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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

Memoir, *cont'd.*

(Continued from page 7)

Sea of Galilee challenges us to rethink our attitudes and values:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...the merciful...the pure in heart...

The peacemakers” (Matthew 5:3-9). My prayer is that faith, persistence, patience, hope and wisdom prevail.

Mr. Barbara Robertson is a lay person in the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, Lawrenceville, GA. Ms. Robertson traveled to the Holy Land with the United Theological Seminary in 2012.

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Much More than a Metaphor

The Rev. Peter J. Miano

1 Corinthians 15

You’ve heard it proclaimed from pulpits and seen it announced in pastoral letters—if it weren’t for Easter, there would be no Christmas. Sure, Christmas summons a lot more sentimentality and frenetic activity, but Easter is the more important of the two beloved holidays. If Jesus had not been raised, we probably would not remember his death let alone his birth. In fact, if it weren’t for the fact of Easter, there would be no Christian calendar at all. No Pentecost, no Ash

Wednesday. No Saints’ days. No One Great Hour of Sharing. No Children’s Sundays. No nothing.

Make no mistake about it. As people of faith, we put all our Christian eggs in one Easter basket. Or, as the Apostle Paul put it, “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is empty and your faith is empty also.” (1 Cor. 15:14). As a matter of fact, there is no biblical account of Jesus’ resurrection. The Gospels include only stories of Jesus’ *appearances after* his resurrection. Still, the reality of Christ’s resurrection is expressed beautifully, yet cryptically in

varied scripture passages. It is affirmed in thousands of churches every Easter morning. Had it not been for the experience of the resurrection, all that Jesus preached, all that the first generation of Jesus’ followers first heard, all would have died and been buried with Jesus.

So, this Easter Sunday, like every Easter Sunday, the pressure is on. Don’t think that the preachers don’t feel it. They do. Once again, this Easter Sunday, in churches packed to the brim like no other Sunday in the year, they will summon their

(Continued on page 3)

Memoir of a Holy Land Pilgrimage

Ms. Barbara Robertson

Faith based travel – pilgrimages, short term or long term mission/volunteer trips, and religious retreats have become means for Christians to express and validate their religious faith and answer the call to serve. In January, I spent twelve event filled days inclusive of travel and serious hiking on a pilgrimage with The Society for Biblical Studies connecting with the history of the Bible in the Holy Land. As a believer, my confessed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ does not require tangible proof. However, the historical record and some archaeological evidence exist to confirm Old and New Testament scriptures and the Gospel. To experience this first

hand edifies the spirit and, yes, blows the mind. I was traveling with a group on a cross cultural pilgrimage to Israel, the West Bank and Jordan coordinated by the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio and the Society for Biblical Studies. The course objectives were ambitious, but the opportunity to view the land and holy sites – sacred places that impact Christianity and other religions – was a long held dream. I also wanted to gain some clarity on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, liberation theology, and experience the Middle Eastern culture. We had a unique opportunity to accomplish these objectives and get the perspective of the people who live in this region - share their hospitality, cuisine, and reside in the heart of their communities.

The land of Israel and the West Bank are stunning and mesmerizing. Like many first time visitors, I found the region breathtaking. I was enthralled by the majesty of the mountains, the sloping valleys, the undulant deserts, the sparkling Sea of Galilee and the mineral laden Dead Sea. The juxtaposition of the ancient and the modern is majestic and awe inspiring. Upon seeing the land in panorama from the top of Mt. Nebo, this scripture came to mind.

“...A land flowing with milk and honey... [it] is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to

(Continued on page 7)

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Mission Work in Palestine

The Rev. Jil Jennewein

10 days in 2010 with The Society for Biblical Studies, I knew I had to return someday. Unlike traveling with a commercial tour company, our S.B.S. group spent the majority of our tour not only retracing the life of Jesus by visiting the places where he ministered, but more importantly seeing what living is like for the Palestinian and Israeli people today and applying our biblical learnings to the world we live in.

