



Lakeside Sermons

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

APRIL 5, 2015
RESURRECTION SUNDAY
BE THOU MY VISION

Open Our Eyes to Life
I Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

I have long thought that on Easter morning (if not every Sunday) we preachers ought to heed the words of George Burns who said, “The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, then having the two as close together as possible.” Most of you would agree that on the majority of Sundays, that is good advice. On Easter Sunday, however, it would seem particularly appropriate for little more needs to be said than, “Christ is risen! Hallelujah!”

Not to disappoint but, I am a preacher, and my job is to say something more. If the message of the day is “Christ is risen! Hallelujah!”, what does that mean for us? What is Easter all about?

We sometimes get the impression that Easter is about last chances. Certainly it is good cause for repentance and fresh commitment to Christ, but is the message of Easter a “turn or burn” threat? Is what happened on that Sunday morning in a garden just outside the gates of Jerusalem only about the eternal condition of our souls? What about those of us who already believe? What does Easter mean for us today as we sit in this sanctuary? As I read the scriptures, I discover an invitation instead of a threat, an opportunity rather than a condemnation.

There are two basic tenets that shape my theology, my understanding of who God is and what God is about. First is the presence of God. We read the stories of creation and discover God intimately involved in the entire process, breathing life into everything thing that exists, up to his elbows in clay creating humans. God walks in the garden with the man and the woman and continues to be present in the rest of the story. Throughout their wilderness wanderings, a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night hovered over the Hebrews as a constant reminder of God’s presence with them. First the tabernacle and then the temple existed to symbolize God’s presence with his people. Finally, or rather ultimately, God came in Jesus Christ to show us that he was in this adventure with us. After his resurrection and prior to his ascension, Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would be present with them—with us—forever. “Lo, I am with you always,” Jesus said, “even to the

end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). At the core of our faith is the simple fact that God is with us.

The second belief that shapes my faith is an understanding that God’s desire for all of creation, especially humanity, is a fullness of life. Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The meaning of abundance in this context is a sense of fullness and completeness. In other words, Jesus came to live among us in order to teach us how to enjoy the most life has to offer by the grace of God.

I do not believe God is like some cosmic child, carefully constructing a world block by block only to take delight in knocking down the whole business once it is complete. God did not create this intricately majestic world simply to destroy it. God set creation in motion for a reason and scripture is clear that God desires relationship with us and among us. Thus God offered us this wonderful adventure of life.

What, then, is the meaning of Easter? If Christ is risen, what next? Why shout, “Hallelujah!”?

On the Friday before his resurrection, Jesus endured unbelievable violence and abuse for our sake. His intention was to demonstrate to us God’s willingness to do anything-absolutely anything—for us, even to lay down his life. God’s love for us encompasses the willingness to die for us, if necessary. How unusual it is, don’t you think, that the Creator would die for the sake of his creation.

Up to this point, Jewish faith, and even pagan religion, was centered on restoring relationship with God or some other god by making sacrifice. Demonstrating one’s contrition and willingness to make amends by sacrificing something of great value has its merits. It indicates that we are invested in what we are doing. We are taking seriously our relationship with God. Like most things we humans do, however, the practice of sacrifice became corrupt. The prevailing attitude became that people could essentially buy their way back into God’s favor without ever having a change of heart. The psalmist understood, however, that God does not demand a sacrifice of lambs or goats or money. What God desires is the sacrifice of a contrite heart (Psalm 51:16-17).

Jesus’ crucifixion is about the extent to which God’s love will go for us. Not only did Jesus die as a demonstration of God’s love, he also took with him

all of our sinfulness to conquer it as well. It was the ultimate expression of love. Think of a child playing that game “How much do you love me?” “Do you love us this much?” (fingers inches apart) the world asked God. God shook his head. “Do you love us this much?” (hands two feet apart) the world asked God. Again God shook his head. “How much do you love us?” the world asked. And God stretched his arms out as far as he could (arms extended like Jesus on the cross) and said, “I love you this much!” So Christ died in an attempt to demonstrate for us the immense love of God.

Along with the lifeless body of Jesus, our sins were also dragged into the tomb and a stone rolled tightly over the opening. Imagine how dark it was in that tomb. Actually, it was beyond dark. It was completely void of light, if you can imagine what that is like. Really serious deep water divers talk of Bushman’s Cave, a remote underwater cavern that lies beneath the desert scrub lands of northern South Africa. Once you make your way down a steep slope to a puddle of water no larger than a manhole, you slide down twenty feet into the waters of the cave. The cave itself is 1000 feet deep, about 250 yards wide, and dark. It is so dark that the beam of a flashlight is swallowed in the blackness. There is no light at these depths.¹

The tomb was void of light. It was as if the words that John would later write about Jesus were never true. He declared that “In him was life and that life was the light of all humanity. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it” (John 1:4-6). In the tomb, however, it seemed that the darkness had won. There was no light and there was no life.

There was only death and with that death came a stench. Yet, it was not the odor of Jesus’ decomposing body for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had lathered his lifeless body with 100 pounds of expensive perfume. No the horrid odor that filled that lightless chamber was the smell of the death of all those sins Jesus took to the tomb with him: sins of omission and commission, things we should have done and things we should not have done.

