that she could have it for her science project upon returning home; and the nights we would watch movies on a sheet in the open air of the campground of Bandolier.

The hours of driving in the car were not quite so memorable. My siblings and parents pulled every trick out their hats to keep me, a five year old, entertained. Don't you know they lived for nap time each day? This presented its own unique challenge.

Without Ipods, PSPs, or in-car movies, we were entertained by finding unusual sights to point out to one another. Often the word, "Look!" exploded from someone's lips to call everyone's attention to some roadside wonder. If I had my head in my mother's lap, it only took one small "look!" to get my head to pop up and the hopes of a nap were dashed. When our mother reached her exasperation point, it was our dad's vocabulary that rose to the occasion. "Children, instead of 'look,' let's say 'scrutinize,' and it won't mean anything to Sarah." With this plan in place, I would drift off to sleep and my family would scrutinize the scenery in blissful relief.

Fred Craddock calls this type of life involvement as having "hospitality of the mind." It includes observation but also contains an openness to what is surrounding you so that you can take in the significance of what is occurring or what you are seeing or what you are hearing. He is so disciplined about it that each night he writes in his journal five conversations that he has had during the day. He says that he rarely understands the significance of what he is writing until he reads back through his journals at some later time. Suddenly, there is some truth peeking out at him, some insight just waiting to be harvested.

Frederick Buechner gives us an example of this type of openness from his teaching days. He says that it was as he was walking to class late one winter afternoon, that he noticed the beginnings of what promised to be a remarkable sunset. ("The Killing of Time") There were just the right kind of clouds, and the sky was starting to burn, and the

bare trees were black soot against it. But when he got to the classroom, the lights were all on, and the students were chattering. He said that he was just about to start things off as usual when he

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thought of the sunset going on out there in the winter dusk, and on an impulse, without warning, he snapped off the classroom lights. The room faced west so as soon as it went dark, everything disappeared except for what could be seen through the windows, and there it was—the entire sky on fire like the end of the world or the beginning. You might think that somebody would have said something...some wise crack...for teachers do not normally plunge their students into darkness without explanation. But the silence was as complete as you can get in a room full of people, and they all sat there without even so much as a chair squeaking for over twenty minutes! They remained unmoving for as long as it took for the extraordinary spectacle to fade slowly away. He says of this experience:



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morning at 9 a.m. and  
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It was taking unlabeled, unallotted time just to look with maybe more than our eyes at what was wonderfully there to be looked at without any obligation to think any constructive thoughts about it or turn it to any useful purpose later...we were bound together there simply by the fact of our being human, by our splendid insignificance in face of what was going on out there through the window...

I suspect that the truth of it is simply that we are <most> alive when, instead of killing time, we take time. When in the midst of tearing around in our busy-ness to do something, we stop once in a while and just let ourselves be something, be who we are. When by unclenching our fists, we give life a chance to do something with us. When we take the little piece of time that we have in this world and pay attention to what it is telling us, not just to what it is telling us about the beauty of the sun as it sets, God knows, but to what it is telling us about the wildness and strangeness and pain of things, the tears of things...as well as the joy of things.

In the movie August Rush, we meet an orphan child who can hear music in everything. He raises his hands to absorb the natural rhythms that are heard in the wind and rain, the swoosh of grain and the call of the moon. IT is as if he has no filters with which to stop the sensory overload that comes to him in the form of music. When he is bullied by the bigger boys in their barracks-type dormitory, he assures them that he can hear the music and it is the music that gives him his hope—the hope to find his parents and his hope to survive.

Somehow, I think that resurrection is like this: no filters; a hospitality of the mind; such scrutiny that in the tears of things, the wildness and strangeness and joy of things there is the undeniable recognition of coming face to face with resurrection

All week I have been puzzled by Mary's conversation with the angel in the tomb. Mary, in her grief, in her confusion, in fear and in despair, comes to the tomb. The disciples have left her to run on back to the house. They leave her there alone. She finally looks in the tomb and the angel asks what seems to be (to use a word from our household) a redunculous question. It seems to be redundant and ridiculous, for the angel asks, "Why are you weeping?"

I read that question and it makes me want to say, "What kind of angel are you? Why is she weeping? She is in the cemetery for goodness' sake. Don't we all weep when we stand in the cemetery?!" I pondered it all week and in a late epiphany, it dawned on me that perhaps there was foreshadow in the question...a nuance that is lost in the printed word, but present in the living conversation between Mary and the angel. Unable to exercise hospitality of the mind due to her grief...unable to scrutinize due to her tears...unable to disassociate from the events surrounding the crucifixion so that all of her filters are clogged with fear and terror...unable to open herself to the wildness and strangeness and pain and tears of things as well as to the joy of things...perhaps the angel's question was more full of this implication: "Why do you weep when there is resurrection all around you?" For almost immediately, her name

is called. She recognizes Jesus, and not only stands in the presence of, but is staring resurrection right in the face!

