

“Searching the Shack”

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John 20:1-18*

April 12, 2009

The following announcements actually appeared in various church bulletins:

1. Don't let worry kill you – let the church help.
2. Thursday night – Potluck supper. Prayer and medication to follow.
3. For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.
4. This afternoon there will be a meeting in the South and North ends of the church. Children will be baptized at both ends.
5. This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Lewis to come forward and lay an egg on the alter.

I hope you laughed, at least a little. Perhaps a smile.

This is the day to smile and laugh – as Christians!

- Easter – the day of surprises, hope, new life!
- Easter – the day of an empty tomb, of resurrection!
- Easter – the day that opens new possibilities for your life!
- Easter – the day that unequivocally declares “God Loves You”, and there is purpose and meaning for your life!

This is the day that defines Christianity, one third of the world's population. The empty tomb speaks volumes about how we view the world we live in.

We humans, children of God, are searching for our place in the sun (son?). Within each one of us, there is a longing to assuage this inner thirst for something more in our lives. There is this discontent, this deep desire to search for wholeness, fulfillment.

For all the declarations that “religion” is lessening in America, I would counter – “The lady doth protest too much, me thinks.” Yes, by all means “institutional religion” is diminishing to some degree. Nothing-new here. Since the turbulent 60's we've seen this. This recent poll touted by Newsweek about the decline of Religion in America, is flawed (in my humble view) by being too narrow in its scope of religion, and focusing too much on the “Christian Right.”

Did you notice its barely disguised, semi plagiarized copy of the 1966 “Time” cover page – “Is God Dead”, with today's “Decline and Fall of Christian America” in the shape of a cross? I know about the “Christian America”, stigmatism. But, the understanding of religion; personal, cultural, and civilizational is entirely too simplistically presented in this article. (But read it.)

Religion is here to stay! (You can say you've heard it here.) Change - it will! But remain – it must!

Micklethwait and Wooldridge, authors of: God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World, declare,

Most of the evidence from the ground indicates that the American Religions marketplace remains vibrant...There is plenty of data to show that the turmoil of modernity stimulate demand for religion...Looked at from a celestial perspective, the American model of religion, far from retreating, is going global.”

The search is on! Or should I say “continues”!

Our religious diversity in American is a great strength. There are 100’s of different religious traditions in our country. Did you know there are specific Bibles for cowboys, brides, soldiers and even rap artists? “Even though I walk through/the hood of death/I don’t back down/for you have my back.” (I’ll keep my day job.)

The search is on!

The spirit is thirsty.

I recently heard about a best selling fiction book. A novel unabashedly religious (Christian – although some have said “heretical”). It has sold over 3 million copies. It’s been on the New York Times Paperback Trade Fiction for 46 weeks and is currently #1. The name of the novel? The Shack by Wm. Young. (Who have heard of it? Who have read it?) I read it last week. On two separate occasions, first a woman saw me reading it at Panera’s – and told me it was a wonderful book. Days later, a young man, approached me as I was reading The Shack and was effusive about it.

My friends, the search is on and continues!

The Shack is about a father “Mack”, who has a wonderful family, but while camping his youngest daughter, Missy, is kidnapped and murdered. They find evidence of her death in an abandoned shack out in the woods. Mack is grief stricken, as is his whole family. Four years later he receives a letter in the mail from someone named “Papa” (a name Mack’s wife uses to refer to God). The letter invites him to meet at the shack. Mack goes to the shack (the place of a horrific death) and there he meets the Trinity – God; God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Not your traditional Trinity mind you;

The Father “Papa” is a “big black woman with a questionable sense of humor”

Jesus is a Middle Eastern laborer, not very good looking.

The Holy Spirit is an Asian woman named Sarayu.

Mack spends two days with God, the Trinity. He anguishes over Missy’s murder. He sees how God loves in this Trinity relationship. He argues, cries, and learns about how much God loves him and his Missy. Intense love is shared. Scenes of redemption follow, trying to make sense out of suffering and loss.

The author, Wm Young speaks of the shack as a metaphor for “the house you build out of your own pain.” Perhaps too – a tomb where instead of suffering and death being the end of the story, it is the place where the living God meets you. Where you are on your journey, your searching. (Now I could pick apart sections of The Shack, as many have done – yet missing the point.)

How wonderful - millions of searchers are reading a book that takes them into that place of “The Great Sadness” (as Mack called it), and there they are offered a relationship with the God of love, and loving relationships. Mystery remains, but the searching is progressing.

Let’s go further back. It’s early Sunday morning. They have been dark, sad days. There she is, do you see her, it’s still fairly dark. It’s Mary Magdalene, alone. She is almost to the tomb (shack) mourning the murder

of Jesus. She had been searching. She thought Jesus had been the one to give meaning to their lives. But, he was dead now.

She arrives at the tomb – the stone has been moved. She runs away. Mary finds Peter and John (the one Jesus loved), and cries out, “they have taken away Jesus’ body!” In an instant they are off and running toward the tomb. John gets there first, but stays outside the tomb. Peter (impetuous Peter) runs straight into the tomb! No dead body! John goes in. Death is not present. Mary is weeping. It’s been bad enough – they killed Jesus, now they have stolen his body. She asks the gardener where his body is. But, it is Jesus!

They went to the place of death, without expectation. Their searching was dashed to pieces on Friday. But, in the place of hurt, pain, and loss – God came to them!

Mary went and told the others. “I have seen the Lord!”

Mack found out in his searching that much of what he thought and believed was wrong. In the Shack he found – that God loves you, God loves you, God loves you!

- Believing this – is a way of life!
- Living this will change your life!

Mary, Peter, John and others found in their searching – the living Christ – who mirrors, reflects God and God’s love. From this tiny group – a vision for the world ignited. From an empty tomb – fulfillment has been granted!

As Christians – our searching takes us to the empty tomb – where love, new life and purpose are revealed.

There are shacks, tombs without number. Choose the one that is empty of sorrow and death, and full of life and hope through the risen Christ!

Rejoice! Laugh! Smile. Christ is Risen indeed!!

Amen.