



LIVING THE RESURRECTION
Matthew 28:1-10

This sanctuary is always full on Christmas Eve – and for our joint Christmas service. This same sanctuary is always almost empty on Good Friday evening. Everybody loves the birth of a baby – most are still uncomfortable with death.

The crowds that surrounded our Lord on Palm Sunday were gone by Good Friday. Only a small handful kept vigil with our Lord: four women and a young man. So much for equating manhood with courage and bravery.

It is obvious as we open our lesson today from Matthew's gospel – it was death and not resurrection that filled the hearts and minds of the disciples – the women and the Roman guards. After the day of Sabbath – they were going to prepare the body for burial – not looking for a risen Lord.

Yes, there had been a hasty burial on Friday in order to conform to Sabbath customs – followed by a long Sabbath wait. We know from all four gospels – fear – grief – broken hearts – and shattered dreams consumed them all.

If the sun was shining and a new day was dawning – it was not apparent in their souls and spirits. They did not yet know that day known as Black Friday would eventually be known as Good Friday. It is safe to say these faithful women were not singing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” – or “He Lives – He Lives.” The “Hallelujah Chorus” was not upon their lips or resounding from their hearts.

For me personally – this is why I know the Easter story is real and believable. The confusion and puzzlement that begins to emerge when they arrived on the scene and found that the body was gone and the tomb is opened – is the stuff that life and truth is forged from.

It says to me that the faith of those early believers did not come easily or without pain – but it did come. The reluctance to accept the truth and to experience it “might not be exemplary – but it is instructive to us some 2,000 years later.”¹ The resurrection is a whole lot easier to believe on paper and in theory than it is to “plop” – and plant – this truth right smack into the middle of our lives.

The resurrection is as challenging a message there is to human existence. It is a whole lot easier to live life as a victim – than it is to claim the victory that God wants to

make available to us. It is a whole lot easier to live your life in a penalty box called guilt – or on the sidelines called apathy – than it is to put your hands back on the plow and labor for the harvest that God declares someday will come – and he will settle accounts his way. Sometimes we prefer the illness more than we desire the cure and remedy. We live the resurrection – and let its power engage us for the sacred journey of life.

As we continue in our lesson today we learn that the stone was rolled away – the body is gone – and angels appear upon the scene. To say they were surprised would be an **understatement**. They were frightened to the core of their already shaky existence.

The earthquake is our first hint that something new and exciting is about to break open. There will be a new day and pattern for human existence. It is as though the whole world is being reshaped. I can almost see them hanging on as the earthquake shakes and rattles the terrain when the Angel Gabriel appears on the scene. The angel sits on the stone that had covered the tomb's entrance – which the Roman soldiers are guarding.

Occasionally someone will say to me “Pastor, I only wish I could have been present at the resurrection. It would be so much easier to believe.” Well, our lesson reveals that the guards saw everything. These well-trained soldiers of the Roman Empire were so shook up that they became like dead men. They not only see the resurrection – but react to it. You would think after seeing something so overwhelming – they would get down on their knees and repent of their sins. They would express deep sorrow for participating in the horrible crucifixion of the Son of God. Like the thief on the cross – they would not let this opportunity pass by. They would express regret for gambling for his robe – blinded to see eternal life hanging right above them.

No, when they recover from their fear – they report to the Chief Priests – and take bribe money to say that Jesus' disciples stole his body. I guess seeing is not believing – or more accurately we see what we already believe.²

Gratefully, two women experience the empty tomb and are led to become witnesses of the resurrection. The devotional writer Fred Buechner shares these words – “The symbol of Easter is the empty tomb. You can't depict or domesticate emptiness. You can't make it into pageants and string it with lights. It doesn't move people to give presents to each other or sing old songs. It ebbs and flows all around us, the Eastertide. Even the great choruses of Handel's **MESSIAH** sound a little like a handful of crickets chirping under the moon. He rose. A few saw him briefly and talked to him. If it is true, there is nothing left to say. If it is not true, there is nothing left to say.”³

For Mary Magdalene and the other Mary – there was nothing left to say except to respond to the angel's voice and eventually fall down at the pierced feet of Jesus and worship him.

Yes, the empty tomb is one of the three foundations of the resurrection experience. The second is the series of encounters that others had with the Risen Christ. The third is the transformation of this scared – ragtime army of disciples and believers into one of the most powerful forces and movements in human history. The movement continues even to this very day – to this very moment in this church.

Pastor Fleming Rutledge was an Episcopal priest who served parishes in New York City over 22 years. She began to keep a journal of all the quotations found in the New York Times in their coverage of the Easter sermons offered by Manhattan's sophisticated pulpits. She was deeply disappointed. She named her research file "100 Ways to Avoid Saying that Jesus Christ is Risen from the Dead."⁴

However, as your pastor today, I – without reservation – declare today **CHRIST IS RISEN!** This is the reason we gather today and every Sunday.