My opportunity to fulfill my dream of mission work in Palestine came in between job assignments. The Reverend Peter Miano, Executive Director of The Society for Biblical Studies, offered to support me in my

January is the rainy season, therefore upon arrival the weather was quite cold and miserable, but the rain did not stop me from venturing over to The Hope School. Over the next 4 weeks I got very acquainted with the staff and students who live and work there. The first thing I realized upon visiting their chapel is that there were no hymnals. "How can you have chapel without music?" I asked. This led to many visits with the students. We picked out 3 songs they wanted to sing together and rehearsed until they felt comfortable participating in the worship experience, which we did before I left.

I also made the drive to Nahalin with Daoud and Jahin Nassar three mornings each week. The Women's Project is a grassroots movement created

Each day I felt that my life and contribution was appreciated and valued more than I have ever felt it here in the United States.

mission work and made the arrangements with the Tent of Nations for me to work at the Women's Project in Nahalin. I arrived in Beit Jala on January 22, 2012.

I knew this was not going to be your average, or typical mission trip. Rather than building a medical clinic (like I had done in Haiti) or some other "hands on" project, I knew this was going to be a mission of love and a ministry of Christian presence. My goal was to make my pilgrimage a form of mission in itself by building bridges of understanding through the relationships I formed while in Palestine.

by Jahin for the rural Muslim women in the village of Nahalin. I was told I would teach these women English. "Teaching English" turned into a last minute creation of a 4 week Women's Empowerment Workshop designed to be implemented and used beyond my time on the project. Each morning there were between 12 and 20 young Muslim women who would attend these free courses. Jihan utilizes the expertise of not only the professional women in her area but the many internationals who travel through. In this way these young women are

(Continued on page 6)

Memoir of a Holy Land Pilgrimage, cont'd

(Continued from page 1)
its end" (Deuteronomy 11:9-12).

The fact that two major groups have substantial ties to this area and three religions claim Abraham as patriarch attests to its venerable history. But its modern day vibrancy is evident in the numbers of visitors who travel to the region despite the longstanding conflict and possible safety and security issues. As it so happened, the timing of this journey coincided with the Eastern Orthodox Christmas celebration on January 7.

Christmas decorations abounded and there was a sense of anticipation, joy and excitement in many of the areas we visited. All of the cities, especially Bethlehem and Jerusalem, were teeming with people there to observe holy sites and holidays. In fact, some in the group were turned away from our hotel in Bethlehem as capacity was overbooked. We were genuinely able to claim that there was no room at the inn!

There were exhilarating highs. Certainly all of the sacred

places and other sites we visited (more than 40) are spiritually and historically significant and were accompanied by thorough background lectures. This was inspiring and life changing as scripture came alive before my eyes. In addition, having the opportunity to hear the voices of the people: the advocate for women living in refugee camps, the privileged atheist in a kibbutz, the hopeful director of an international peace center, the Christian Bedouin, the Jewish rabbi, the

former IDF soldier who "broke the silence", the business entrepreneur, the priest whose church we attended for worship service, and the liberation theologian gave depth and meaning to this pilgrimage.

There were also depressing lows. The *hafrada barrier* (or wall of separation) and militarized checkpoints were a reality that the people in the region live with every day but were shockingly reminiscent of repressive practices in other nations. We were told how difficult it is to conduct ordi-

one of whom we witnessed being treated with indifference and inhumanity. Is there reason to hope? International peace talks were in progress while we were there but the process is complicated by Zionist rhetoric, politics, outside influence, memories of past wars, and an oppressive military presence that seemingly justifies committing atrocities for the sake of security!

The people of the West Bank, especially the Christians, whose numbers we were told are diminishing, have little influence and power but their hope and faith are inspiring. A question posed to us by the speaker on the first day of our journey shaped the collective group consciousness and burst the tour bubble. We were asked point blank, "what are you going to do [to help]"? In fact, what is the proper response to all that we have seen, heard and learned? As Christians, we are to love, serve and care for others. And typically as God would have it, an opportunity to help materialized during the course of our journey!

