

The Great Foothold of Faith

Easter 2008

Matthew 28:1-10

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Over the past week or so, I've unexpectedly developed a fascination with the word "foothold." I believe God really enjoys taking a word I've never thought much about, seeding it in my brain, then unceasingly watering it and turning it over and over again with the spade of the Spirit to see what grows. In this case, an early part of that turning over led me to look up a dictionary definition of the word, where I found that a "foothold" is "a firm or secure position that provides a base for advancement."

Perhaps you've heard the word used in business. Folks, for example, talk about people and companies getting a "foothold in the market." Or perhaps when you hear this word you might more immediately think of rock climbing. That's what I think of, although I confess that the closest I ever get to rock climbing is when I'm standing in comfortable shoes watching my daughters at a rock-gym hosted birthday party! I do know, however, that the adventurous people who climb actual rock faces use several different kinds of footholds in their efforts to succeed (or in some cases, stay alive!) All of them require good balance, good timing, good strength, and a good attitude.

Of the foothold forms I've read about, the one I found most interesting is called the "Smearing" foothold. I like it because it involves maximum sole! As in, the maximum area of sole on your shoe is applied to the rock. If I were a rock climber, I can just see myself making small, self-authenticating talk at parties by saying things like, "Yeah, when you need to secure a good base for advancement, I find smearing works best."

So we can use this word to talk about a rigorously athletic hobby or about that other sort of sport known as securely getting ahead in the world. But on this most blessed morning, the spade of the Spirit has turned over this word and sprouted up a declaration that the most critical foothold of all has to do with our *faith*, with that part of our lives having to do with the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen (Hebrews 11:1). When, as happens at times to all of us, we find ourselves slipping away from the Rock of our Salvation, this foothold of faith is what we must apply. It is the *maximum soul* foothold we know as the *resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*.

In this morning's passage from the Gospel According to Matthew, the vital, central significance of this faithful foothold is demonstrated to us very directly. Yet

through the many years of reading this text, I've never really noticed it. That's the beauty of repeatedly reading even the most familiar Bible passages – that spade of the Spirit keeps pointing out fresh sprouts.

I'm really surprised I've never noticed these early disciples in the prayerful posture of foot-holding. Maybe you are surprised as well? But there they are before us in Matthew 28. By "they" I'm not referring to all the disciples and not even to the likes of Peter. Not a man at all, actually. They are instead two of the most devout women we meet in the Bible. Matthew identifies them as Mary Magdalene and more vaguely as "the other Mary." The first Mary, just to remind us, was a woman from the region of Magdala who was so thoroughly healed of evil by the hand of Jesus that she became one of his most devout followers. Most scholars regard the "other Mary" as Jesus' mother. Who better than these two absolutely loving, loyal-to-the-end women to show us how to respond to this morning's Good News?

They had had a most unexpected, utterly remarkable morning. In their grief, and quiet possibly on a mission to further de-scent the stench of death with embalming spices, they appeared at the tomb where Jesus had been placed. What they found happening as they arrived was not at all the sorrowful finality they had quite reasonably expected. Matthew's dramatic flair, and his careful attention to the details of Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled, tells us they were greeted by some supernatural-sized seismic rumbling and by a powerfully radiant angel with a heavenly physique (for this angel gets sole credit in Matthew's Gospel for rolling the stone away). With a calming voice (I believe of the sort we too hear in heart-whispers when we most need it), the angel announced to the women that Jesus was not in the tomb, but had risen from the dead and gone ahead of them to Galilee as previously promised. Awestruck and overwhelmed with joy, the women then raced away to tell the other disciples about what they'd experienced. But they get suddenly interrupted by Jesus somewhere along the road! He gives a gleeful, good neighborly, greeting of "Good morning!" to them and then ... then they demonstrate for us the great foothold of faith.

Matthew 28:9 reports that their immediate response to this unbelievable, totally illogical (to human reasoning), and absolutely inspirational scene is that they *took hold of his feet!*

They grabbed hold of his feet in astonishment and holy adoration, desperate to never have to let go of Jesus again. They grabbed hold of his feet to anchor themselves not at the foot of the Cross, but at the foot of the Living God. And they grabbed hold of his feet as a laying on of hands, hoping to absorb some of the glorious power that had

beat out humiliation, torture, crucifixion, and any claim on eternity sin and death itself thought it had.

On this day, as he does everyday through the Spirit, but today especially, Jesus greets us too with a gleeful, good neighborly greeting of “Good Morning!” How are we responding? Are we awestruck and joyful, already starting to run out the door with an unrestrained zeal to tell the world? Are we feeling supernatural-sized seismic rumblings in our souls, shaking us free from complacency and incredulousness? Or are we really more focused on Easter eggs and candy and company?

He is Risen, He is Risen indeed! This is our foothold of the faith! Trusting in the Almighty’s love for us in Jesus Christ, a love that conquers all hells and holds each of us in a tender, personal embrace, is our truest security. This is the truth from which we can keep going, keep adventuring, keep rising higher and higher with the Rock of our salvation!

I once read a totally made-up tale that described Jesus’ return to heaven after his sojourn here on earth (courtesy of Tony Campolo’s book Let Me Tell You a Story). Eager to hear all of what happened, angels gathered closely around him. They listened as he told them about living among people, loving them, sharing his teachings, and dying on a crude Roman Cross to atone for humankind’s sin. And he told them all about his resurrection, the definitive declaration from God that the new Kingdom was at hand.

After he finished talking, the archangel Michael asked the Lord, “What happens now?” In reply, Jesus answered, “I left behind a handful of faithful men and women. They will tell the story! They will express the love! They will spread the Kingdom!”

“But what if ...” inquired Michael, “what if they fail? What will then be the plan?”

With great hope, trust and holy authority in his voice, Jesus simply replied, “There is no other plan!”

This is a made-up story, sure enough. But it couldn’t be any truer. We are here to continue proclaiming and acting out the love of God in Jesus Christ. When this old, wounded world keeps spinning out its terrors, putting people we love in peril, we are the ones heaven bestows resurrection grace upon and expects to be footholds of hope for all sorts of folks. The Church, this congregation and every one of our sister congregations across this planet, must hold fast to the feet of the Risen One. All other reasons for its existence rise up from this position of security. As a favorite Christian author and preacher of mine once put it, “Unless something very real indeed took place on that strange, confused morning, there would be no New Testament, no church, no

Christianity.” (Fred Buechner, sermon “The End Is Life”)

So let’s continue our hallelujahs! Let’s continue grabbing hold of that holy power that redeems us, sustains us, and sets us loose in love. Advancing the ethical influence of the church in our homes, our community, our nation, and our world is not about defending and promoting an institution. It’s about trusting, adoring, and glorifying in the personal person and reconciling work of Jesus. It’s about testifying to what keeps us ultimately feeling safe and secure. It’s about our one, spiritually solid, great foothold of faith! Amen.