

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

Easter Sunday, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
April 21, 2019

The Empty Tomb

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

The book of Isaiah narrates the failure of Jerusalem and its destruction in chapters 1-39. Then in the remaining chapters it anticipates the restoration and the return of the deported. Our lesson on this Easter morning is of the restoration part, for God has not quit or been defeated. Listen to these words from Isaiah 65:17-25...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson today presents Luke's account of the events of that first Easter morning. All four gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—convey the story of women coming to the tomb on the morning after the Sabbath to anoint the body of Jesus. There they receive word of his resurrection. And then they begin the proclamation of the good news that inaugurates the faith we celebrate on this highest of holy days. Listen to these words from Luke 24:1-12...

Sermon

During Lent, we follow Jesus and his disciples on the road to Jerusalem. Last week we celebrated his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. But a lot happens in that one week between Palm Sunday and Easter. We hear the sound of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem; the crowing of the cock that convicted Peter of his denial of even knowing Jesus; the clatter of coins expressing Judas' regret at betrayal; the calls to "crucify him"; the splash of water by indecisive Pilate; the thud of the hammer on Jesus' hands and feet; the rattle of dice by soldiers beneath the cross; and that final cry of Jesus, "It is finished."

On Monday and Tuesday the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders escalates.

On Wednesday Judas meets with the religious leaders and arranges for Jesus' betrayal.

On Thursday Jesus meets with his disciples in the Upper Room and shares with them the Last Supper. Later that night he is arrested while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Early Friday morning Jesus is tried before Pilate and sentenced to death. By Friday evening Jesus is crucified, dead and buried.

Saturday was a Sabbath day of rest. The Jewish Sabbath was on Saturday—the last day of their week, commemorating God's rest after the work of creation:

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Gen. 2:2-3)

And so at last we come to early Sunday morning. Only seven days had passed since the triumphal entry, but so much had happened. Imagine how the disciples felt at this moment. They were in shock at the events of Thursday and Friday. They were in mourning over the death of their Lord and friend. And they were hiding in fear for their own lives. Jesus had warned them that the road to Jerusalem was the road to the cross, yet somehow, they did not understand. But now Sunday morning had arrived, and everything was about to change.

Well, in Luke's account of the empty tomb the women journey to Jesus' burial place as soon as they are able, following the mandated Sabbath rest. They go to carry out the last rites of love for the dear dead, to embalm and anoint Jesus' body with spices. Despite what must have been numbing grief, they prepare the requisite spices and ointments, and set out to do what they have to do.

Now in the East tombs were often carved out in caves in the rock. The body of the dead would be wrapped in long linen strips and then laid on a shelf in the tomb. And they would close

the tomb with a large circular stone like a cartwheel which would run in a groove across the opening. But when the women come early that morning, they find that the stone is rolled away. They go into the tomb but do not find Jesus' body. They are perplexed, but two men, two heavenly, angelic figures in dazzling clothes, stand beside them. Naturally, the women are afraid and bend their faces to the ground. And the two men ask them this question: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Then they proclaim the good news, "He is not here, but has risen."

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" "Why do you seek the living in a tomb?" For the women weren't seeking a living Jesus; they were seeking a corpse to anoint with the spices they had prepared, so that Jesus would get a proper burial. Where else would they have gone but to the tomb?"

William Barclay says there are many who are still looking for Jesus among the dead. There are those who see Jesus as a great man, a noble hero—one who lived the loveliest life that has ever been lived upon earth, then died a horrible death. But scripture declares that while he did die a terrible death, even death upon the cross—that he was crucified dead, and buried—it also declares that on the third day he rose again from the grave. That he is not just a great man, but a living presence—even this very day.

Secondly, there are some who think of Jesus as a person whose life is to be studied, whose words are to be examined, whose teaching is to be analyzed. Thus we see the growth of study groups about Christ, and the decline of prayer meetings. Of course, study of Jesus and Christianity is important, but Jesus is more than someone to be studied. He is someone to meet and live with day by day. He is not only the main character in a great book, but a living presence.

