

Easter Doesn't Make Sense
John 20:1-18
April 17, 2022
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

Today marks the one-year anniversary of our first in-person worship during Covid. Our first experiment with being back in the sanctuary was Easter Sunday, and if you were here you remember that we had reservations and seating charts and Tetris-style diagrams. "Let's see, I think we can fit Smith, party of four, in pew 14, and then the Wilsons will fit in pew 15 if two of them sit sideways." That was a crazy Easter, and yet we made it work and are so thrilled to be back in person again this year.

I'd love to say that we are all 100% full of joy as we sit here this morning, but I don't know if I can make that claim, either about you or about myself, because it seems like there's this low hum of fear that exists just below the surface of our lives. This world gives us so much to be fearful of, from new variants to global conflicts to fear of things we don't even know about yet. And I'm guessing we bring that fear with us into this most holy time.

I remember a few years ago I wanted to get an early start on Easter so I worshipped on Saturday night at a local church in hopes of filling my well for Sunday morning. Well, it didn't quite happen because I let theology get in the way. The preacher's goal was to prove the resurrection was a historical fact. He said, "We have four main sources to prove the Resurrection: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John." Well, yeah, OK. But that's using the Bible to prove the Bible. That's like me writing down on a piece of paper that eating lots of BBQ cures cancer, and then saying to my wife, Amy, "Hey, guess what I read?" Now, I'm not doubting the resurrection was real, but it's that kind of circular logic that drives a lot of people away from the church.

But what really got to me about the sermon was when the preacher asked the question, "If you die tonight, where are you going?" That's a fear-based question. I'd rather ask the question, "If you live tomorrow, what are you going to do to make the world better?" That's a love-based question. There is enough in our world today to make us scared, we shouldn't add Jesus to the list. And yet, it is the cumulative fear in our society that keeps us from truly experiencing the profound joy of the resurrection.

So, I believe we have come here or logged on this morning, not just because we can, but because we're looking for something, something our world can't offer us. We may call it peace or assurance or faith, but ultimately what I think we're looking for is Jesus. I remember two years ago when we had to make the difficult but correct decision not to worship together in the sanctuary on Easter morning. It was one of my hardest days in ministry, and I remember people lamenting, "But it's just not Easter if we're not worshipping together!" And I think I said all the right things like, "The church is more than a building" and "Even a pandemic can't keep Jesus in the tomb!" But why did I spend that morning in tears? Why did so many of us not feel any joy that Easter? We were desperately looking for something that worshipping on Easter provided: we were looking for Jesus.

That's why Mary went to the garden this morning, she was looking for Jesus. But the problem was she was looking for Dead Jesus, because that's the only reason someone would go to a cemetery. I've not once gone to a graveside service where the deceased was sitting on the casket greeting people as they arrive. There's only one thing Mary could possibly be looking for

this morning: a body. There is no multiple choice here. It's the only answer. But what she found didn't make any sense. It wasn't what she was expecting.

What would you do if you woke up one morning, and what you expected to be there wasn't there? When I was in seminary in Indianapolis, I lived close to a not-so-nice part of town. That never bothered me until one morning when I walked out to my car. I went to unlock it and saw that the lock had been popped out of the door. Uh-oh. Thankfully, my car wasn't broken into by Billy Graham because my theology textbooks were still there, but my car stereo and CDs were missing. Kids, ask your parents what a CD is. That's not how I expected my morning to start. If you've ever had something stolen from you, you know the feeling of expecting one thing, but instead finding something very different.

Mary had something stolen from her, her expectation of finding a dead body she could anoint for burial. She wasn't expecting resurrection, and the empty tomb fills her with confusion and fear. After all, Jesus is supposed to be dead. Mary's day would have been a lot easier if she had found Jesus' body lying in the tomb. And there were plenty of people back then who thought the whole resurrection thing was a hoax made up by Jesus' followers. So let's play that out. What if Jesus really did stay dead? After all, that would make more sense. What would that mean for us sitting here in church on Easter Sunday?

