

Easter Sunday 2006

Text: John 20:1-18

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This passage sets out John's account of the resurrection. Like our own family histories, it shares some of the same details of Matthew, Mark, and Luke; but in some ways is much more detailed and personal in its depiction of Mary, Peter, and "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved."

Sermon in Nut Shell

The powers of coercion; the powers of death, accident, disease, violence, hatred – these are all still at work in our world. But so also is the hidden and present love of God. And this love of God is persistent; is a survivor; endures; perseveres; heals; restores; outlives and lives again. Where is Cesar? Where is Rome? All gone. Where is Christ? Here. Present. Alive.

Sermon Thoughts (Not the Sermon)

This Day Is Made for You

The news media this past week have headlined stories that report – once again – shocking new discoveries that challenge the facts of the Easter story. The Gospel of Judas "reveals for the first time" that Judas was actually a hero who acted at Jesus' request so that Jesus could shed his body. Another story claims Jesus didn't really die on the cross – Pilate faked the crucifixion to appear to get rid of Jesus but also keep him alive because Jesus told his followers to pay their taxes! (Which Jesus actually did not do. Check out Matthew 22:21, and ask yourself, "What would Jesus think did not belong to God?" (Answer: Everything belonged to God, which doesn't leave much to "give to Cesar the things that belong to Cesar."))

If only the news media were aware of the historical facts, they would know that such rumours and stories are as old as Easter itself. Matthew reports that the guards at the tomb were paid to spread the rumour that it was the disciples who had come in the middle of the night and taken Jesus' body away.

We should not be surprised that there have always been rumours and speculations about "what really happened" on Easter Sunday, because as we see from the followers of Jesus, even they were surprised, astonished, perplexed, terrified, disbelieving and uncomprehending. Even they were hard pressed to explain what they had experienced. Jesus, who appears and is not recognized at first; and then is known suddenly in the speaking of a name, in the breaking of bread. Jesus, who asks not to be touched and then invites being touched in order to answer doubts. Jesus, who appears on a beach, in a locked room, on a mountain; who walks and talks and eats; and yet who clearly is also not flesh-and-blood-and-bones. Jesus, who lived and taught about the kingdom of God being at hand, is now seen to be alive in the eternal life of God. Jesus, who was once a flesh and blood reality pointing to a spiritual reality is now a spiritual reality pointing to a flesh and blood reality.

Personally, I accept that Jesus really died, that his dead body was really buried, and that on Easter Sunday his dead body was gone and his followers "saw the Lord." What they saw was not a resuscitated body. This was not like Lazarus who came back to life and would one day die again. This was a real Jesus who was now living in the eternal life that is God.

Easter is not a rite of Spring where we celebrate the return of life that has lain dormant. It is about the celebration of the reality that though he was killed, dead and buried, Jesus has been raised from death. And being raised from death, we are not simply celebrating that Jesus' eternal soul continued to exist after his earthly body died. We affirm the integrity of body-soul selves. You

cannot have one without the other. And so Easter Sunday is about celebrating that our physical self must also participate in the life to come. Our bodies bear too much pain, too much suffering to be left out of the good news. Our “muscle memories,” the aches and pains that our bodies hold, are raised from death to new life. Jesus, who was really, totally, completely, body and soul, 100% dead has been raised to life! Hallelujah indeed.

But let us also be clear that the new life we are celebrating today is not just a new improved version of the old life. That might be better news – the way things are in this world could certainly do with some improvement; but that would not be good news. For we must remember today that we are not celebrating simply that Jesus died and is now alive; we are celebrating that Jesus who was tortured and brutally executed by the ruling authorities, that Jesus is the one who is now alive. Jesus didn't die peacefully in his sleep and then come back to life. That would be pretty amazing all right, but that is not what has drawn us here today. Nor are we celebrating that having been raised to life, there is now no more death, no more torture, no more brutal execution. Despite what many of our hymns say, we are not celebrating a victory over the powers of death, injustice, disease, and accidents. They still have plenty of power, so it is not their defeat that has drawn us here today.

