



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 27, 2016  
RESURRECTION SUNDAY

Leaning into the Heart of the Holy:  
Leaning into Life  
Isaiah 65:17-25; John 20:1-18

I have some news to share this morning.<sup>1</sup> I was at the sunrise service at Spring Arbor earlier, so I don't know if it made it on the morning news programs. There are, after all, a lot of important things happening in our world. I haven't had a chance to look at today's newspaper, so I don't know if it made the headlines or not. It's important news, so I wanted to be sure that you heard it today.

There is so much news, and some of it tragic. The story of the terrorist attacks in Brussels keeps unfolding and we learned on Friday that one of the Americans killed was engaged to a young woman from Raleigh. His sister died with him when they were on the phone calling home to say that they were safe in the airport in Belgium. How ironic. I don't know that anyone here today actually knew either of them, but that connection with our sister city somehow makes it personal, doesn't it?

You may have been listening to that sad news and missed the news that I want to share. I fear that it has been pushed out of the daily news cycle by everything else that is going on these days like the Presidential primary contests. I don't know if we want to call those events news or not. I detect some rather serious issues in our country but find that candidates are acting like schoolboys (or girls) hurling insults at each other's loved ones because the personal insults don't seem to stick. When they begin telling "Yo Mama" jokes, we will know we are in the deep end of the pool and the lifeguard has gone home.

So, in case you were watching the political shenanigans taking place all across our country and missed the news, I wanted to give it to you straight, because it is important news. Its news that we all want to know. Its news that we need to know. It affects us all as do the deaths of the four students at North Carolina Wesleyan College last week. How sad to lose four bright,

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<sup>1</sup>The idea for the framework of this sermon was inspired by a sermon by Fred B. Craddock, "The Announcement," *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 103-108.

energetic, gifted young women, all on the cusp of bursting into the world ready to change it for the better! We need to continue to pray for their families and the entire Wesleyan community.

Local news like that becomes the talk of the day and other news sort of takes a back seat. I wanted to tell you this other news today because it might have gotten overlooked with everything else that is going on.

Then again, who has much time for news, especially with the excitement of the NCAA tournament? The Sweet Sixteen has now been whittled down to the Elite Eight or, should I say, Six, and I am certain that most of you will be tuned in tonight to see which ACC teams move on to the Final Four. Granted, those of you who prefer a darker shade of blue may not cheer on your sky-blue friends, but remember that there is always next year.

Who can keep up with all that is going on in the world? Terrorism, politics, local tragedy, sports? The papers and TV news, even the twenty-four hour a day news channels cannot tell every story, every bit of news. It is no wonder that many of us take advantage of spring break and head to the coast for a little rest and relaxation and respite from the news of the day. In case our travels and recreation cause us to miss it, I want to tell you some very important news today.

In the darkest hour of the morning, just before dawn, God raised Jesus Christ from the dead! Christ is alive! In case you have not heard, that is the good news of the day!

It's true, in this day and time, all of the other news and entertainment items overshadow a story like the resurrection. Sure it's important. Of course it literally changed the course of human history. Most important, it has changed lives in a multitude of ways. Sometimes, however, this Good News gets buried on page five with all of the other miscellaneous news. I wanted you to know: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

We know this news because John, along with Matthew, Mark, and Luke, have told us. We have the witness of Mary and the other women. The Apostles spread the word. Paul took the Gospel international. The news has spread throughout the world and over time. Thanks to technology and radio waves, I suspect that the Gospel is piercing the universe in search of any being who has not yet heard it. God raised Jesus from the dead!

News like that, of course, begs for evidence. If Jesus is raised from the dead, where is he? What happened to the body? Where can we find this risen Christ? Those are the questions Mary and Peter and the other disciples were asking. Where is he?

The first place everyone looked was in the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed. John recounts a frantic tale that sounds almost like a relay race. Mary discovers that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb and runs to tell the disciples. Peter and the Beloved disciple (whom we assume is John), race to the tomb, but John, being, perhaps, a bit younger, arrives first and leans in to find it empty. He believes. What exactly he believes we don't really know for we are told that at this point they have not fully apprehended the scripture which says that Jesus will rise again. Simon Peter comes trudging up and, in his usual manner, rushes right into the tomb. Empty! The linen wrappings that covered Jesus' body are there, but the body is missing. He wonders. He ponders. He tries to figure it out as the two men go back to the upper room where they were hiding.

