

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
April 21, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 25:6-9

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 24:1-12 NRSV

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

At the Tomb: Can I Get a Witness?

We have gone through every portion of Holy Week with numerous worship services these past few days. Thanks to the full support of our leadership and many individuals we held a commemoration of **Good Friday**, observed **Holy Saturday** with a reading of the entire *Gospel of Mark*, and of course we held a **Maundy Thursday** service that evening. The only thing we did not re-enact or highlight was Jesus trashing the merchants in the temple. That would be a great one-act play, no doubt! Instead, we did perform the evening worship of Maundy Thursday, reviewing the events of Jesus and his disciples gathered for their last meal together. Of course, Christian tradition holds that this was the time when Jesus performed the actions of the **Eucharist**, a gift to us. We hold this as a sacrament through **God’s Spirit** and in the **presence of Christ** through this tangible and very real partaking of simple food: bread and juice or wine. It is one of our two sacraments, along with our baptism, and it serves as a **physical reminder** of the unspoken and **invisible grace** which we receive from God.

Not every denomination or congregation goes to this much trouble during Holy Week. During much of the 20th century, many southern Presbyterian churches never bothered with these liturgies, but they received increasing attention and emphasis in larger congregations and in all ten of our **Presbyterian seminaries**. This goes back to a reacquaintance with the writings of John Calvin, Martin Luther, and the liturgies of the Lutheran, Anglican, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic churches.

Maundy Thursday and the observance of the Lord's supper, the Eucharist, also reveal a very important part of our core beliefs, our theology. This is where the theology of the sacraments begins to spill over into the life of the church: the church seasons, such as **Lent**, **Advent**, and celebration events such as **Pentecost**. Through these special times during the church year, we witness God's Spirit entering into our worship, our prayer life, and our living. We hold that God is always present. What better way to recognize and enact these beliefs than to **seal God's Word** to our hearts and lives through the **sacrament of the Eucharist**? Many pastors (yours included) would prefer doing so every Sunday and every time we gather in worship. The guidelines of our worship allow us to do this very thing, a reflection of the **freedom** we have in our worship.

Now, everything we are talking about begins to take shape on this day that we celebrate: the day we know as **Easter Sunday**. Truly, we should identify with the position and attitude of **the disciples** as they are depicted in our **scripture lesson** today. Like them, we are left baffled, even unbelieving, at the sudden news that **Jesus is not dead**, but among the living. Through our modern lens of thinking and knowing, this makes no sense whatsoever. The **disciples** felt the same way.

Three days after the death and burial of **Jesus of Nazareth**, they are still mourning. They have lost a close personal friend, an unquestioned leader who is both **charismatic** and inspiring. Many of them thought that Jesus wanted to **reform** the established religion of Judaism, but everything had come to a gruesome, final halt. The future looked **bleak**, and the movement, whatever it was, came at a complete **standstill**. Jesus, their leader, a man who was prophet, preacher, healer, exorcist, and opponent of the religious and political authorities, was removed from them forever. Would there be a **backlash** of oppression to wipe them out, as well? If they **survived**, somehow, who would be their leader? Even the keeper of the purse and finances, **Judas Iscariot**, was dead.

With this in mind, can you imagine the **reaction** of these faithful women and men, when some of their own come into their hiding place and announce that **the tomb is empty**?

Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

Luke 24:10-11 NRSV

So, what was the state of their minds and their attitude as this **startling news** came to the disciples? Were they unable to take it in, living in **denial**? Were they ready **to flee** Jerusalem and Judea for a new life in an area outside of Roman control, perhaps in Parthia, closer to modern-day Iraq and Iran? Why did those gathered **fail to believe** these faithful women?