On one side of the tomb were the idols that capture our attention and resources ahead of God along with our unwillingness to rest our bodies and minds, to refresh our spirits, and honor God, if only for a day. Disrespect and neglect of parents and elders were packed in one corner along with murder,

¹Julia DeWitt, “Good Guys: No Man Left Behind,” *This American Life*, Chicago Public Radio and Ira Glass (March 20, 2015): program # 551; available online at: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/551/transcript>.

adultery, theft, abuse of reputation, and covetousness, both actual and imagined.

In another corner were broken trust, empty promises, neglect, and hurt. Beside that lay stacks of prejudice and hatred ranging from ignorant chants to crude nooses to murderous attacks. Terror, genocide, and bloodthirsty greed reached to the ceiling. In a third corner were all those ways we fail to appreciate God's gifts to us—squelching, wasting, and ignoring our abundant talents; thinking less of ourselves than we ought; and tarnishing the image of God within us.

Littering the floor were cruel words, unclean thoughts, snap judgments, gossip, selfish acts, the trading of human well-being for power, the arrogance of self-righteousness, the sadness of self-loathing, crimes against humanity, crimes against creation, crimes against God.

On the back wall, resting on a shelf carved out of the stone, lay the body of Jesus. The tomb was void of life and light, filled only with despair, hopelessness, and the smell of the death and destruction of all those sins Jesus took to the cross with him. Were you in that tomb on Saturday, all you could do would be to close your eyes and hold your breath.

If you were in that tomb on Easter morning, however, and dared open your eyes, you would see a pinpoint of light growing larger until the entire tomb was illumined. As the stone rolled away, brightness flooded the cave until every shadow was banished and every nook and cranny was full of light. All darkness was gone because John was right—the light had truly conquered the darkness.

Dare you take a breath, you would smell, not the stench of death and despair, but the fragrance of a new creation floating on the breeze from the garden, the aroma of new life. There is no body in the tomb for Jesus is no longer there. The tomb is empty.

If we look, we will see the vision of new life. There is new growth everywhere as fresh flowers spring from the earth and blossoms flourish on trees. Old growth shrubs and trees burst with leaves and flowers and fruits. Everything is flooded with light and beauty and fragrance. And there is a sound—music actually—birds and animals and voices singing praise to God. And underneath it all is a melody of the breeze, the Spirit of God whispering life into it all.

There stands Jesus looking at us, extending his hand, beckoning us to come out of the tomb into the garden of life, to leave behind darkness and death and step into life, full and complete. That is Easter. For us it is a chance for new life—an opportunity to begin again.

A few months ago, Peggy Wallace Kennedy, daughter of the late Governor of Alabama, George Wallace, was a guest in our community. She shared with us what it was like to grow up in the Governor's mansion in those days when racial tensions were at their height, especially when her father stood at the schoolhouse door and steadfastly refused to allow African-American students to enroll at the University of Alabama. It was her life to grow up in that situation with so much hatred and so much prejudice. For years she compartmentalized her father's politics from the rest of her life. She tried to ignore his actions and push away his opinions. It was not until she took her own children to visit the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Atlanta that the past crowded in upon her.

As her family walked through the museum, they turned a corner and were confronted with a large picture of her father angrily denouncing integration and equal opportunity. When her young son asked her why his grandfather had done such things, she knew it was time to confront her past. In that resurrection moment, she committed her life to atoning for the sins of her father. She began working to reconcile people who had been distanced from one another because of racial conflicts. With her life, she began preaching a sermon of love and reconciliation rather than hatred. Peggy Wallace Kennedy experienced a resurrection in the garden of Easter at that moment because she understood that we can change our lives and through our lives we can change the world. That is why Jesus came to live among us. That is why Jesus went to the cross. That is why Jesus was in the tomb. And that is why Jesus came out of the tomb and was in the garden—so that we might have new life and help create new life.

Easter offers us the opportunity to begin again. We can accept that all those things that have brought darkness and death into our lives are gone. Jesus took them to the cross. They disintegrated in the white-hot heat of God's love in the tomb. Before us is nothing but life, new life that we can shape together with Christ. It is all new, all fresh, all vibrant—if we will but open our eyes and our hearts to this new life in Christ. Easter is God's redeeming love, strong enough to resurrect even our lives. This is Easter! Christ is risen! And so are we! Hallelujah! Amen.

April 5, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of Creation, 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 once again seen evidence of your promises fulfilled, and we, like the first disciples, stare in awe that the Risen Christ, who is the Lord of life, 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, 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. The darkness of the tomb still seems to envelop them because of illness or grief, poverty or hopelessness, violence or oppression. As heirs of your resurrection 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, to speak peace in the midst of chaos.

With the boldness of those first witnesses, may we who are glad of heart sing our Alleluias, proclaiming 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 the Living Christ is indeed upon his throne, empower us to go out from this place to sing out this hopeful, wondrous, life-changing news—Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

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