We can look in the tomb, but we will not find the Risen Christ there. The tomb is a place of death and emptiness. There is no life in a tomb, only sorrow, perhaps regrets, certainly longing. If you want to find the Risen Christ, the tomb is not the place to look.

Peter and the Beloved disciple rushed back to the house where the other followers of Jesus were hiding out in the upper room. Maybe Jesus would be there with his followers—but he was not. What was in that room was fear and anxiety. If the Jewish leaders were able to have Jesus crucified on trumped up charges, what hope did his followers have of escaping their bloodthirsty wrath? Houses were being searched and threats were being made. That borrowed room was a safehouse for followers of Jesus who feared for their lives, but it was no place for someone who had just received life again.

It might be wise to look for Jesus in the temple. After all, he spent a great deal of time there teaching and healing and being about his Father's business. It was there he went toe to toe with the scribes and Pharisees and put the Sadducees in their place. Perhaps the temple would be the ideal place for Jesus to go and celebrate his resurrection.

The temple, however, had become a place of rules, regulation, commerce, and competition. The veil separating the holy of holies from the

rest the temple had been torn in two, signifying that God was no longer to be kept isolated from his people, but surely the chief priests would do their best to mend it. As important as the temple was to the Jewish faith, it was not the place to find the Risen Christ.

I wonder if some of the disciples ran outside the city to the hill where Jesus died. If that is the place where Jesus gave up his spirit, perhaps it would be the place his spirit would seek out. Yet, Golgotha was no place for anyone to be. It was a hill of humiliation, revenge, injustice, and unimaginable suffering. It was a place where death was exalted as the ultimate power. That cursed hill was no place for the Risen Christ.

Perhaps Jesus could be found in Rome. If he was able to be resurrected, surely he could have been transported to the seat of power in the Empire. There Jesus could declare the establishment of his kingdom on earth, a kingdom modeled on the justice of heaven. But God's kingdom is not of this world. Rome was the embodiment of unchecked power, immoral excess, obscene wealth, and unbridled self-indulgence. The Risen Christ would not dip his foot into such foul waters.

Where else could Jesus be found? Where could this good news be celebrated, news that ought to have been headlines on everyone's front page?

Let's follow Mary. Mary desperately wanted to find Jesus. She had run back and forth between the tomb and the upper room. She had shared the news, told the disciples his body was missing, and felt the pain of loss all over again. Once more she crept up to the tomb, steadied herself on the chiseled rock opening, and leaned in. It was not empty, but Jesus was not there. Angels sitting on the platform which should have held his body filled the room with light, but they had the audacity to ask her why she was weeping, an absurd question, if ever there was one. She begged to know where Jesus' body was, but they sat silent in vigil over that chamber of death.

Perhaps wondering if her watery eyes and muddled mind were playing tricks on her, she turned away from the tomb and saw a man standing there. Who else would be in a cemetery so early in the morning but the caretaker, so she stepped toward him and blurted out her story once again. "If you have taken his body, tell me where it is and I will take care of it!" Mary had looked everywhere for Jesus. Maybe this man could help her find him.

We can imagine them standing there in the cool mist of dawn. As the sun rises in the east, shadows persist among the caves carved into the hillside. In clumps here and there, green shoots reach up from the ground. Beckoned by the sun, flowers have begun to bloom adding color and perfume to the greening garden. Trees, strong and mature, arc overhead, forming a canopy which offers a feeling of calm and protection. The man and the woman stand there looking at one another. She, begging for information, pleading for help to find Jesus. He, pausing a moment, waiting to see if the growing sunlight will enable her to recognize him. She leans toward him, desperate to know. He leans toward her, eager for her to know. He says one word: "Mary!" In an instant the sun shines, the fog clears, her heart leaps, and she rushes to him. "Rabbi!" she screams. It is Jesus! She has found the Risen Christ!

