



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Echoing Christ

Matthew 28:1-10;

Colossians 3:1-4; Ephesians 5:1-2

Considering all the activity that goes on there, a garden is usually a remarkably peaceful place. Though there is constant movement and growth, buzzing and chirping, creeping and flying, most of us would probably associate gardens with serenity and quiet. The beautiful sights and aromas of flowers, vegetables, and trees can renew one's spirit and be powerful reminders that, despite the death and darkness in so much of our world, God's creation pulses with life and beauty and possibility.

Early morning is an especially beautiful and peaceful time to be in a garden, when the air is cool and the day's first rays of sunlight dance over the leaves shimmering with dew drops. I confess that I'm not much of a morning person myself and that most of my experiences with dawn are from pulling all-nighters as a student and then crawling into bed just as the sun was coming up, or during early-morning feedings when my boys were babies. But since I would much prefer to stay up until things are done rather than get up early to finish them in the morning, I have approached many sunrises from the front end of sleep and am all-too familiar with those pre-dawn hours.

Whether you are a night owl or an especially early riser, you, too, may be familiar with those "wee, small hours of the morning"—those silent moments when the crickets have stopped chirping but the dawn chorus of the songbirds has not yet begun, those moments of anticipation just before the haze of daylight breaks over the horizon, when the darkness is total but the promise of light is evident. I've always imagined this to be the moment the women, led by Mary, walked into the garden with the spices to anoint Jesus' body on that first Easter morning.

To be fair, this image is one that I have, in part, conjured, because we really don't know how early it was when the women arrived at the tomb, and the Gospels don't offer much help in figuring it out. John says that they arrived while it was still dark, but Mark writes that, though it was very early, the sun had already risen. Both Luke and Matthew simply indicate that it was at early dawn. In any case, it was in the stillness of early morning, when the

world was just awakening, and because of the task they were coming to the garden to perform, their hearts were as dark and heavy as the air that hung around them. All was still and quiet as the women made their somber procession toward the place where Jesus lay, their minds still spinning and their hearts broken from the horrific events of the previous two days. Their Lord, the one in whom they had placed their faith, the one they thought was the Messiah who had come to save them, was dead, and even in a garden teeming with beauty and new life, the weight of death and despair was all they could feel.

Matthew is the only Gospel to mention an earthquake, but whether the earth literally shook or not, it must have seemed that the ground was pulled from underneath their feet when they reached the tomb only to be greeted by the stone out of place and heavenly messengers there to tell them the news: He is not here! He is risen! I have no doubt, earthquake or not, that in that moment, the serenity of the garden was pierced by crying, shouting, questions, exclamations of disbelief and then joy, and the pounding of feet running off to share the good news. Jesus was alive! He is risen, just as he said!

In trying to interpret the meaning of the startling events of Easter morning, the German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who led the Confessing Church in Germany to oppose Hitler's regime and was ultimately hanged as a traitor in the Flossenburg concentration camp, wrote that if the crucifixion was the world's "No" to Jesus and his message, then the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's resounding "Yes!" to the world.¹ The arrest, trial, and execution of Jesus was a rejection of his vision of God's kingdom, his interpretation of the Law, and his inclusion of all people within the reach of God's grace. Jesus declared to the powers that be, both in the religious establishment of his day and in the Roman government, that things are not necessarily as they seem, that God's favor is not reserved for the acceptable "insiders," and that real power is to be found not in wealth or might or status but rather in vulnerability and humility and compassion.

Jesus' ministry and teachings turned everyone's assumptions and expectations of God upside down, as he touched those deemed untouchable, included those who were sinners and outcasts, declared forgiveness for sins, and both proclaimed and lived a grace that was not limited to a chosen people but was, instead, extended to all people. His ministry and message were so radical, so inclusive, so disturbing to their structures of power and authority,

¹*Theological Letter on Easter*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, commissioned by the Pomeranian Council of Brethren, Berlin, March 1940, translated by Douglas W. Stott.

that they rejected them and him. The world Jesus had come to love shouted "No!" as he was mocked, beaten, and nailed to the cross.

But when the women arrived in the garden to find the tomb empty, they heard God exclaim "Yes!" in response: Yes to humility instead of pride; yes to generosity instead of greed; yes to compassion instead of hate; yes to peace instead of violence; yes to redemption instead of sin; and yes to life instead of death. When the stone rolled away and Jesus got up from the tomb, God issued a "Yes!" so loud and so emphatic that it has continued to reverberate throughout all of history, for every time and culture and language and place.