After all, these women were the **followers of Jesus**. They had taken it upon themselves to attend to the **body of Jesus** and prepare him for a proper burial, perhaps even washing his body. This morning after **the Sabbath**, they were returning to the tomb to complete the task of preparing the body of Jesus for **burial**. They carried items for anointing him: spices and fragrances, likely including the expensive items told to us earlier in the gospel: **frankincense and myrrh** offered by the mysterious Magi as part of the birth story. It was the custom to use and the valuable nard for this preparation of the dead: the same fragrance used to anoint Jesus during his last few weeks among his friends.

But, before they enter the tomb, these women had an encounter with men in “dazzling white,” surely heavenly beings, and they saw that Jesus was not there. These same beings tell them that Jesus is **not dead!** Isn’t this **good news?** The women are frightened by this revelation, but also overjoyed. They run to tell the disciples. But, these individuals do not believe it: It is an idle tale, they say (*Luke 24:11*). Why so glum? Don’t the **disciples** get it?

Well, in fact they **do not** “get it.” They are mystified, or even stupefied, if you want to use a more base term. Perhaps, they are numb from the **grief?** Perhaps, some of them saw the horror of the agony and death of Jesus, and it remains embedded in their minds, making them unable to escape the horrific images! Most of us are familiar with the description of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, abbreviated as PTSD. It is very real and slow to resolve, if it resolves at all. Perhaps something like this is affecting the disciples?

And yet, is there not the glimmer of **hope?** Like the parents of a service member who is listed as **Missing in Action** (MIA), are they not allowed some hope, even if it might not become the desired reality? Today, we sometimes function in the same way, being overcome by an unsettling reality that offers us bleak prospects: a new and unwanted **illness**, the news of the **death** of a close friend, or even an increase in **your rent**. Day-to-day, you and I deal with many forms of **disappointment**, and we can relate to those discouraged disciples who were sitting immobile 2000 years ago.

There are other events that **paralyze us** today. And, when this happens, we continue feeling an emptiness and a growing uneasiness just taking in the news of the day. Senseless and brutal tragedies of **murder** and terrorist acts and **hate crimes** occur all too regularly. We look into another opening **abyss** of hopelessness and despair on any given morning or evening. Like Roman occupied Palestine, these are difficult times.

And, yet, there is **Good News** for us in the face of tragedy. Like the disciples, we have to look beyond the obvious conclusions that we draw and look to God for solace and **comfort**. It is easy for us to read these verses and conclude that the disciples must be blinded to **the truth** in front of them. But, here is where the Gospel truly begins: The amazing story of the **resurrection** is out in the land. And yet, at this time there is **no joy**. There is only resignation. We read these words and pause and realize that the joyful celebration of **Easter has not become reality** in this description of the **resurrection dawn!** In this scripture lesson, the significance of the empty tomb was still a **mystery** to those who knew Jesus firsthand.

While you and I profess that we believe in the **Risen Christ**, and benefit from the power that came to him with the resurrection and ascension, many of us remain very much like those disciples on the first Easter morning: untouched and **unaltered** by this **act of God**. In that sense we are very much like the disciples, you and I. You may not agree with this summary, but consider this: When you and I return to our homes today, will we be affected by the realization that Christ has **died for us**, not just for the forgiveness of our sins, but to **transform us** into a new way of living? This is not merely repentance for sins past, but a more **permanent change** in our makeup, our **personality**, our **world view**.

Here is an example of what I we are discussing: After this morning’s service, can you and I honestly say that we are going to approach the new day with something positive to say about our neighbor, literally, the **annoying neighbor** next door? Will we give thanks for the first breath of morning, not just because God grants it, but because all life and **our very being** comes from

God? This is even more real for some of us; we are literally here today, physically, because our otherwise fatal illnesses, such as an underlying cardiac condition, was overcome by technology and modern diagnostic procedures: all **gifts of God** for the people of God.

