



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

“Living the Difference Easter Makes”

Scripture Lessons: *Luke 24: 1-12*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr.
on March 31, 2024, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 24: 1-12

The Resurrection of Jesus

24 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women^[b] 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. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.” ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² 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.^[e]

Living the Difference Easter Makes

For some people, waking up after what amounts to a brief respite from the trials and tribulations of the previous day – the dawn of a new day can arrive with great hope that things might be different. That somehow, perhaps providentially, their circumstances may have changed overnight.

I’ve often wondered if the disciples woke up on that first Easter morning with any hope at all! Oh, they had heard Jesus say that “The Son of Man [was] to be betrayed into human hands, and [that] they [would] kill him, and [that] three days after being killed, he [would] rise again.”

But they didn’t understand what he was saying, and they were afraid to ask him, and so what ends up happening on that first Easter morning is that the disciples, those faithful men of God – the Sons of Thunder / Peter, the Rock / the Beloved Disciple – they are nowhere to be found!

Reason being, they had seen Jesus die! They had seen his eyes – the ones that had radiated with such warmth and compassion – they had seen them close under the weight of death.

They had seen his hands – the ones that had embraced the children, and given sight to the blind, and lifted disabled people to their feet. They had seen those hands folded over his chest and wrapped in bands of cloth.

Oh, they had seen his feet – the ones that had walked on water and had approached the bedsides of countless sick souls. They had seen those same feet pierced by the nails of the cross.

And it wasn't just the disciples who were without hope! When some of the women came to the tomb – even they weren't expecting to find it empty! They were coming to anoint Jesus' body, a dead body!

And that happened because Jesus did what he said he would do! On that glorious Easter morning ... Jesus, who was dead, with life in him again! ... And we know this, how?

Well, for starters, we know that this happened – and that it wasn't a hoax – because Pilate had gone to some lengths to ensure that Jesus' body wouldn't be stolen. Pilate was well aware of the possibility that someone could come along and take the body and then say, "See, he's not there! He has risen as he said!"

And believe you me, Pilate didn't want that kind of drama any more than those who truly opposed Jesus, and so Pilate said to the chief priests and the Pharisees, "You have a guard of soldiers; go make (the tomb) as secure as you can."

... And they did! They posted guards at the tomb's entrance, and they sealed the tomb with a stone! But, alas, in the morning, the body wasn't there ...

We read in Luke's account this morning about the women who came before dawn and how they told the others about the resurrection. Later in the day we can read about a man named Cleopas, and his friend, who were walking to Emmaus ... and how Jesus came alongside them and opened their eyes!

More and more eyewitness accounts begin to circulate and on one occasion we are told that Jesus appeared to a group of five hundred believers at once (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:6) (PAUSE)

All these people – for having seen what they saw – their lives would never be the same again!

But something remarkable happened to them on Easter – from men and women of disillusionment and fear, they suddenly become men and women of faith and hope and love!

The dramatic change in the spiritual disposition of Jesus' closest followers is seen by some as the greatest evidence of Jesus' resurrection!

Consider again the disciples. There they were, Friday, Saturday – scared to death, operating more or less in the shadows / hiding behind closed doors!

Ah, but on Easter Sunday ... when that day dawned ... the followers of Jesus / they start living more boldly than ever before, and they would live like that the next day and the day after that ... until, one day, and nearly to a disciple, they would be killed for their faith.

“Faith” is the key word there, because no one lays down their life to perpetuate a fraud. No! If the gig was up, if Jesus didn't rise, then they would have hung their heads and walked away!

They simply were not going to come out of hiding and live boldly, and risk and trust in Jesus even at the expense of losing their lives ... they weren't going to do that, unless they believed with every ounce of their being that Jesus, who was dead, had come back to life!

Sadly, there are a great many people in the world today who have not experienced the resurrection for themselves. They remain so burdened by the previous night – they're still living it; indeed, they do not know the joy that comes in the morning!

They are not altogether different from the women who came to anoint Jesus' body before dawn – they think they know exactly what each new day will bring; so burdened are they under the weight of loss ... they expect little and hope for less.

Perhaps there is peace in knowing that even the disciples could relate to that feeling.

Take Peter, for example, he would one day boldly declare to the rulers and the scribes and the elders: “This Jesus is the ‘stone that was rejected by you, the builders, it has become the chief cornerstone.’ There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we much be saved.”

But recall again how that same Peter would deny Jesus three times before Easter morning ... and it didn't take much, just the simple accusation of a servant girl – that's all it took to send Peter into that downward spiral, denying even his association with Jesus – denied it with an oath – and saying, “I do not know the man.”

Or take the Apostle Paul as another example. Paul would one day say to the Church in Corinth, “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the world of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord

your labor is not in vain.”

But consider Paul’s previous labor ... literally hunting Christians, a persecutor of the church, exemplar – he also knew quite personally what it meant to fall short of the glory of God!

Both of them could have thought, at one point or another, that the final chapter of their mistake-ridden life had been written ... and both of them would have been wrong!

But here’s the miracle – and if you hear nothing else of this morning, hear this – Easter is no less true for us today than it was for those first followers of Jesus!

Oh, the world may try to convince us that things will never be different / that any hope we may have for redemption has been locked away in some stone-cold tomb; but, friends, a tomb couldn’t stop the world’s central miracle from happening then, and it certainly can’t stop the power of the Risen Christ from transforming our lives today!

If there are any among us who feel that the epitaph of their life has already been written, as if permanently etched with their worst choices, their failures – the things they have done ... the things they have left undone.

Oh, to any who would doubt that a dreadful past can, in fact, be finished and gone, know this: by the power of the Risen Christ, our premature and temporal epitaphs can be burst to smithereens!

By rising from the dead Jesus has shown us that there is absolutely nothing about our lives that cannot be restored and forgiven and set right by God.

When Jesus turned and spoke to the thief on the cross, the one who was crucified next to him and had shown a contrite heart, Jesus didn’t say, “I wish something could be done.” He didn’t say, “Perhaps we will meet again one day.” No! Jesus, knowing who he was and what he had done showed mercy and said, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Those of us who have come to know God’s love personally, we know in our hearts that – our salvation by grace through faith – it is not simply an eternal reward ... it is a gift that makes a difference in our lives right now.

And one would think that the good news about Jesus – that it would be for us like God’s revelations were for the prophet Jeremiah / like a fire in our bones which makes us weary for holding it in; that on account of knowing about Jesus’ death and resurrection, we’d become like the disciples at Pentecost who appeared to be drunk with wine, when it was only 9 o’clock in the morning! (PAUSE)

Sadly, such zeal seldom marks our everyday lives. Oh, we are often far more tempered in our enthusiasm.

But why is that? We would do well to remember that the disciples were not restrained at all! And given how Easter completely changed them – and how the disciples, in turn, changed the world – it shouldn't take much imagination on our part to perceive something of the impact of our living witness!

Think about it – for all those who would call Jesus Lord, but who have not yet done so ... to see us “Living the Difference that Easter Makes”... for them to see in us a blessed measure of awe and wonder / to see that Jesus, working in our lives, has made all the difference in the world! Think about what a difference that could make in their life!

In the end, the life we have in Jesus, when lived to the glory of God, is about meaning and purpose and hope. It is about seeing the world rightly. It's about having a new set of attitudes and activities.

A life lived in joyful response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, our Lord, just might be the very instrument of grace that shines through someone's darkness and helps them to finally see and experience the dawn of a new life! (PAUSE)

Oh, by God's grace may such a testimony to an empty tomb ... may it be found in the fullness of our hearts!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.