On Easter morning, as we gather once again to sing our "Alleluias!" and proclaim with all of creation, "Christ is risen indeed!" we take our place among the great cloud witnesses who have heard God's voice in faithful fulfillment of his promises once again and who have taken up the task of echoing God's "Yes!" to the world.

But while this message is good news indeed, we also know that God's "Yes" is still, too often, met with the world's "No." So when we hear the message that the women came running from the tomb to proclaim, when we listen for the good news that Christ is indeed risen and claim for ourselves the name of Christ, we become a resurrection people, ready to commit ourselves to echoing God's "Yes," even when we are met with the same rejection Jesus and his first disciples experienced. Saying "yes" is often not seen as socially popular, politically expedient, or fiscally prudent. The message of the cross, and therefore the resurrection, is after all, Paul writes, foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:18), but for those who proclaim this good news, as foolish as it may sound to some, it is the power of God to save us. Jesus came to show us that God's "yes" is not about popularity or politics, winning or even success as the world defines it—Jesus said that the last will be first (Matthew 19:30) and that whoever loses their life for his sake will find true life (Matthew 10:39).

So when the world says "No" by being determined to divide everyone into factions and parties, interest groups and clans, we are called to echo God's "Yes" by working for unity and cooperation.

When the world says "No" by rejecting those who are different because of race or language, religion or nationality or sexuality, we echo God's "Yes" by showing hospitality to the foreigner, the marginalized, and the oppressed (Leviticus 19:34).

When the world says "No" by building weapons and waging war, we echo God's "Yes" by beating swords into plowshares and waging peace (Isaiah 2:4).

When the world says "No" by finding more and more ways to one-up or beat down, to label or demonize, we echo God's "Yes" by outdoing one another in showing love and kindness (Hebrews 10:24).

When the world says "No" by declaring that it is not possible to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and heal the sick, we echo God's "Yes" by meeting their needs with our own words, advocacy, work, and resources (Matthew 25).

When the world says "No" by assigning value to people according to who is the toughest, the richest, or the most productive, we echo God's "Yes" by living the Lord's requirements to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly (Michah 6:8).

And when the world says "No" by speaking hate, we echo God's resounding "Yes!" by loving God with our whole selves and our neighbors as ourselves.

Through Christ's resurrection, God has said "Yes" not only for Jesus and his ministry, but also for us and for all of creation, as by God's grace we, too are offered new life, re-creation, and reconciliation. The good news of resurrection is that God's eternal "Yes" is for all the world. In spite of all the hatred, division, and despair that may come our way, and despite the sin and darkness which seem to reign, on this glad Easter morning, indeed every day of our lives, we can speak boldly as resurrection people to echo the best news ever shared: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!

O God whose love and sorrowed flowed all the way down from a cross to save us, we praise you and worship you because you are the Almighty and Everlasting God. We come with joy and gratitude in our hearts this Resurrection Day because we have journeyed through the dark clouds of Good Friday and have experienced again the jubilation and hope of Easter morning. We trust in your promises for our lives, O Lord, because we know that you have been faithful to keep your promises made to your people, even to send a Savior who would conquer sin and death. As your Risen Son once appeared to his disciples, make yourself known to us now, we pray.

Even in this moment of celebration, O God, we remember that while the Resurrection is for us a promise of the ultimate defeat of suffering and death, it is also for us a call to minister to the need that surrounds us in our world. As we see vivid images of suffering on the evening news or as we drive down the streets of our own town, we realize, Holy God, that we are a people blessed with material possessions, with fulfilling relationships, with freedom and peace. Make of us also a people who possess the gifts of compassion and generosity, and teach us that because we have been given so much, much will be required of us. We pray for those around the world who live in fear of violence and unrest and for our own citizens who serve to bring relief and peace. We pray for those who have suffered the loss of life or livelihood because of natural disasters. We pray for those who face uncertain days because of a lost job or a lost home. We pray for those affected by disease, hunger, and poverty. Help us to bring healing to those who are sick, comfort to those who mourn, companionship to those who are lonely, and hope to a world in despair. May our ministry in your name bring to those who suffer the same joy and hope that we have experienced again this Easter morning. In the name of our Risen Savior, even Jesus our Lord, and through the power of the Holy Spirit we make our prayer. Amen.