This trip was a fulfillment of a lifetime desire to "walk where Jesus walked". I clearly understand the sojourn was a pilgrimage, not a tour, and that it comes with responsibility. It was a privilege to experience the glory of the Holy Land, but the "land is groaning" from the conflict. I've already begun

to share what I learned on this amazing cross cultural journey with my family, church and community. Educating and uniting with others is critical for any effective action. Even so, my take away despite the heartbreakingly real problems engulfing this region, is that we serve a real and living God. He is working through those who are committed to seek peace, understanding and reconciliation. The Beatitudes given in the Sermon on the Mount by the

(Continued on page 8)

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Mission Work, cont’d.

(Continued from page 2)

learning about health care, hygiene, nutrition, education, employment, their legal rights, learning better English speaking skills, re-sources for counseling and domestic violence advocates, and much more.

I have never met more hospitable, kind and generous people in all of my life than those in the Palestinian communities. I felt welcomed, safe and protected and saw the living spirit of Christ daily. I learned more about myself during those short 30 days in Palestine than the rest of my life put together. Each day I felt that my life and contribution was appreciated and valued more than I have ever felt it here in the United States.

And this all started with a desire to "walk in the land where Jesus walked". Yes, I hear those words many times from people wanting to tour the Holy Land. To visit the land of Jesus’ birth and life, is worthy of adding to your Bucket List. One simple tour turned my life and perception of the world upside down. I had no idea what was really going on in Jesus' home country. I would venture to say that most people here in the United States do not, and will not know the truth unless and until they go "Visit Palestine" (as the poster says). I will never forget my friend and mentor Rev. Don Messer (former President of Iliff School of Theology), telling our class during Iliff Week of Lectures, that we each have a responsibility to # 1 go and # 2 come back, and # 3 to tell others what we saw and experienced.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” asked Nathanael. “Come and see,” said Philip. (John 1:46). Jesus asked his followers “What do you want?” and they answered, “where are you staying?” And he responded, “Come and see.” (John 1:38-39). I am very grateful to have been led safely by The Society for Biblical Studies, which encourages all travelers to consider that we have a responsibility as Christians to keep our biblical studies in context and that we owe it to ourselves to spend more than 3 hours in Bethlehem and behind the ominous wall that separates the so called West Bank. I know I am grateful I did and I now look forward to visiting my new Palestinian friends again and again.

The Rev. Jil Jennewein is a United Methodist Minister. She traveled to the Holy Land and Turkey with The Society for Biblical Studies and returned as a short term volunteer in January 2012.

This all started with a desire to “walk in the land where Jesus walked”

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Metaphor, cont’d

(Continued from page 5)

because I read about it in the Bible, not because someone told me about it or preached it to me, but because in my own life I experience Christ not as a memory, but as a present, persistent reality and I experience the resurrection as much more than a metaphor. Easter does not ask for sympathy to the crucified Jesus, but loyalty to the resurrected one. What would be the point of expressing sympathy for the crucified Jesus while maintaining loyalty to the values and systems that crucified him? Try reordering your values, aligning them with a vision of eternal life and you’ll find out very quickly just how real the resurrection is.

At the end of the day, the reality of the resurrection is not proved, but expressed in a loving and enthusiastic embrace of life itself and of those who are living. It is not known, but experienced at a level far deeper than the mind can comprehend. It is not believed in without evidence, but trusted in without reservation when its reality renders the demand for intellectual proof and any other choice pitifully insignificant and utterly absurd. The Easter faith insists not only that Christ is risen, but that He is risen pro nobis—for us. As the hymn goes, “Made like Him, like Him we rise...ours the cross, the grave, the skies...” Maybe Easter is not as sentimental as Christmas, because it is not just a promise, but a demand, an invitation to respond. On Easter Sunday we all affirm the resurrection of Christ, but too many remain voluntarily entombed in self made graves. We say, “Thanks be to God who give us the victory” (1 Cor. 15:57), but do we too claim the prize? Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. The only question left is will we rise with him.

