



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“Saved Through Death”

Scripture Lessons: *Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling Jr.
on Easter Day, April 9, 2023, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Isaiah 65:17-25

The Glorious New Creation

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping
be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short
of a hundred will be considered accursed.

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the day of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy
the work of their hands.

They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord –
and their descendants as well.

Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking, I will hear.

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent – its food shall be dust!

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Luke 24:1-12

The Resurrection of Jesus

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told

you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.”

Saved Through Death

You will notice that this morning’s sermon title is not “Saved from Death,” but rather, “Saved Through Death,” and there’s a reason for that. You see, death is a part of life; and to be certain, we can’t get to the resurrection without going through the cross.

Many people today have no trouble relating to death and the despair that often accompanies it. There are those among us this morning who have recently lost a loved one, and the quiet and loneliness they are experiencing can feel like an orchestra of pain.

Be it a past experience that continues to define who we are, or a break-up, or perhaps a measure of anxiety over what the future may hold, we feel the weight of these things as if we are hemmed in, behind and before, pressed upon, as it were, like an olive in an “olive press.” Pressed and pressured until every ounce of hope is squeezed right out of us!

There is an Aramaic word for “olive press” and it is Gethsemane. Today, we recall how it was that barely three days ago Jesus was in a Garden by that same name. And in that garden he prayed no less than three times to God that he might avoid having to drink the consequences of our sinful life that God might let that cup pass (cf. Matthew 26).

Several of us traveled to the Garden of Gethsemane as part of our Holy Land Pilgrimage earlier this year. It is located on the Mount of Olives, and it is a lovely place. But today we recall that while there, Jesus (like an olive in a press) felt the weight of his mission, the weight of his journey to the cross, the weight of sin. The bible tells us maybe it was because of that pressure that Jesus sweated blood!

Maybe there are some among us who feel like they are in their own Garden of Gethsemane, pressed if not crushed by their circumstances and I’m not saying for a moment that we can somehow relate to what Jesus was going through. We can’t. But if that sounds like you, if your life is marked more by pressure than peace, then Easter is about how God’s story of redemption moved decidedly from despair and death to salvation and new life!

Yet because life, at times, can be difficult, and precisely because Good Friday remains an integral part of the story, it would serve us well to reflect upon the lives of those who are not so different from us ...

the disciples.

The ones whom Jesus called – the ones who had followed him for nearly three years and knew him better than anyone else ... they were the ones who were blessed to have seen the very Son of God face to face.

And having seen Jesus up close and personal for so long, and having witnessed firsthand all of the healings and the miracles ... oh, imagine them having said, in a manner of speaking, “Jesus is the way, alright, the way to the top!”

After all, Jesus possessed the kind of God-given power and authority that captivated and changed people. Crowds flocked to him because he taught like no one had taught before, and not like the Scribes and the Pharisees.

In fact, on the occasion that Jesus entered the Holy City of Jerusalem to begin the final week of his life, one Gospel writer tells us that: “all Jerusalem came out.”

I suspect that some of them came out because they knew him ... maybe they had been born blind and Jesus had restored their sight; maybe they had been caught in the act of adultery and had been shown mercy and forgiveness; maybe they had heard some of the amazing stories that surrounded his life and ministry, like the time when Jesus fed 5,000 people with only two loaves of bread and a few fish.

Imagine how excited the disciples must have been to be a part of that first Palm Sunday parade ... to be so closely associated with Jesus who not only gave meaning and purpose to their life, but who now inspired a whole city to come. Ah, but just as a beautiful spring afternoon is cut short by a thunderstorm, so, too, was that triumphant parade cut short.

On Friday, we began our annual Good Friday procession at the Gazebo down at White Point Gardens, and, as we walked through the city, we considered some of Jesus’ last words.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark we hear Jesus say, “My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?” In Luke we read: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” And in the Gospel according to John, Jesus simply says: “It is finished.”

Like an olive in a press, Jesus felt the weight of the world that he loved, the world he came to save! But praise be to God, when Jesus is finally and fully pressed, it is none other than the light of salvation that is released among us!

Ah, but for a moment and when Jesus breathed his last, the disciples thought it was finished! No longer could they sit in the stands and shout “Hallelujah,” because, as far as they were concerned, the

parade was over. And when Jesus was handed over to the authorities and killed, it seemed to them to be the most catastrophic defeat of all time.

It is in this way that the disciples are so very much like us. We who perhaps throughout another day have felt the pressures of the world mount upon us; we who have been tempted to deny Jesus and turn from him; we who would assume that death marks the end of the story ...

Ah, sadly all too often we are the ones who end up presuming that things are finished and done. We see war and violence in the world. We witness children shot and killed in their schools. And it just seems as if things are broken. ... It feels like nothing can be done!

