

As kids we quickly learned that there were two basic types of situations, we might find ourselves in at any given time. There were the "me-first!" situations. This was especially true if we grew up with lots of brothers and sisters to contend with, although often times sibling rank would determine which "me" actually got to be "first." Even still, "me first" was a screech we learned to utter when ice cream was brought out, the carnival rides came into view, someone was being chosen to sit up front on a road trip, or it was time to tell a story.

We screamed "me first" because we wanted the best selection, the biggest piece, the rarest color, and because we wanted to be the focus of attention, center-stage, the envy of all who had to wait a turn. We screamed "me first" so we could be guaranteed the bragging rights for trying something that was new, fun, and exciting. Winning the "me-first" competition made us feel special, made us feel, just for a moment, like we were the most important person in the world.

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 part of perfecting your response in a "you-go-ahead" scenario depended on a careful and thought-out delivery of that crucial line. Say it too quickly, too loudly, or too enthusiastically, and you were all but guaranteed to become part of an unwanted "me-first" experience. "You go ahead" had to be voiced with just the right amount of hesitation and a hint of subservience.

"You go ahead" was the mantra you used to avoid the last helping of creamed spinach. It was what you said to let someone else determine the lake temperature at camp. It was what was spoken so that you could gradually work your way backward through the lineup to get a shot, or to let your chemistry lab partner determine how bad that stuff floating in the test tube really smelled.

We said, "you go ahead" because we didn't want to take a risk or look foolish, we didn't want to suffer pain, show our fear, or experience the unknown.

When we succeeded in getting someone else to "go ahead," we could watch their reactions and then mentally and physically prepare ourselves when it eventually was our turn. Even though sometimes there was really nothing to be gained by letting someone else "go ahead," you somehow felt safer just knowing that someone else had gone before you.

On this glorious Easter morning, we are supposed to feel joy, wonder, triumph, exaltation. And yet after hearing the story of Christ's resurrection proclaimed we are more than aware that the women in Mark's gospel today felt quite differently. In fact, when they arrive at the tomb and find the stone rolled away, it isn't that hard for us to imagine Mary Magdalene, James' mother Mary, and Silome urging each other to peek inside, "go ahead."

The women in today's narrative were most likely experiencing the different stages we often associate with grief such as: denial, anger, sadness, disbelief, bargaining. Especially given the fact that they enter the open burial chamber expecting to find the dead body of their teacher Jesus. Instead, they find an angelic messenger who reveals to them, "He has been raised; he is not here." Hallelujah, Christ is Risen!

But if we are really honest about the emotions we experience from the empty tomb, we had better include feelings of relief, of safety, and of tremendous reassurance. After all, the good news of Easter morning is that we are a people who have looked around at the sinfulness and shortcomings in our own lives, who have looked ahead to the finality of death and judgment, and who have then cautiously sidled up to Jesus, poked him in the side and said, "You go ahead!" And guess what? He did!

Yes, "he actually did," but Jesus also went so far as to exclaim "me first" and practically pushed his way to the front of the line. In pondering the events of Holy Week we are aware that Christ took the lead as he made his way through the

Jerusalem city gates, as he challenged the religious practices at the temple, as he ate a special meal with friends who would abandon and betray him, as he experienced the injustice of a bogus trial, as he was mocked, humiliated, and nailed to a cross at Golgotha!

Jesus willingly "went ahead" of us to experience the suffering and death that were really supposed to be part of our turn. His sacrifice was for the sins and the disobedience of all of humanity. For the people of Israel who rejected him, for the Romans who enabled them, for his disciples who failed him, for those who cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him," and for all of us who have gathered together on this day to thank and praise him! This morning, we exalt in the victory Christ achieved over death, but we also feel the safety and security that comes from watching someone else, God's Son, "go ahead."

The angelic messenger in this morning's Easter story offers us even more reassurance by proclaiming that this Jesus who willingly "went ahead" of us, even onto the cross and into the tomb, continues to "go ahead" of us every day of our lives. In Mark's narrative, the angel informs the women at the tomb that the risen Christ "is going ahead of you to Galilee." And that is news that we should all ponder and cherish in our hearts as we celebrate our Lord's Resurrection!

Galilee was the site of the disciples' first witness and mission. But for Jesus' disciples, especially those first followers who often appeared to have a "me first" attitude, Galilee was also considered the place they called home. This is especially important for us to hear and understand, because it reveals to us that the risen Lord goes before all of his disciples, both when they are preaching the gospel news to the world and when they are attempting to live the Good News at home. The truth of Emmanuel, "God with us," which was announced by an Angel before Jesus' birth is revealed to be a tried-and-true reality that continues with another angelic message after Christ has been raised.

And yet, this shouldn't be all that surprising for us because we have always had a "go-ahead God." When Moses led the people away from Pharaoh and into the wilderness, the Lord went ahead of them--as a pillar of fire by night and smoke by day. When the Israelites were struggling to establish their foothold in the land of Canaan, the ark of the covenant, God's presence in their midst, would always go ahead of them into battle. When the psalmists and poets of Israel described God's ever-guiding presence, they sang of the "mighty arm of God" that went ahead of God's people.

When God wanted to speak to the people, a divinely called prophet was sent ahead with words of warning and comfort for all Israel. When the political entity of Israel finally fell, God went ahead of the people into exile. When the women, who had witnessed Jesus' death and burial, went to anoint his body with spices, God went ahead of them to roll away the stone that had been previously placed in front of the now empty tomb.

God has been ahead of us every step along the way since our creation. In fact, the joy we discover from that first Easter morning is a moment that celebrates the greatest "go-ahead" dare ever taken! Jesus Christ, God made incarnate, God in the flesh, willingly "goes ahead" of us into the future, even one that led to his suffering and death.

The good news we celebrate today is that Jesus is alive! And his story is too big to be overshadowed by reports of death and disaster, injury and illness, corruption and conflict. When Jesus is raised, he actually succeeds in putting death to death. He smashes the status quo, and turns the tables on those who see violence and corruption and disease and destruction as unchanging constants in the world that we live in. When Jesus leaves the empty tomb, all bets are off and all expectations shattered. He races ahead of us into the future that he is planning for us, and he invites us to follow him in the direction he is going.

Ok, so if God goes ahead of us into pain and suffering, torture and death, then how can we doubt God will be there ahead of us wherever life may take us? Just as he was "going ahead" of the disciples into Galilee, the risen Christ will "go ahead" us whether it is a familiar experience or a new one. Christ will "go ahead" when we return to our neighborhoods, our communities, to our homes. Jesus will also "go ahead" of us into that new classroom. He will "go ahead" of us into that new family or even that new career. He will "go ahead" of us into the world as we seek to be his hands, his feet, his presence to a world that is in desperate need of God's life-giving power of love and forgiveness.

And because God is always there ahead of us, we modern day disciples of Jesus can dare to call out "me first" no matter how scary a new situation might appear. The church, as the body of Christ, should always dare to offer itself first for the sake of others. In fact, we can boldly call out "me first" wherever we may find ourselves because our Easter secret is that there is no place we can go, no dare we can take, no limb we can crawl out on, where we won't find that God has already "gone ahead." And thanks be to God for that! Amen.