The Rev. Peter J. Miano is a United Methodist Minister. He is the Founder and Executive Director of The Society for Biblical Studies.

Metaphor, cont’d.

(Continued from page 1)

best to give to the highest and to all of us who stream to church hoping to be wowed into renewed faith. We will get renewed. Won’t we? Jesus really did come back from the dead. Didn’t he? For one day, at least, faith will trump doubt. Won’t it? Or will it? I am not so sure.

In the sermon I heard last Easter morning, the minister stated that he did not know what happened on the first Easter morning! He affirmed confidently that *something happened*, but he didn’t say what. However, being so candid, the preacher affirmed what many dare to suggest, namely that too many of us

don’t really know. In too many churches this Easter Sunday morning, the resurrection of Jesus will be interpreted not as a reality, but only as a kind of a metaphor. As if to say it didn’t really happen, but it is symbolic of something to wish for. In many other churches, it will be spoken of as a distant memory, but not as an immediate, life changing possibility for all.

For many, the resurrection event is interpreted as a metaphorical account signifying new life. They find proof for the resurrection in the return of Spring, the lengthening of the days, the appearance of crocuses and daffodils. I wonder though. Does the Christian faith rest on the mere

affirmation that the seasons renew, that life goes on? If we really believed that Christ was raised, would we treat it as if it were a metaphor with proof in the signs of Spring? If we believed in the distinct possibility that each one of us can participate in the resurrection, would we treat it as a memory? Make no mistake about it. The resurrection does have metaphorical meaning, but it is much more than a metaphor. To me, treating the resurrection only as some kind of a metaphor betrays deeper insecurity about the resurrection faith. Camouflaged in stories and statements of faith, Easter sermons betray a very natural ambivalence about the heart of

(Continued on page 4)

The Holy Land, The Holy People

Mr. Allan Nixon

My wife and I are experienced tour participants. Our decision to join this SBS led journey to the Holy Land was easy. The itinerary included stops at just about every significant site that we had read about connected with the beginnings of Judeo-Christian religious practice as well as many sites, less known to us, with significance to Islam; we would be able to spend time in majority Palestinian cities; opportunities would be provided to meet with Jewish and Palestinian citizens and activists; our guides would be scholars knowledgeable in history, religions, geography and archaeology; our fellow travelers were to be pastors early in their careers who, naturally, would be able to ask and answer lots of faith related questions and inject youthful enthusiasm all along the way. Despite signing on with such high expectations, we were never disappointed.

Hannah and I were continually impressed with the scholarly ex-

pertise that guided us. Thorough preparations had been made for every stop. Peter Miano led the group and clearly showed on-the-ground preparation as well as the ability to convey the

The Holy Land, Holy People trip gave me a far deeper personal understanding of life in Bible times, with particular attention to the footsteps of Jesus...

Biblical and historical significance of each place we visited. He took time to read and cross reference Bible passages with the land, buildings and artifacts as they came into view. On a Sunday, after an overnight on the

shores of the Sea of Galilee, Peter led us to a path through a nearby valley. With no other people in the area, we stopped and talked about the probability that this was indeed a path that Jesus had walked. Some of the pastors/ travelers in the group had brought along the elements for communion and shared the elements under overarching trees in a most moving service.

Particular care was taken to show and explain evidence of Roman civilization in the region before and during the period of Jesus’ life. The experience of standing among the ruins of Herod’s summer palace added immeasurably to the understanding of the political and military power under his rule, adding yet another dimension to familiar Bible references. Similarly, we later visited the desert site where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found and learned about the time, place and significance of this site in Jewish history. Every stop along the way was used to add meaning and perspective to our understanding of Holy Land, Holy People.

