

Sermon: Victory
Mark 16:1-7

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After our long Lenten fast, it is finally the Feast of Easter – the day of Resurrection, probably the holiest, most sacred day of the year for Christians. This is a photograph of an Easter celebration in Jerusalem, in which it almost appears like the Church is on fire. And that’s what Easter does. It sets the world ablaze with the death-defeating, life-giving love of God. So central to our faith is Easter, that we say each Sunday is a little Easter, a weekly celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord. It is a beautiful, wonderful day.

So what has brought you here this morning? In thinking about the variety of reasons we find ourselves in worship on Easter Sunday, Fleming Rutledge remarks, “Some who come on Easter have been coaxed or intimidated into coming by family or friends. Some are here out of a sense of obligation to a spouse or parent. Some maybe respect the importance of ritual or are here out of a sense of habit or duty – it’s just what you do on Easter. Some of you have brought your children because you want them to know something about the faith that you grew up with and that’s important to you. Some of you are seeking, curious. Maybe some have come out of a sort of last ditch effort to believe in something.”¹ As I think about Easter and all this day means to us as Christians, I wonder, “Is this really a day of incomparable gladness for us, or has Easter become little more than an excuse to get dressed up and celebrate Spring and the return of new life to the earth? Is Easter really a ‘royal feast of feasts’ or is it just one more of our long-weekend American holidays, giving us a break in our routine and a chance to get together with family and friends?”²

Regardless of what brings you here today, I am simply glad you are here, God is glad that you are here, I am grateful that out of all the things you could be doing on this Sunday morning, you are here, in worship. I think that pleases God. But I would like for us to prayerfully think for a moment about why it is we have come to this place, on this day, to think about what we are hoping for, what we long for, what word from God we need to hear.

“In this hemisphere, Easter coincides with Spring which means that we look out the window at springtime, at Easter, and we think rebirth, renewal, revival. We hear of a new season, new growth, new life, the warmth of lengthening days, pretty flowers and budding trees, pollen, all those things that come with spring time, and this might warm our hearts for a while, for a few Sundays around Easter, but.....would you bet your life on it? Would you give your life away merely for the change of a season if that’s all that Easter is? Is it possible that signs of springtime would have taken hold of a tiny band of utterly demoralized, beleaguered, disgraced, scattered,

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Help My Unbelief*. p. 197.

² Ibid.

and frightened disciples and transformed them into a mighty power that within a few years was shaking the foundation of the Roman Empire? Do you think we can credit that to warmer days, flowers and budding trees?”³

Some find it incredible and even foolish that any thinking, rational person would take seriously the Church’s belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The Church’s teaching around the Resurrection has been a source of embarrassment for many who consider the idea unsophisticated and who then seek to “explain” the Resurrection in ways that seem more palatable for the scientific mind. You have probably seen one of the countless *Discovery Channel* or *History Channel* documentaries that offer up a host of experts who will help us understand what *really* happened so that we can navigate the so-called “problem” of the resurrection. A few years ago I heard an interview with a professor of religion who was arguing that a recently discovered ossuary or “bone box” had provided further evidence of why the resurrection of Jesus must be understood metaphorically or spiritually but not literally.

“One journalist writing about Easter, recently referred to Easter as a spring festival celebrating ‘the ancient myths of the Mediterranean imagination.’” Really? Is that what upended the disciples’ lives, transformed them from a paralyzing fear to a willingness to die for their faith? Is this what you came for today?

Think about it. Do you think the women who came to the tomb walked among the singing birds, and the budding flowers and trees, felt the warmth of the sun and thought, “Oh, everything is going to be alright.” Fleming Rutledge asks, “If you take flowers to the grave of a loved one or friend, would you expect to find an empty grave?”⁴ And if you did find an empty grave, would it occur to you that the body was risen from the dead? Of course not...the women and the disciples didn’t believe because of an empty tomb or the first signs of spring. They believed, they were comforted, they were transformed, they were empowered, they found new hope when Jesus himself appeared to them and he was alive, he was Life. There in the midst of their grief, and fear, and heart brokenness, they believed and were transformed when God came back. That’s the power of Easter, when we think all is lost, God comes back.

As Pope Francis observes, “In front of the big ‘why’ of life we have two paths - to stay and watch gloomily the tombs of yesterday and of today, or to bring Jesus to our tombs....Because each of us has a small tomb, some area that is a little bit dead inside our heart: a wound, an injury suffered or done (to us), a bitterness that does not let up, remorse that returns, a sin that you cannot overcome. We identify these today, our little tombs we have inside and Easter means we

³ Adam Hamilton, *24 Hours that Changed the World*. p. 199.

