

Easter Sunday

April 21, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, Maryland

Readings: Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 24: 1-12

Grace to you and peace from God - Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Amen

The first ever Easter sermon did not go well. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and other women came racing to proclaim the good news of the Risen Lord to the disciples. Did one speak for them all or did they all keep tripping over each other's words in all their astonishment and excitement? They had rushed back to the upper room where the disciples and followers of Jesus had been hiding, grieving, praying, and unable to grasp what had happened to Jesus that terrible Friday when he was crucified. Into that despair, the women came in, smelling of dawn and hope, energized with news.

"We went to the tomb with spices to anoint the body of Jesus early this morning. But when we got there, the stone was rolled away from the tomb and when we went in his body was not there. We didn't know what to think when two men in dazzling clothes suddenly appeared beside us. We were terrified and bowed with our faces to ground. The men said, 'Whys do your 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 we remembered. It was just as Jesus told us. Don't you remember, Peter? John? It's just as Jesus said!

There it is — the first Easter sermon, by women preachers, no less and it was not received well. No "Hallelujahs," no "Praise Gods." No high fives or end zone victory dance. Luke reports the disciples dismissed their words as an idle tale. Actually, the Greek word translated as "idle tale" "is the root of our word 'delirious.' So in short, they thought what the women said was crazy, nuts, utter nonsense."¹ Yet, putting aside any sexism, who can blame them? Who expected a resurrection?

But even that doubt and stunned disbelief turns out to be good news. Because in and around the church, many carry this little or big niggling that asks — "Are you really sure [there was a resurrection?] Isn't that all very odd? And how on earth will that help pay the mortgage, save the marriage, feed the hungry, save the whales or even make you a better Christian?"² If you are one of those with a bit of hesitation, if you are one who hears of over 200 dead in the coordinated bombing of churches and hotels in Sri Lanka and wonders if Easter and resurrection are true and good news, then you find yourself in the good company of [a group of stunned women disciples], a bunch of frightened and grumpy original followers of Jesus, and a perplexed Peter . . . what happened on the first Easter was something nobody expected"³ "Which is why," Pastor David Lose writes, "I think that

if you don't find resurrection at least a little hard to believe, you probably aren't taking it very seriously."⁴

"He is risen," does not mean Jesus was resuscitated to resume his earthly life. That life was crucified on a cross and gone. What God did was reach into that tomb and into human history, lifting Jesus up to new life that was no longer subject to death or the sin of the world. And it is to say that God will do the same thing for us.⁵ Easter is not an arbitrary miracle or God showing off, "Look at what amazing thing I can do!" Easter is about God beginning a new creation once death has done the worst that it can do. Resurrection breaks all the rules, goes beyond human expectation or imagination — which, if we're honest, can be simultaneously exciting and unsettling. After all, Anna Carter Florence once said, "If the dead don't stay dead, what can you count on?" Which takes us back to those first disciples. How did they deal with their shock and befuddlement? If Jesus was no longer dead, what did it mean? What else might God be up to?

Their challenge was the same as ours — to pray through the Easter story and hold our minds, our whole lives, open to the God who does unexpected things . . . life-transforming things, things you'd never have imagined possible. Like raising Jesus from the dead. In the middle of their doubts and questions, those early disciples came to realize that despite forgetting what Jesus had told them about his death and rising from the dead, despite not understanding or believing it at the time, Jesus was raised from the dead anyway. God did not wait for us to have perfect trust or understanding. Our Lord did not abandon those disciples who had questions or doubts. The truth of the resurrection doesn't depend on *our* being able to explain it or fully comprehend its meaning. "Jesus' resurrection shows us God being faithful when we are not; God being faithful when we are confused; God being faithful if we sin; God being faithful while we doubt. Jesus resurrection is God's proclaiming that the world and our lives get to start over again."⁶ Resurrected life isn't just a promise for life in eternity with God. A Risen Lord announces that we do not have to live frightened by the darkness of sin or death. At the empty tomb, we see that God's love and grace are more powerful than either, so we can live differently.

Joyce Holly Day tells the story of a schoolteacher who was assigned to visit children in a large city hospital and received a routine call requesting that she visit a particular child. The teacher took the boy's name and room number, and was told by the teacher on the other end of line, "We're studying nouns and adverbs in this class now. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework, so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher got outside the boy's room that she realized that it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain. The teacher felt that she couldn't just turn around and

walk out. And so she stammered awkwardly, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs." This boy was in so much pain that he barely responded. The young teacher stumbled through his English lesson, ashamed of putting him through such a senseless exercise.

The next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What did you do to that boy?!" Before the teacher could finish her outburst of apologies, the nurse interrupted her: "You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back; he's responding to treatment. It's as if he has decided to live."

Later the boy would explain that he completely given up hope until he saw the teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With moist eyes, the boy said: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a boy who was dying, would they?"⁷

He looked at life differently; he began to live life differently because he no longer felt death was looming over him. He was no longer living to die but living for what could be, what was yet to be. That's Easter, folk. Even as we grieve with our brothers and sister in Sri Lanka, many killed celebrating this very feast day. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we are freed to live for all that can be and all that is yet to be. There is a power beyond ourselves and the forces of this world. We are freed to live lives that will make a difference in this world that **so** needs God's peace, God's understanding of what is true wealth, love, strength and success.

The truth of the resurrection of Jesus has withstood the challenges of time, questions, rejection, attack, disbelief, sermons that were a dud and misguided disciples and churches. Whether you find believing in the resurrection of Jesus to be difficult or life-giving, make room in your heart for the good news of Easter. God is not finished bringing light into darkness, wholeness where we only see holes and strength and witnessing courage to even the most puzzled disciples. The Risen Lord is alive and at work through folks like us who have faith that it's not just a nice story with a happy ending . . . it's the beginning of a new world and way of life. We no longer live to die but live in the certain hope that there is much more God is up to and we are a part of it. We must be a part of it! Christ is risen! Alleluia! **(He is risen, indeed. Alleluia, Alleluia)**

Linda Alessandri 4/20/19
(altered after news of bombings in Sri Lanka Easter morning)

ENDNOTES

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1. David Lose “If It’s Not Hard to Believe, You’re Probably No Paying Attention!” posted 3-24-13 on www.workingpreacher.org
 2. N.T. Wright Lent for Everyone Luke, Year C Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009 pp. 113-114
 3. N.T. Wright Lent for Everyone Luke, Year C Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009 p. 114
 4. David Lose “If It’s Not Hard to Believe, You’re Probably No Paying Attention!” posted 3-24-13 on www.workingpreacher.org
 5. Adapted from a quote from M. Craig Barnes’ article, “We’re All Terminal,” Christian Century April 6, 2004 p.18
 6. paraphrase from David Bales sermon “our Story” as posted on www.goodpreacher.com
 7. Joyce Holly Day, Sojourners, March 20, 1986, p. 19 as quoted by Donald William Dotterer in his sermon entitled, “Living in the Resurrection Age,” Living The Easter Faith, CSS Publishing Company, 1994 (posted on esermons.com)