It has me wondering about how often we stand in the figurative cemetery incapable of staring resurrection in the face. (Tracey Lind, "The Unfinished Story," Interrupted by God) We all know the empty landscape of death and despair. Remember when innocence was first lost, when cynicism and sarcasm became easier than optimism,

when faith became a struggle instead of a privilege. Remember when the hope that life could be happy was lost and fulfillment became a younger person's dream. Remember the first betrayal. Remember when lying and cheating became easier than being honest. Remember when addiction took over pleasure. Remember when homelessness and hunger, violence and foul language became so commonplace that it didn't faze us anymore. Remember when the job was lost and unemployment seemed to go on forever, or when you sat in jail for months that turned into years. Remember when the lovemaking ended, the silent distance began, and a relationship withered away. Remember when your child threw a fist at you, or you threw a glass at the wall. Remember the first time a close friend died or moved away. Remember when you lost a part of your body, or found out that you had a serious illness. Remember when the first startling realities presented themselves that parents, your parents, were getting older, or when you looked in the mirror and saw for the first time that you were growing old. Remember any one of these things and we will stand in the cemetery with Mary. We all know the place. In fact, too many of us spend too much of our lives in such a sorrowful, dead place. (Lind)

Therefore, I find it fascinating, yea, a fact full of hope that it is right in the midst of the cemetery that resurrection comes face to face with grief and hopelessness. From the very beginning we find that resurrection is not something to be reasoned or rationalized. Resurrection is an inexplicable event that is beyond time and space. It is a moment that only God can name. And it is an experience born in the depths of death and despair. Resurrection is the place beyond emptiness. It is a place filled with hope, the hope of new beginnings and new possibilities. Resurrection is an opportunity that wants to be fulfilled like a blank sheet of paper that invites writing. (Lind)

When Jesus asks Mary not to hold onto Him, the truth slowly begins to dawn on us that Easter is not some event that happened to Jesus in the past. Rather, Easter is the recognition that Jesus is alive in the present, whenever and wherever people choose to follow Him and His way. And when we choose to follow Him and His way, we meet our Risen Lord and stare resurrection right in the face on too many occasions to count. (Lind)

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For resurrection is the renewal of an old friendship once broken by a wound of the past. Resurrection is a free man walking out of jail with another chance at life. Resurrection is the seedling growing where a massive forest fire raged. Resurrection is getting over an illness and forgetting what it was like to be sick or accepting a chronic or fatal disease and deciding to live with it gracefully. Resurrection is a family gathered to dedicate a park bench in memory of their dad who died too young. Resurrection is the extraordinary ability of God's creation to rise again. It is the resiliency of life and the rebirth of love that is incomprehensible, simply beyond explanation.

I believe that Easter never gets finished, for I watch it continue in our lives as a church family. Easter is the widow who understands that her husband is gone, but knows somehow that he is going to be all right and so is she. Easter is the survivor of a divorce who is able to love again. Easter is the person struggling with addiction yet who is able to get through one day at a time without a drink or a smoke or a needle. Easter is being unemployed and having the energy to look for another job. Easter is working for a just peace wherever there is unjust war. Easter knows that somehow, some way, things are going to be all right. Easter is about more than surviving or bringing back the old or that which is dead; Easter is about living again...living anew...living with promise and hope. (Lind)

About this time last year, I got a call from my niece in New York to share the wonderful news that she was pregnant. We delighted in this fact, for having been an insulin dependent diabetic her entire life, none of us were sure if this would be a possibility in her young life. It wasn't too many days later that she called again, however, to say that there were issues with the pregnancy. A congenital heart defect in the baby had been discovered. There would have to be specialists. There would be not just one surgery but many surgeries to insure life for this baby we did not even know yet. My niece and her husband decided to bravely take this challenge as their own. And so they studied to prepare themselves for the arrival of Anna Margaret.

The day of delivery came. All seemed well. The mother had done just fine. The father was beaming. The grandparents were appropriately proud, and the baby, Anna Margaret, was beautiful. The precarious nature of the situation, however, was made poignantly clear when their pastor arrived to baptize the baby in the hospital "just in case." Within 24 hours, the baby was taken to another hospital nearby where open heart surgery took place. Each day, we could check on her progress at a web site maintained by her father. We could see her in the incubator with all the monitors and always, the presence of someone who loved her so very much. What amazed me on this web site were the numbers of people I did not even know who kept assuring my niece's family of their love and prayers. Even, here at BCOC,

you joined in these prayers, for you knew we were in the cemetery hoping for a miracle.

Just two days ago, Anna Margaret made her first airplane trip to Birmingham. And tomorrow, I, The Great Aunt Yay Yay, have only one plan for the entire day. I will hold and nuzzle and sing and laugh with Anna Margaret. I imagine that when I look into her face, I will see bits of her mother and hints of her father, but most of all, I think that while I hold this little miracle, I will come face to face with resurrection!

Eleanor Daley in her Requiem has a piece entitled "In Remembrance." The words read:

Do not stand at my grave and weep.  
I am not there. I do not sleep.  
I am a thousand winds that blow.  
I am the diamond glint on snow.  
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.  
I am the gentle morning rain.  
And when you wake, in the morning's hush, I am the  
sweet uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight.  
I am the soft stars that shine.  
<so> Do not stand at my grave and cry.  
I am not there, I did not die.

***My prayer for us this Easter is that we will have such hospitality of the mind...our sensory filters turned so low that when we hold something in our hands so fragile, hear a song so sweet, listen to the breathing of one so dear, scrutinize the new life bursting forth from the earth so fresh...that what we will experience is something so much more than magnificent beauty. What we will come face to face with is resurrection!***

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"Why are you weeping?" the angel asked. And in my mind she continued to say: "Look Mary Margaret and Andy! Look Dannelly and David! Look friends of Baptist Church of the Covenant! Resurrection is everywhere! Come face to face with it! Scrutinize and you shall see!" Amen and amen.