Generous time was given to appreciate the heritage, traditions, and situation of Palestinians who live,

(Continued on page 4)

Holy Land, *cont’d*

(Continued from page 3)

work, raise families and worship in these same Holy Lands.

We often stayed in and walked among residential areas, e.g., Bethlehem, that are walled or fenced to separate Palestinian inhabitants from Israeli areas. The tour included a visit to a desert village, home to nomadic people who had title to the land prior to the time that Israel became a nation. There we saw the remnants of a small block home belonging to a widow. The house had been bulldozed by the Israeli army because it did not have the proper permit. The village has no public services provided by the state and is not shown on maps of Israel, yet the people remain on their deeded property and strive to build essential services, including water, electricity, and communication links, for their community.

During another visit the group went to a refugee area that had been established as housing for Palestinians whose homes were taken when Israel was established. Arrangements had been made to meet with a community leader for conversation about the situation of families in his community today. His is a perspective not often covered in American news media today but is crucial to understanding the political stalemate that continues to plague today’s Holy Land.

Our group was also privileged to visit a Kibbutz with a long time resident, an Israeli woman, as our guide. This philosophically close-knit community now includes second and perhaps a few third generation families. It is highly organized. Everyone contributes to the work of the community and the benefits of their productivity are shared equally. We were impressed by the evident focus of individuals on the welfare of the community.

A young former Israeli soldier met with us to discuss his view of the current Israeli-Palestinian relationship. He explained that quite a number of former military men and women have shared their observations of the situation and are speaking out to try and make a difference in the situation.

(Continued on page 5)

Metaphor, *cont’d*

(Continued from page 3)

Christianity.

Easter is a tough day to preach, because even many clergy do not understand and are ambivalent about the message. I suspect that more than a few of Easter Sunday’s sermons will sow the seeds of doubt even if they try to reassure. I suspect that ambivalence about the Easter message is rooted in confusion between resuscitation and resurrection. At the end of the day, though, Easter is about resurrection, not the resuscitation of a corpse. It is natural to be skeptical about corpses coming back to life and Christian faith does not require us to believe that.

What does the Bible actually tell us? It seems that many are so heavily influenced by repeated affirmations of faith, i.e., “I believe in the resurrection of the body,” that they confuse the statements of the creed with the testimony of the Gospels. Let’s not be naïve. There are many who reject the Easter faith, because their 21st Century intellects

simply cannot accept the concept of dead bodies coming back to life. For many contemporary Christians and quasi-Christians alike, reason is the ultimate arbiter of truth and to them too many elements of Christian faith seem to require the suspension of the intellect. If the creed is telling us that bodies return from the grave, the creed seems incredible. After all, where is the proof? Others, if not outright rejectionists, are skeptical for the same reason. Skepticism is natural. It is an element of faith. It is particularly natural, especially if we think we are obliged to believe in the resuscitation of a corpse. There were those in Paul’s churches in Thessalonika who were skeptical—anxious

about the fate of those who had died and demanded reassurance from Paul. In Corinth, there were those who denied the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:12). Obviously, neither outright denial of nor skepticism about the resurrection is new.

The Bible does, indeed, tell stories about corpses being resuscitated and returning from the grave. The raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44) is the primary example. Lazarus is so dead that when Jesus indicates his intention to revive him, Martha exclaims that the corpse already has the stench of a decaying body. Nonetheless, Jesus commands Lazarus to come forth from the grave and he does.

The corpse is revived. It is an incredible story in that it is amazing, full of powerful meaning, packed with drama and rich in significance. For many, though, it is just incredible, i.e., hard to believe. We just don’t have a lot of experience with corpses rising from graves and so we look for and find alternative renderings of the meaning of the passage. All this is natural enough and the Bible does not tell us to take the Bible literally. The story seems to demand that we suspend our faculties of intellect and believe the unbelievable. Reluctant

to do so, we find alternative renderings, ones that are more harmonious with our rigorous 21st Century brains. Don’t get me wrong. I believe that the resurrection of Jesus is real. I believe that it is amazing. I believe that it is life changing when we experience it, which we can do. But I do not think it is unbelievable. Neither do I believe it is about a resuscitated corpse.