Well, friends, that's what the world thought before ... and it was wrong then and it is wrong now ... because standing in the face of the fallenness of humanity is the Risen Christ!

On this morning, some 2000 years ago, God revealed to his disciples, and, through the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, he reveals to us as well, that God has the capacity to part the waters; to make a way when there seems to be no way at all; and, yes, God even has the power to conquer death.

Have you ever wondered why the Apostle's Creed goes to such great lengths to communicate Jesus' actual death when it says he was crucified, dead and buried? Any one of those words would have expressed the reality of death well enough. Why is the church compelled to say all three?

Well, I, for one, believe that it is because the framers of the creed wanted us to know that Jesus really died ... and so will we.

And most of the time death is not pretty. It isn't beautiful. Sometimes it is long and drawn out, and, at other times, it arrives as an intruder upon life.

For me to stand up here and say that just because someone believes that Jesus is the son of God that they are exempt from the pain and suffering that sometimes accompanies a physical death would be to preach from something other than the Bible.

What the Bible does say is that God has the last word, even when other voices seem to prevail ... and, at the end of the day, God's Word is Life!

Oh, it may have sounded like Pilate had the last word when he washed his hands and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood ..."

It may have appeared that Judas had the last word; Judas, who for his 30 pieces of silver, had since hanged himself.

It may have looked like the soldiers who mocked Jesus had the last word as they took off his purple garments and put his own clothes back on him and led him away to be crucified.

Ah, but when it comes right down to it, Pilate had no power over Jesus that God would not allow him to have. And that kiss of betrayal ... it never could thwart the loving purposes of God. And the clothes on Jesus' back, they were the garments of a new kind of king, not a king who would sway a scepter but one who would wield a cross for far greater things.

The final word always belongs to God and God's is a word of **comfort** for all those who face the Pilates of the world and who even now find themselves yielding to their verdicts.

It is a word of **assurance** for anyone who knows what it means to be betrayed, either by people, life's ambitions, or by our own self-destructive habits.

God's is a word of **peace** for all those who find themselves stripped down to nothing and feel washed up and, heaven forbid, spiritually deprived.

For all such people, this day ... this dawn ... is about a new message! It is about a new hope and a new life that comes from the grandeur and the glory of the Risen Christ.

And, oh, how Jesus suffered to make it so! He died to make it so!

Let me just add here that God could have stopped Jesus' death on the cross at any moment. God could have taken that vinegar served on that hyssop branch that they gave Jesus to drink ... God could have taken that bitter substance and made of it the sweetest wine this side of heaven.

God could have yanked Jesus from that tree with a legion of angels numbering the stars in the sky and lowered him down gently ... lest he dash his foot against a stone.

But God didn't do any of that because God had determined to do something much, much better! God showed us that just when we think it is time to throw in the towel and give up ... that Jesus Christ has already won the victory ... not us, mind you, but Jesus! In fact, this is an important distinction to make.

There is nothing we can do to make ourselves right with God. Jesus' victory over sin and death is undoubtedly something in which we share, but it was always God's victory to win!

And isn't it wonderful to know that we have a Savior who understands exactly what it feels like to be alone; to feel the pressures of life; to know that no matter how far apart from God we may feel, that Jesus has been farther still ... and has done so on our behalf.

I'll say it again. God doesn't save us *from* death at Easter ... He saves us *through* death at Easter. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

The triumph of Easter is based entirely upon what Jesus did on this very morning so many years ago. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "If Christ is not raised from the dead, then your faith is in vain, and we are not to be pitied."

Oh, praise be to God. Easter didn't end with the crucifixion. Had it ended there, I suppose we would have also been left with the disciple Peter having denied Jesus three times – there, after the crucifixion, huddled with his friends and acting the coward ... probably wondering to himself if his old fishing nets were still any good.

But, because Jesus lives, we are left with a Peter who moves to a deeper level of Christian maturity than ever before – and, by God's grace, so can we.

For we are invited by the power of the Risen Christ to a common call and ministry: to bear witness to God's redeeming love with a love of our own; a love that reaches out its hands in praise to God just as quickly as it reaches down to pick up one of the least of these.

God always has the last word, and on this day of days, God says to you and to me and to the world through us: "Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!"

Let us pray ...

Almighty and Everlasting God, we know that there is not a single person here this morning who has not known something of defeat ... or who has never felt lost, or alone, or afraid. Yet yours is a victory, Gracious God, a victory over the very poser of sin and death.

And so we would be so bold as to ask that for all of us that we would know your victory in our life as never before ... that we would be divinely equipped to glorify and enjoy you forever!

In Jesus' name. Amen

*The above sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.