In our daily routine, will you and I treat our **waiter** or the salesclerk more **civilly**? Will we pay an **honest wage** to those who provide services to us? Some of you have owned a business: Did you provide health and retirement benefits for your employees, even though it took away from your bottom line and personal income? Like the disciples, are you and I substantially **changed** by the report of an **empty tomb**? Or, do we continue to look into the hollow space we find **within ourselves**, sinking deeper into our own pit of depression and **anxiety**?

Well, here is the truly **Good News** of Easter. **Christ is alive**, and he continues appearing before the disciples over several days and weeks and in various ways. The two men encounter him on the **road to Emmaus**. A short time later, he appears to the the disciples where they are gathered, hiding **in fear**, in or near Jerusalem. He sees them on a mountain **in Galilee**. And, in the *Gospel of John*, Jesus finds the disciples working hard **in their boats** once again. It takes a long time to get the message across, even to those who knew him best! Why should **you and I** be any different?

During the worship service and the sermon in many African-American congregations, the preacher will seek **affirmation** from the congregation at a critical moment. It is a way of inviting others in the worship space to express their approval: to clap or shout "Amen." The speaker will stimulate those in the congregation by asking the question: "**Can I get a witness?**"

Even though I greatly enjoy participating in this lively form of **interactive worship**, nothing like that is going on in our scripture lesson today. In fact, the disciples appear **disorganized** as well as discouraged. And yet, our minds, steeped in the traditional story of resurrection and new life, are crying out to tell those in the story that there is **no need for fear**: That this is just the beginning: This is the **heart** of the Gospel!

But, we have to stop and reassess this part of the story at **face value**. On the surface, we could say that the outward appearance of Easter Sunday had all the trappings of death and finality. There is a gravesite: **a tomb**, although it is reported as being **empty**. There is **the shadow of the cross**, if not literally, then figuratively, cast over the disciples and followers of Jesus. We ourselves carry the memory of our own worship experience of this past **Holy Saturday**; the death of Jesus of Nazareth remains as evidence of this **somber mood**. And, in our worship experiences on **Maundy Thursday** and extending through the weekend, we create this somber mood intentionally as part of the the story of **Holy Week**.

But, rest assured: the witness of the women is **not the end** of the story. The ever-impulsive disciple, **Peter**, got up and ran to the tomb. He is able to confirm that the tomb is empty. This seems a bit odd that noting follows this bold act. And, there is a lot of debate among scholars about these verses. Was this part of the story a **late addition** by those who revered the **apostle Peter**? Jesus referred to him as the Rock, and tradition holds that **Peter followed Paul to Rome** and became the bishop of the churches in that great city and the surrounding region. This tradition of succession to Peter led to the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, accepted as head of the Church in the West for nearly 1500 years. Perhaps, a tradition such as this influenced the author, or authors, of the *Gospel of Luke*, giving more attention to Peter in the narrative of this Gospel. We may never know.

In our scripture lesson, there are plenty of **witnesses** to the events surrounding this amazing finding of an **empty tomb**. Even Peter has difficulty taking it in. But, the true reality that confronted them continues before us: **Christ is risen!** There are **more encounters** with the Risen Christ among the disciples, as told in the remainder of *Luke* and in the second portion of the story in the *Acts of the Apostles*. All of this will lead to the anointing of the followers with God's Spirit at **Pentecost**, transforming of the disciples from woeful, fearful people into **bold proclaimers** of the Gospel message. Because of that, they relay this Good News of the power of the **Risen Christ** for all humankind. My hope and prayer is that you and I will be transformed into **disciples of Christ**, as well.

Because the tomb is empty, we know that **Christ is risen**. We recognize this each year at **Easter**. And, each Sunday we re-enact that message in **our worship**, just as the disciples did: beginning in the **hideaways** of Jerusalem, but extending throughout the world. Today, let us celebrate the gift of **God's power**, and understand that **God's Spirit** has come to us through the death and **resurrection of Jesus Christ**. Certainly, we do this because of **tradition**. But, more importantly, we celebrate this Good News, because-

He lives!

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