Let’s be clear that disbelief is natural. In fact, all the resurrection stories in the Gospels state that disbelief was the first reaction of some of Jesus’ closest followers. Fortunately for believers and skeptics alike, Jesus’ resurrection is not the same thing as the resuscitation of Lazarus’

(Continued on page 5)

Metaphor, *cont’d.*

(Continued from page 4)

corpse. The Bible does not say that Jesus’ corpse came back to life. When Jesus appears, his followers do not recognize him. He appears in their midst suddenly. He is taken to be a ghost. He seems to walk through a closed door. Jesus even chastens Thomas for expecting some kind of corporeal proof.

Paul is even more explicit. Paul’s testimony to Christ’s resurrection is the earliest of any Christian source. He writes perhaps 20 years or more prior to the Gospel writers. He most certainly does NOT describe a resuscitated corpse. He states: “But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ Fool!...So it is with the resurrection of the dead...It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.” (1 Cor. 15:35-44, NRSV)

“Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” (1 Cor. 15:51-52)

Paul most certainly does not believe in a corporeal resuscitation. Paul’s Easter faith is not in the incredulous resuscitation of a corpse, but in resurrection, the transformation of physical life and the renewal of Being itself.

For Paul, and I believe, for you and I, the proof of the resurrection is not a story about a corpse brought back to life. Neither does he cite stories of an

empty tomb to persuade the Corinthians of the reality of the resurrection. In fact, Paul knows nothing of empty tomb stories. Rather, for Paul, and for you and me, the proof of the resurrection is, first of all, in the very real encounter with the risen Christ. Paul did not relate to Jesus as a memory. He encountered the risen Christ as a present, immediate reality—over and over again. Such an encounter is available to all and it is all the proof you need. Such an encounter must be described metaphorically, but it is as real as real gets.

At the end of the day, though, Easter is about resurrection, not the resuscitation of a corpse

Paul knew that Christ was raised, because Paul, himself, was raised. No one proved it to him. Rather, he experienced it and then he trusted it . The proof of the resurrection is transformed life, reordered Being itself. For Paul, the resurrection was real when it induced him to reorder his values and his loyalties. He no longer

trusted the standards of value the world had imposed upon him—class, wealth, gender, status, political power and ethnic group—the reality of all these dissipated faster than the morning mist in the rising summer sun. Instead, he insisted on living life according to new standards and new values—God instead of Emperor, love instead of power, forgiveness instead of vengeance, humanity instead of parochial, artificial, divisive nations, community rooted in eternal, ultimate reality rather than in fleeting, accidents of personal existence.

I believe in the resurrection, not

(Continued on page 6)

Holy Land, Holy People, *cont’d.*

(Continued from page 4)

During their service, they were part of efforts to further restrict the movement of Palestinians and to facilitate the expansion of Israeli settlements in areas previously designated as Palestinian. It was chilling to hear his first-hand accounts of how these operations were carried out.

The Holy Land, Holy People trip gave me a far deeper personal understanding of life in Bible times, with particular attention to the footsteps of Jesus. Perhaps as important, it brought the current state of conflict, with basis in competing religious traditions, into sharper and more balanced focus. I am grateful to the General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church, for sponsoring this trip and to Peter Miano of the Society for Biblical Studies for making our arrangements and personally sharing his wealth of knowledge of the region and the subject so freely with us.

Mr. Allan Nixon is a lay person in Grace United Methodist Church, Manassas, VA who is very active with Volunteers in Mission, leading mission trips to Russia and the Ukraine. He traveled to the Holy Land with the General Board of Church and Society in 2011.