Where else would you find Christ but in a garden, a place teeming with life? While the upper room, the temple, Golgotha, Rome, and even the tomb desperately need the presence of the Risen Christ, that is not where new life begins. In her poem which has guided our Lenten worship and devotion, Joyce Rupp informs us that she is ready "to lean a little further into the heart of the Holy,"<sup>2</sup> deepening her faith in the Risen One. She reminds us that she knows where to start—her "humus" place. Humus, of course, is the decaying, organic matter that nourishes life. Our humus is the stuff of life that falls around us. Some of it is old ideas and beliefs and ways that we slough off. Some of it is mistakes and regrets and sins that have rotted around us. The gardens of our lives are spread far and deep with the compost of our living. Out of the humus of life, like the soil of a garden enriched by what has fallen there, new life emerges. This is where Jesus is found or, rather, where Jesus finds us. Onto that fertile soil, the Risen Christ shines the light of his love and grace to coax new life into being. In the garden of faith, we, too, are reborn and made alive again.

Now we can take Jesus to the upper rooms of our lives where people cower in fear. Jesus will fling open the door, open wide the windows, and invite us to live freely again. Laughter will be restored. Hope will bloom. Joy will return to life.

Now we can take Jesus into the temples of life where rules and traditions are considered sacrosanct over human need. We can rip up

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<sup>2</sup>Joyce Rupp, "Lent 2001," available online at: [www.joycerupp.com](http://www.joycerupp.com).

whatever veils separate humanity from God and restore the relationship God established in creation.

Now we can take Jesus to Golgotha where human cruelty flourishes in the guise of righteous indignation. Hatred and cruelty will be banished and our inhumanity against one another will be replaced with charity toward all.

Now we can take Jesus to Rome and all of the other seats of power in the world. We will remind those who rule that they do so at the behest of God and for the goodwill of the people but not for the benefit of a few. We will remind them that God's authority trumps any and all presumed power and that God will not be mocked by injustice committed in his name.

Now we can take Jesus to the tombs of our lives, those places where our hopes and dreams have been laid to rest, where our self esteem and dignity have breathed their last, where our failures and vulnerabilities have caused a thousand deaths in their wake. We will declare that death is defeated, that death no longer holds power over us, that Christ has offered new life to us all.

Now we can meet Jesus in the garden where we are made alive once again. I wanted you to know this news today—this Good News that God has raised Jesus from the dead—and raised us with him. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

March 27, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of creation and Lord of life, we gather to celebrate the Resurrection of your Son, through whom the former things have indeed passed away and all things have been made new. In this season of new life, the brilliance of your world cries out with color and song, and the women running from the empty tomb invite us to join the chorus of praise that Christ is risen indeed! We have spent these days leaning into your heart and have once again seen evidence of your promises fulfilled. Now we, like the first disciples, stare in awe that the Risen Christ stands among us. Though our lives bear witness to the abundance of your gifts to us, O God, in humility, we profess our faith that your redemptive work is not done, but that you continue to transform us in your image, to breathe into us your life-giving Spirit, and to mold us into new creations. Because we have received this glorious news of renewal and hope, may everything we do and say declare the truth of Christ's Resurrection and express our gratitude for your goodness to us.

But even as we claim the joy that is ours on this glad Easter morning, we recognize, Merciful God, that there are some for whom even the marvelous news of resurrection cannot remove their doubts and fears. It has been a week filled with difficult and frightening news. The darkness of the tomb still seems to envelop so many in our world because of illness or grief, poverty or hopelessness, violence or oppression. As heirs of your grace, grant us the courage and the strength, O God, to share your good news with all who need to hear it: to tend the wounds of those who are hurting, to loose the shackles of those who are bound in body or in spirit, to walk as companions beside the lonely, and wherever we go, to make peace.

With the boldness of those first witnesses, may we who are glad of heart proclaim our Alleluias, announcing the extraordinary news of our encounter with the risen Christ. With our hearts filled with the joy of ones who have received grace beyond measure because our God has come to dwell among us, empower us to go out from this place to speak and sing and live this hopeful, wondrous, life-changing news—Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

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