

SERMON- Easter Sunday (C)

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Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

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1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Luke 24:1-12

OPENING:

The story goes that a preacher got up into the pulpit one Easter Sunday morning—this happened to be in Jackson, Mississippi mind you—and leaned into the microphone and said simply: “It.... is all... true”

And then he sat down.

Amid the pageantry,
and the brass bands,
and the Easter lilies
and the packed church,

the preacher went minimalist.¹

You will not be so lucky this morning, but I do promise, as the expression goes, that “I won’t keep you long, but I do hope to keep you close.”

FIRST SERMON

That Delta preacher’s delivery was in a long line of preachers trying to give a sermon that might describe the Paschal Mystery, the Christian proclamation, the Easter Story.

The very first such effort occurs in our Gospel that I just read.

The women return from the empty tomb and (Quote) “they told all this to the eleven and to the rest.”

Mary and Mary and the other woman named Mary, they came back to the disciples, and they delivered their “sermon.”

The feedback, the sermon response, was less than promising:

It seemed, to the first hearers, to be: an “idle tale,” “empty talk,” “a foolish yarn,” “utter nonsense,” “sheer humbug”... depending on the translation.²

That’s somewhat reassuring to those of us standing in the women’s shoes all these years later.

Of course, I will tell you that the very way that that first Easter sermon was given, the way that it was recorded, and then the way that we remember it, are indeed all of great significance.

¹ Sarah Condon. 4/12/2023. “The Light has come to stay.” *Mockingbird* <https://mbird.com/bible/the-light-has-come-to-stay/> (4/12/2023)

² Tom Long. 4/4/2021. “Empty Tomb, Empty Talk.” *Christian Century*, 11.

But with apologies to the first sermon and that Mississippi preacher, here are 3 ways that I would elaborate on theirs:

1) Faith is not automatic, rather it is experienced.

As goes the famous line: “Faith is caught, not taught.”

The disciples do not accept the women’s Good News, they treat it with scorn.

Peter, the lead disciple, he takes a page from my 7-year-old’s book on whenever he does not know what to do in a situation, he just starts running

To his credit Peter runs *toward* the tomb,

but he is curious, not faithful, he is amazed, he does not believe.

The meaning of the Resurrection cannot be deduced from an idea, derived from a theorem, or proved scientifically.³

It’s okay to just say that.

The story of Emmaus and Doubting Thomas will confirm and reconfirm this.

This does not mean that we need to, then, go out and earn our faith (by no means!), it’s simply that it’s not automatic.

We are all a bit, like the disciples, just a bit obtuse, if not downright resistant. And that’s okay, the disciples knew Jesus, they heard him say all this was going to happen, and they still needed a few resurrection appearances to get on the same page.

Next week, we will start Confirmation classes here at St. Timothy’s, and I am certain that there is an expectation that **I** will unlock some mystery, show what is behind the curtain.

Luckily, all I have to do is confirm what God has already been doing in the confirmands’ lives and say some variant of: “It’s all true.”

The only thing I can do, then and today, is do what the multiple Mary’s—and, eventually, the disciples—do which is to show the empty tomb, to declare that a Message in the Bottle has washed up on the shore and inside are the words: “Christ has died. Christ is Risen. Christ will come again.”

2) That leads to my second point:

Those who receive that message, who hear it, who experience it in some way, something does tend to happen next.

What do witnesses do when they decide to testify to something dangerous like this?

³ Fitzmyer, Joseph A. 1981. *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)*. (Anchor Bible Commentary). Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1547.

They put their lives on the line.⁴

Resurrection means that living is more important than dying.

That is to say, in the words of one scholar, if the gospel writers had wanted to write stories about how “Jesus is risen from the dead, therefore you will too when you die.” They have done a very poor job of it.

BUT INSTEAD there is another emphasis:

“Jesus is risen from the dead, you have work ahead of you.”⁵

There is the story of when author Robert Louis Stevenson was critically ill and dying. He got a letter from a rather self-absorbed missionary, probably one who gave overly long sermons on Easter Sunday.

This missionary wanted to come and talk to Stevenson because Stevenson was (quote) “a man in danger of dying.”

Stevenson replied with his famous wit that the missionary should instead visit him as “a man in danger of living. I am a very sick man, but suppose I get better! Any fool can die; as a matter of fact, all do. I’m going to need much more help if I go on living.”⁶

Resurrection means that living is more important than dying.

Easter rearranges our priorities, our order of operations.

We live with the assumption that “life is short and death is forever.”

that “life goes by so fast, that we want to live while we can, that life will be over so soon.”

But if the Easter story is true, really true, then it’s not:

“life is short and death is forever. It is that life is forever and death is short!”

That is what the Resurrection is saying to us. That we have it backwards. Death is not an eternal state, it’s an event, a thing that happens, and it is life that goes on.⁷

That’s a strange, counter-cultural, dangerous message.

It was to the Roman Empire, it was to the apostles, and it should be to us as well.

3) That leads to my final point. A bit more on the experience part of it all...

Resurrection happens in the dark,

no one actually even saw it way back when.

There were no forensic witnesses to what happened. Only to its aftermath.

⁴ Marty, Martin. “Theological Perspective.” (Luke 24.1-12) in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2011. *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. (Year C, Vol. 2). Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 352.

⁵ Wright, N. T. 2003. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 603.

⁶ Cousar, Charles B. 2003. “Make It as Secure as You Know How.” *Journal for Preachers* (26:3) 18.

⁷ The Rev. Dr. Frank H. Wade. “Easter Priorities.” Easter Sunday Sermon. (April 4, 1999.) St. Alban's Parish, Washington, D.C.

(Maybe that's why the sermons were so short!)

We do celebrate Easter in the light and with good reason,
but in your life and in mine, resurrection often arrives without the Easter bonnets
and the triumphant hymns and the luxurious brunch.

It happens instead in the dark.

It happens in the lonely hotel room when the salesman takes out the Gideon Bible,
It happens in marriage when couples, they don't come to a dramatic breakthrough
on Instagram, but rather face the hard truths about their relationships behind closed
doors.

It happens at churches, as seeds are planted and life grows in ways that I would
certainly try to bottle and sell, if I could.

So if we want evidence, if we want testimony of that happening, of the resurrection
amidst all the problems of this country and of this world, how long do you got?
Look in Philene and Ellie's office where all this smelly sports equipment has been
revived from your garages and now is going to serve God's purposes with kids that
need it.

If we want evidence, take a look at our balance book, the line that reads Haiti
School Fund, and I can announce that YOU ALL have given enough to support our
friends at St. Mathieu's in Chapoteau for another year.

There are some among us who said "There is no evidence, there is no proof that we
can make this commitment. 'He is not here' and YOU resurrected that and you have
witnessed and testified, in the dark, by writing these checks to do nothing short of
save lives.

CONCLUSION

Faith is not automatic, rather it is experienced.

Resurrection means that living is more important than dying.

Resurrection happens in the dark,

That's enough for today:

By the way, there were two reactions to that Mississippi preacher in the story that I
began with.

Some declared him a lazy misfit who could not be bothered to prepare a sermon for
the holiest day of the year.

And others said: "you nailed it"

because how can you improve upon:

"He is not here, Christ is risen."

Friends: "It's all true" **AMEN**