What has drawn us here today?

Jesus lived and taught, preached and healed and performed occasional wonders, all pointing to a truth that is both hidden and present. That truth has been variously described as the Kingdom of God, the realm of God, or simply, heaven – the place where God's will is done. However, as we see in the story about his meeting with Pilate, Jesus steadfastly refuses to be called a King, and states that his kingdom is not of this world. And yet he has come that we might know the truth – a truth that is both hidden and present.

We see in the story of Jesus' arrest, torture and execution that Jesus is living / abiding in a strength that is hidden and present in him. And we see that this strength does not engage the powers of this world on their terms. Jesus neither engages nor resists Pilate and his soldiers. Jesus is not a bigger and better King with bigger and better swords. Nor is Jesus without strength.

Jesus wants us to see a hidden and present truth that is an alternative to the story the powers of this world want us to believe. They want us to believe in survival of the fittest, in force of arms, in coercion, in the need for control, in the right of Kings. Jesus wants us to believe in the hidden and present power of love. Jesus wants us to see that God is not and never has been simply a bigger version of Cesar. Jesus wants us to see that the source and sustainer of reality is not another Lord and Master in the sky, but is – to use an inadequate metaphor – a loving daddy who pines for us.

God is love, and God has all the power that love has. God is what love is

Now love is very powerful, but love also has two very important qualities: it is not coercive and it is free – freely given and freely responded to (or not). So it is in God's eternal nature to not have power over – power over events: causing things to happen; power over the future: everything happening according to a plan that God has already mapped out; power over nature: causing (or failing to prevent) accidents, disease, earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc. You and I and everything in all of creation – animals, vegetables and minerals – all are free. Our freedom is limited by historical circumstances and by universal “laws of nature.” But we are free to respond to God's love – or not. This is the hidden and present truth that Jesus abides in; the hidden and present truth that sustains him through his suffering and death; the hidden and present truth he wants us to see and experience and know deeply and live.

God's power is the vulnerable power of love. God is not interested in Kingship, but in kinship – kinship; love.

The powers of coercion; the powers of death, accident, disease, violence, hatred – these are all still at work in our world. But so also is the hidden and present love of God. And this love of God is persistent; is a survivor; endures; perseveres; heals; restores; outlives and lives again. Where is Cesar? Where is Rome? All gone. Where is Christ? Here. Present. Alive.

Have you ever been mocked, shamed, abused – physically, emotionally, spiritually? Then this day is made for you; because this day reveals that these realities are not the only reality. They are not the only thing you have to live with for the rest of your life. For Jesus, the one who also experienced all of these things has not died. He is alive and present with you; with the power of God's love; the persistent, enduring, healing, restoring love which outlives and lives again. Jesus lives, and you get to live with him for the rest of your life.

Have you ever been betrayed, abandoned by trusted friends, separated from beloved friends and family? Then this day is made for you. Because this day reveals that these realities are not the only reality. They are not the only thing you have to live with for the rest of your life. For Jesus, the one who also experienced all of these things has not died. He is alive and present with you; with the power of God's love; the persistent, enduring, healing, restoring love which outlives and lives again. Jesus lives, and you get to live with him for the rest of your life.

Have you ever felt abandoned by God, prayed and had your request denied? Have you ever suffered at the hands of fools who were unaware of what they were doing? Then this day is made for you. Because this day reveals that these realities are not the only reality. They are not the only thing you have to live with for the rest of your life. For Jesus, the one who also experienced all of these things has not died. He is alive and present with you; with the power of God's love; the persistent, enduring, healing, restoring love which outlives and lives again. Jesus lives, and you get to live with him for the rest of your life.

Can you bear to abide in this vulnerable, powerful love? Then this day is made for you. And we are the people to whom this hidden and present truth has been made known, and in whom this hidden and present truth is needing to be experienced and lived. May this day of resurrection be a day of new life for us and all of creation. Christ is risen! Hallelujah!