Paul writes about this rather bluntly in his first letter to the Corinthians. I'm reading from the translation *The Message*: "If there's no resurrection, there's no living Christ. And face it—if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. Not only that, but we would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ—sheer fabrications, if there's no resurrection. If corpses can't be raised, then Christ wasn't, because he was indeed dead. And if Christ wasn't raised, then all you're doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever. If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot."

So, Paul says, if Jesus really stayed dead, then we're wasting our time. Have you ever wondered about that? Have you ever wondered if all this faith stuff is true? I've wondered that once or twice...this week. I **always** wonder about that, because we don't know for sure. Paul's line about wandering around in the dark sounds like a pretty good description of the last few years. What if we've got it wrong? What if the Bible isn't true? Paul says in Romans that nothing can separate us from God's love, and yet a global pandemic shut our doors Easter, of all Sundays. What if what we believe is smoke and mirrors?

Those are hard questions, but I have an even harder question for us to answer: What if it IS true? Paul finishes the previous statement with this: "But the truth is that Christ *has* been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries." What if Jesus really WAS resurrected as the Bible tells us? What if our belief isn't smoke and mirrors, but is truly based upon the fact that Jesus Christ was the son of God and defeated death by walking out of that tomb? A Dead Jesus makes sense. Easter doesn't make sense. In some ways, I believe we're more afraid that the resurrection IS true than we are that it isn't true. Why? Because if it is true, then there are some things in our lives that we need to change

Living a resurrection life means doing some things that scare us. Like giving up control. Like stepping out on faith. Like using the resurrection as the lens through which we view life's circumstances, which means that we live in hope, not in fear; in love, not in hate; in grace, not in judgment. It means speaking out against injustice and working for equality. It means loving God more than we love anything else, including our bank accounts and our country. And frankly, all

of that is really hard to do. Sometimes I think life would be easier if Jesus had just stayed dead. That would make more sense.

But maybe it's not supposed to. Jesus didn't come to explain life, he came to show us how to live it, and how to deal with it when it doesn't make sense. He never said, "Understand me," he said, "Follow me," which we are called to do each and every day. I've preached a bunch of Easter sermons and I still can't explain the resurrection. Easter is never going to make sense. Proverbs tells us to trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understandings. Easter is not something to be understood; it's something to be experienced.

Do you remember chasing lightning bugs when you were a kid? It was one of my favorite summertime activities. Once it got dark, we'd go stand in the yard and wait to see that little flash of light. Then we'd run to the spot where we saw it, but it then it would appear in another part of the yard. So we'd run over there and wait for the flash of light again and repeat this process until we finally were able to catch one.

Keeping up with the resurrected Jesus is like chasing a lightning bug. You see a flash of light at the empty tomb, so you come here today to see Jesus. But then the light flashes in a locked room full of scared disciples, or on the road to Emmaus, or on a beach where the disciples are fishing. And each time that light flashes, it's Easter all over again. That doesn't just happen once a year; that happens every day...if we are looking for it. We can be standing in a yard filled with lightning bugs and never see one of them if we're not looking. That doesn't mean their lights aren't flashing all around us; it just means we're too preoccupied to notice.

Author John Purdy said, "God is not in the past, shut up in the tomb of our sins, our youthful indiscretions, our wasted opportunities, our shattered hopes and dreams. God is ahead of us – in our future, out there freeing us from our past, easing the pain, feeding the hungry, making for peace, washing the feet, raising the dead. God is gone ahead of us and he is out there waiting for us to get moving." In other words, if we're looking for Easter to make sense, we're missing the lightning bugs around us.

If you leave this place today and Jesus is still dead for you, then I'm sorry I made you sit through this, because nothing is going to change for you. But if you believe Jesus is alive, if you believe that our God is a God of rolled away stoned and new beginnings, if you believe resurrection is not a noun describing a past event but a verb describing an ongoing action, then tomorrow should be different than today. Easter doesn't have to make sense for it to change everything. Maybe you've believed that all your life. Maybe you're believing it for the first time today. Doesn't matter. What matters is that, because we can't understand Easter, we have a choice to make. Is Jesus really alive? And if he is, what does that mean for you? Happy Easter!