⁴ Rutledge, p. 199.

can invite Jesus there.”⁵ When that loved one lays dying with disease or old age, or when anger, or violence, or addiction, or betrayal seem to have won, and the stone has been rolled in place and we can see no way forward, we’re not comforted by the possibility of a springtime that’s just around the corner. We feel hopeless, paralyzed, utterly devastated – like the women and the disciples following the death of Jesus. We wonder if we can go on; can life be full again? We need more than warmer weather and springtime. We need someone to once and for all conquer the enemies of sin and death which plague us. We need someone to eradicate the dis-ease that has stricken us. We need God to do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. We need resurrection, victory, Life. We need someone to shout into the little tombs we find ourselves wasting in and say to us, “Come out into the light!” Today, regardless of why we have come, regardless of the countless little tombs we sometimes find ourselves walled up within, today we are offered Easter, resurrection, the good news. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen!”(Luke 24:5b)

My friends in those moments when, like the women and the disciples, life has left you wondering, “Who will roll the stone away for me?” Who will make it possible for us to go on, to find faith, and hope, and courage? On all those Good Fridays and Saturdays in between, we don’t need sentimental poetry about springtime, and flowers, and a bright sunny day. We need the Gospel truth. We celebrate each Sunday of the year as a little Easter to remind us of why we are here, of what it means to be the Church, of what we are all about, and that this world needs what the Church has to offer. This world sealed up tightly in its self-made tombs that rob and destroy life. This world needs to hear, we need to hear, not a word of judgment, not a list of do’s and don’ts, not a morality lesson about how to be a good, nice person. The world needs the one thing we have to offer. So maybe we’ve come today to Easter to hear once again *the* word that we can hear nowhere else, the voice of our Lord calling to us from the other side of death.

You see, “the Resurrection is not simply about a dead man being restored to life.”⁶ That’s resuscitation. That’s what the paramedics, and the doctors, and the nurses, thankfully, can sometimes do. The Resurrection is about a completely different quality of life. Easter is a reminder that Christ is the Victor. “The resurrection of Jesus Christ, like his crucifixion, is a word from God speaking a profound truth that changes everything. The suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a powerful word from God announcing God’s victory over the powers of evil and sin that alienate us from God. Easter is God’s triumph over sin and death, which we, by faith, share.”⁷ By faith, Christ’s victory, Christ’s resurrection, is ours.

Adam Hamilton offers what I think is a helpful metaphor for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

⁵ *Catholic News Agency*, April 2, 2017.

⁶ Adam Hamilton, *24 Hours that Changed the World*. p. 126.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 127.

Like all metaphors it breaks down at some level but I think it can move us to a fuller understanding of Easter. He writes, “In Jesus, God entered a boxing arena to take on a very powerful enemy. This enemy, like the Philistine giant, Goliath, held humanity captive. We human beings live in a world where ‘might makes right’ and where evil so often seems the victor....The reality of our enslavement to evil, sin, and death is evident all around us. Think for a moment about Syria.... In Jesus God entered that arena where evil seems to have the upper hand. Christ took the worst blows of the enemy, being subject to the powers that conspired to destroy him. He was beaten and abused and eventually knocked out, crucified on a cross. But, just when it seemed the match was lost, Easter happened, and in raising Jesus from the dead God deals a finishing blow to the forces of sin, and evil, and death. Christ the victim, became the Victor. And with his victory you and I and all the world are offered the gift of freedom from the power of evil, sin and death, and the opportunity to live a life of hope, freedom, joy, and love.”⁸

Sadly, we still often align ourselves with the enemy, but that enemy has been defeated, and it is a lost cause. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is the vindication of his life and his message. Easter is God’s resounding “Yes” to Jesus and to everything he stood for. In raising Christ from the dead as victor over sin, and evil, and death, God is saying to each of us that the way to Life, the way to being most fully human, is found in following the crucified and risen Lord. It is Easter that makes it possible for us to be raised from the depths of our sin to a new and abundant life defined by forgiveness, and love of enemy, and prayer, and worship, and generosity, where the poor, the hungry, the meek, the lowly, the peacemakers are blessed. In short, Easter makes possible a life that looks like Jesus.

And finally, Easter is the doorway to a new world and a new quality of life made possible by the power of the resurrection. Easter is the reversal, the undoing of humanity’s pride and sin in Eden, and it is the beginning of a new creation, the resurrected Christ himself is the true vine and the first fruits of a new creation, where God’s kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. For any who find themselves still living in some dark tomb, Easter is the good news, that “...God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our sins, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved – and God raised us up with him...and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”.(Ephesians 2) That is the gospel and we’ve bet our lives on it.

I don’t know what drew you to this place today on Easter. At some level it really doesn’t matter. I’m not even sure the women who came to the tomb on the first Easter were really sure about what they were doing there except that they knew that something was drawing them to be near to Jesus.

⁸ Adam Hamilton, *24 Hours that Changed the World*. p. 127.

Regardless of what drew them to that first Easter, what they received, once there, turned their lives, their world, upside down. It was so much more than a Spring festival celebrating the ancient myths of the Mediterranean imagination. It was the good news that forever changed this world. It was the good news that love wins, that Christ is the Victor. It was the gospel first proclaimed with a question - "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen!"(Luke 24:5b) Thanks be to God. Alleluia and Amen.