

An Invitation to Christian Discipleship:
“Follow Me”
Luke 24:1-12, Matthew 4:18-20

Dr. J. Howard Olds
April 8, 2007

“Sing with all the saints in Glory. Sing the resurrection song.” It is Easter. It is the day “yes” got up before the sun. It is the day we know our victory over death was won. Over eighty percent of Americans call themselves Christians. And over 100 million of us will gather in tiny churches or elaborate cathedrals throughout the land to proclaim the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We will announce that life is stronger than death. “Christ is risen; He is risen indeed!” Countless others around the world will join the hallelujah chorus. It’s quite a celebration and I find myself yearning for it more and more each year. It is Easter! Thank God, it is Easter!

Of course, the first Easter knew none of this hype. A few women went to the tomb and found it empty. When they told the eleven frightened disciples, they considered the news an idle tale, complete nonsense, some wild imagination of these women. They were frightened for their lives. That is how the first Easter started, except for one disciple, Peter. *“But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen clothes by themselves; then he went home, amazed at when had happened.”* And here is where I want to land today.

PETER GOT UP AND WENT

Peter, along with a band of 120 or so people, changed the world with one message: Christ is risen; Christ is risen indeed!

All of us know that the longest journey begins with a single step. All of us know how difficult that first step really is. Watch any toddler take his first step and you will witness the great process of tumbles and falls, cheers and tears, successes and failures, from just learning to walk.

If by some chance in life you have to learn to walk again, it is even more difficult the second time around. As many of you know, when illness affects your mobility, the mountains seem insurmountable, almost too steep to climb. Thousands of U.S. soldiers from Iraq are coming home with limbs lost from combat. They are spending this Easter in hospitals around the country learning to walk again. Or as one sergeant said, “I am going to run again!”

Spiritually speaking, Peter had to walk again, too. The one who denied his Lord stepped back on the road again. With the rooster still crowing in his mind, he moved forward into a resurrected life. If Jesus could rise again, then Peter could walk again.

And so can you. Maybe you have lost your way. Maybe you have come to deny your Lord. Maybe you are not sure there is any truth in this at all. Maybe you got sidetracked by the fire of temptations. If Peter could rise out of his denial, you

can rise out of your doubt.

Back in the 1980's my colleague in ministry in Lexington, Kentucky was Jeb McGruder. A few of you will remember that name. Jeb ran the day-to-day details of the Richard Nixon campaign. He was a rising star among Washington's political influential personalities. He was a brilliant, absolutely brilliant. Then came Watergate. Jeb took the hit. He went to prison. But a Presbyterian pastor in Washington D.C., Louis Evans, would not let this bright, young, flawed politician go. He prayed for Jeb and with Jeb and the congregation ministered to Jeb's wife and family. Louis helped Jeb make connections in the community when he got out of prison. Eventually Jeb McGruder became a Presbyterian pastor. In those days we served together, as Jeb had the largest Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Kentucky. Jeb got up and went – and so can you

PETER STOOPED DOWN AND LOOKED INTO THE TOMB

Now I want to ask you a few questions. Have you enough humility to take another look at the Resurrection of Jesus Christ? It is not easy to get on your knees if you live in million dollar homes. It does not come natural to bow down when you are used to standing tall. It is almost impossible to take orders, when you are used to giving orders. But Peter stooped down. Peter, who would not bend down to wash another disciple's feet a couple of days ago, is now crawling on his hands and knees searching for the resurrected Christ.

The root word for humility is "humus" - earthy (earthly). I suspect it would do us all some good on this Resurrection Sunday to come down to earth and get on our knees. Ponder again what the resurrection of Jesus Christ means for the world.

The second question I have to ask is this: Have you learned to live the questions? Peter did not get any direct answers at the tomb. All he saw was a left-over linen cloth. Have you learned to live the questions? Several churches in our community are promising to answer hard questions about the faith this Easter. I respect that, but through the years I have found more faith in living the questions than in pursuing the answers.

Had Jesus wanted to start a publicity campaign, he would have staged his resurrection appearance in the temple courtyard or maybe a special leadership conference at the resort town of Tiberias on beautiful Lake Galilee. Instead, Jesus appears to lonely women, scared disciples, unlucky fishermen, and Peter, who looking in the tomb can only find leftover burial clothes.

A German poet, Rainer Rilke once said, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart, and try to love the questions for themselves. So do not seek the answers that can't be given to you because you would not be able to live them." The point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer." Have you got it all settled in your mind? That is not the question. I ask today to humbly live the questions.

I no longer say to parents who have lost a child, "God must have needed another

angel.” I can do without answers like that. I no longer say to a spouse who lost a mate, “God must have had a good reason for this.” I can do without answers like that. I do not ask people suffering from disease the question posed by the religious authorities of Jesus’ day. They wanted to know of the blind man, who sinned, this man or his parents? Assumptions like that don’t help. Instead, I go on not knowing the answers. But every day I feel more comfortable with the questions. Stoop down and look. Live the questions.

PETER WENT BACK AND FOLLOWED

Peter was the one who went back and preached the first sermon of the Resurrection. He followed. Do you know about the word “follow”? The book stores are bloated with books on leadership. Everybody has written a book on leadership whether they are a good leader or not. But even in a religious bookstore you can hardly find a book on following. Yet that is the only thing Jesus ever asked people to do.

When Jesus first caught up with Peter, he was in Galilee, running a fishing business. Jesus did not go through the Apostle’s Creed, he did not give him a long list of things he ought to do, he did not ask him how many times he had been to church. Jesus just said, “Follow me.” The incredible thing is that Peter did, along with John, Andrew, James, and others. Their response was immediate, quick, rapid, forthright. *“And at once, they left their nets and followed.”*

Jesus called me when I was just a kid. I had no clue what it meant. I could not hold any discussion about religion at all. But I got up and started following. And I am glad I did. Are you willing to follow, to follow Jesus, to go with him all the way?

I have learned a few things about this following. Everybody is following somebody or something. With apologies to Bob Dylan, “It maybe the devil, or it might be the Lord, it could be yourself, or a group of one accord. But everybody is following somebody or something.” That is the truth.

There are preachers all over this country today who will tell their congregations that following Jesus means health, wealth, and the Lord’s favor on every detail of life, including finding a close parking space in a crowded parking lot. Such prosperity gospel is heresy.

I have found following Jesus means surrender, service, and simply trusting day after day after day after day. Following can be easy. Following can be hard. We follow when the way is clear, when we know it is right, and we follow in the darkness of the middle of the night when we cannot figure it out at all.

Are you willing to go with him all the way? You see, that is what Easter is really about. Some of you have been following for years, a lifetime. What better day than Easter to say, “Thank you Lord, let’s keep walking.” Others of you here have not once in your life made a clear decision to follow Jesus Christ. What better day than today to start? Some of you followed for a while, but other things got in the way. Or you took some other road and there was a detour, and now you feel like

Peter did on Easter Sunday. Why don't you get back on the road again?

Christianity is a great institution, but like Mae West said about marriage years ago, not everybody feels the need to be institutionalized yet. Christianity is a great fellowship, but as a church member once said to me, "I get all the fellowship I need down at the corner bar. They are like family to me." First and foremost, Christianity is a vital, personal relationship with our Risen Lord. Get up! Get up and start following. Jesus is calling you by name. Will you follow the Risen Christ?