In that spirit, I want to share three reasons why Christians live the resurrection and do not fear.

FIRST, TRUTH WILL ALWAYS WIN OUT.

William Cullen Bryant wrote "Truth crushed to the earth will rise again." Whose truth has prevailed in history? As one poet puts it so well when he writes, "Speak history! Who are life's victors? Unroll the long annals and declare: To whom do we call the victors today? Was it Herod – Pilate - or Christ?"

Yes, when Job declared, "I know that my Redeemer liveth" that expressed his confidence that one day his faith would be vindicated – for God would not suffer truth and integrity to be confounded.

Today, we worship the One greater than Job – who lived and died in the same faith and with the same hope. Before leaving his disciples to travel to Jerusalem and to Calvary he said to them, "In this world you will have troubles – but take heart. I have overcome the world."

The Apostle Paul boldly declares that "Christ holds all things together." All of life will find its completion in Christ because Jesus' resurrection is the first fruit of what God is doing with his creation. All of creation which groans in travail will find its redemption in Christ: a whole new order of life. This is the New Adam. No wonder the earth quaked.

SECONDLY DEATH IS NOT THE END – BUT A NEW BEGINNING.

To celebrate the resurrection is not escapism – but a way to engage life now with God's power and purpose. This is why – when a man or woman is in Christ – they are a new creation.

Psychologists have long known that the greatest fear is the fear of dying. This was the great enemy that was spoken about in our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. It was this great enemy that Christ conquered and defeated.

It is not the morality of the Sermon on the Mount which enables Christianity to conquer the Roman Empire. The Sermon on the Mount – as great as it is – would have been forgotten and at best become a faint scribble on the pages of history if the man who spoke the words had remained dead. As Dr. Billy Graham shared “It was the truth of the resurrection that shook the Roman Empire.” Christianity was in competition for eternal life – not morality. Resurrection living would come later when you live in the assurance that they might be able to kill the body – but not the soul.

The Bible further teaches us that death is far more than what happens when we stop breathing. It is a life direction that takes over our lives.

You and I must always remember we follow a crucified and risen Christ. Our exalted Head is both. He could not have redeemed human existence and provided a new way without experiencing both. Christ had to pass-over one to lead us in a new way.

THIRDLY, THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST IS THE FURTHERANCE OF HIS LIFE AND PRESENCE AND HIS CALLING AND MISSION.

When Mary and I first started out in ministry – we served two small churches outside of Hazleton, Pa. I was the Senior Pastor, Junior Pastor, Youth Pastor – everything wrapped in this part-time student pastorate.

One Easter we volunteered to hold an Easter egg hunt for the youth group (about 12). It was a good idea – but we had 6 inches of snow the night before the big event. So we had the Easter egg hunt at the parsonage. It was a big house – and we only had one child at that time. So Saint Mary and I hid 4 dozen eggs all around the parsonage including the large attic. We were quite good at hiding the eggs – but not so good at remembering where we hid all those eggs. The youth found 44 of the eggs. We looked everywhere for those other eggs – but could not find them. However, we did find them about 3 months later!

You see, eggs were not made to be hidden away – and neither is the triumphant message of the resurrection. The angel and the Lord said we are commissioned to go and tell others the good news of the Easter event.

Let me ask you today: Who is a member of Evangelical UMC family, or a Sunday School class, or a Bible study because you extended an invitation - or you witnessed about the truth – the way – and the life - you have found in Jesus Christ?

In this year of 2009 – who will you tell the story of Christ and his resurrection?

Every day you cross the path of at least 7 people who do not have a church home. At least 57% of the people in Lancaster County have no personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The harvest is plentiful.

Let me summarize this message for us gathered here today:

Christ is risen! Truth will prevail!
Death has been defeated! New life is possible!
Share the Good News with others!

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
April 12, 2009 – Easter Sunday – 10:30 a.m.
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PASTOR'S NOTE:

In preparation for this sermon, I read two books: one by Eugene H. Peterson, **LIVING THE RESURRECTION**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2006 – the other by Myron Augsburger, **THE RESURRECTION LIFE: The Power of Jesus for Today**, Evangel Publishing House, Nappanee, Indiana, 2005.

I am sure that the influence of these two authors and books can be found in this sermon even if I did not directly quote them. I heartily recommend these two books to prime the pump – not only for sermon writing – but for living the resurrection which is our greatest challenge and joy.

ENDNOTES

¹ Thanks to Dr. Darrell L. Bock for this insight.

² Thanks to Craig Barnes for this material.

³ Frederick Buechner, **WHISTLING IN THE DARK: An ABC Theologized**, San Francisco: Harper and Row, page 42.

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, **HELP MY UNBELIEF**, Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000, page 198.