And thirdly, some see Jesus as a kind of perfect model for life. That he is, but more. Some of us can remember when we were learning to write. There was the paper with the dotted-line halfway between the solid lines. The teacher would write words on the chalkboard that we were supposed to copy onto our paper. Despite our best efforts, we could not write the words like our teacher could. But then she would come and with her own hand guide our fingers over the lines and thus did we get closer to her beautiful script. Well, that is what Jesus does. He is not only a model for our lives—the Way, the Truth, and the Life. But he also helps and guides us. He enables us to follow him and live the life he calls us to.

So, where can the living Christ be found today? Well, one place is in the church. In Matthew 18 we have this promise of Jesus:

For where two or three are gathered in my name,
there I am in their midst. (v. 20)

When we come together in the name of Jesus Christ to worship and celebrate the Lord's Supper, to Baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; when we gather to study, to pray, to work or have fellowship; One greater than ourselves is present—the One who was crucified, dead, and buried. The One who was raised from the dead.

Another place we are promised to know the living Christ is found in serving the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, or the prisoners. In another promise in Matthew's gospel Jesus says:

In as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,
you did it to me. (23:40)

So when we deliver Meals on Wheels or care for the sick, Christ is present with us.

There's a lovely story of a cobbler:

Conrad, the old cobbler, dreamed one night that the Divine Master would come to be his guest. He was up as the sun was rising and set about decorating his little shop with bright flowers and greenery. He set the table with milk and honey and bread, and waited.

While he was waiting, a beggar walked down the street, barefoot in the driving rain. Conrad called him in and gave him a pair of shoes. Then an old woman came along, bent over from the weight of carrying a heavy load. He lifted the burden off her back and shared his food with her. And finally, just before the day was about to fade away into darkness, a little lost girl came, with eyes wet with tears. Conrad gave her a glass of milk, and led her back to her mother. However, the divine guest never came, and Conrad was disappointed. Then softly, in a still small voice, he heard these words.

"Lift up your heart, for I have kept my word.
 Three times I came to your friendly door;
 Three times my shadow was on your floor.
 I was the beggar with the bruised feet;
 I was the woman you gave to eat;
 I was the child on the homeless street!"

This is what Jesus meant when he said,

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Mt. 25:40)

We know that the Living Christ is not limited to the Church, but is present beyond—in the world. The prominent Orthodox icon Christ Pantocreator (meaning all sovereign) pictures the risen Christ as Lord of the cosmos. Often painted on the interior of the central dome of Orthodox churches, Christ Pantocreator is shown as head of the church and ruler of the world. The picture is of the risen Lord holding the Gospel book in his left hand, with his right hand raised in a teaching or blessing gesture. The risen Christ continues to interpret “the things about himself in all the scriptures” to the church and to the world. The risen Christ continues to love and bless the world.

The women at the tomb “remembered his words,” and their witness to the eleven disciples inaugurated recognition of the reign of Christ. That witness continues to be handed on as the church proclaims the good news of Christ’s resurrection and the reality of Christ’s universal lordship.

In closing we note an affirmation of faith in the *Book of Common Worship* paraphrases 1 Corinthians 15:1-6, recognizing the originating witness of the women:

“that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared first to the women, then to Peter, and to the Twelve, and then to many faithful witnesses.”

The affirmation concludes with faith in the risen Christ’s universal reign:

“We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus Christ is the first and the last, the beginning and the end; he is our Lord and our God.”

The Easter gospel for the church and for the world!

My friends, God has not quit or been defeated. The tomb in which Jesus was buried is empty. He is not there; he is risen. Yes, we serve a risen Savior who’s in the world today. Let us open our hearts to him. Embrace him. Let us love and serve our living Lord. Amen.

Now please join in singing Hymn 368, “He Lives!”