

April 16, 2017

“Resurrection”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 28:1-10

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Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Our Lord Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed!

You know, as a Christian, Easter should be considered the most important day of the year. Because today, we celebrate the incredible gift Jesus Christ has given us through that cross. That cross where he took all the sins of the world – all the evils and injustices and sufferings of the world, upon himself, and defeated them all. That cross on which he was crucified, where he died, and then was buried, only to rise up out of the grave, alive again. And now, that cross stands for victory, for hope, and for new life. Hallelujah!

So let's talk about the resurrection of Jesus Christ! What exactly does that mean for us? Well, two things. The first is pretty straight forward: resurrection assures us of eternal salvation, eternal life. Christ's rising means we, too, his followers, will rise to a life after death – to a place we cannot even imagine. But a place so extraordinary that Jesus himself describes it as *paradise*. He said it's like a great banquet, a huge celebration, a place where there is no crying, no pain, no sorrow. Yes, we are assured that our final home is... *paradise!*

And the second thing about resurrection is that it gives us hope for the here and now. This takes a little more explaining, but it's so critical for today's living. In this morning's Gospel reading we heard the angel say, "Do not be afraid, I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified, but he is not here; he has risen, just as he said, and is on his way to Galilee." Now, in truth, this story – about a dead man returning to life and walking around – should shake and startle us to our core. But, apparently most people aren't affected like that anymore. Most people just can't relate to this story that's two thousand years old, from another time and another place. Why? I think we all know. Because in today's culture, religion is too often put down and believers are mocked, so we tend to question our faith. Today, we look to the rich and powerful and to celebrities for all our answers and help. Today, we put more trust in science and technology than we do in God. So it's easy to dismiss the mystery and the awe of the resurrection story, and the strength and the power that God through Jesus Christ can bring us. Yes, for many, the resurrection story has simply turned into an outdated, “back in the day” tale.

But before you accept this reasoning, let me put the story into some perspective for you. For example, how many of you remember pay phones - those telephone booths you might see at the airport or in shopping malls or even on the corner of a busy street? That was just twenty or so years ago, not two

thousand, and they're all gone now, right. A distant memory. So I guess what that's telling us is that people no longer want to communicate with each other via phone anymore? Or, how many of you remember Blockbuster, or any number of those other neighborhood video stores? They're all gone now, as well. So I guess that's telling us that people aren't watching movies at home anymore? See where I'm going here? You see, just because the world has changed, doesn't mean our underlying need for God's power and presence in our life has changed. And I'll tell you why. Because, think back for a moment to a time when you felt afraid or were hurting or suffering. A low point, a tough time in your life. A time when no amount of friends or acquaintances, or inspirational quotes on social media, or any number of self-help books or Google searches were sufficient enough to help you make it through. But where could you turn? Well, this is where you turn to the resurrection story. The fact is, tough times are a reality in this life. The home is still a major trouble spot, with relationships between spouses and children so often strained. Cancer and other diseases strike randomly. Many people are still working dead end jobs, or have no jobs. Drugs, opioids, have become like the plague. And, we're held captive by a culture that measures us by superficial standards like our looks and clothing, or how much money we have to spend, rather than the kind of people we are and how we are living our lives. And so, as you go through the task of daily living with all its issues, complexities, and hardships, don't you really want to count on a living God, a mighty hope, a second chance, a third chance, to be there for you?

Because if you can't count on that, this is what happens. In today's Scripture, the two Mary's went to the tomb where, three days earlier, they had laid the body of their beloved friend Jesus. They arrive, when suddenly there's an earthquake. Then, an angel appears and rolls away the stone in front of the tomb... but it's empty! And the angel explains to them that Jesus isn't in the tomb, not because someone has stolen his body, but because he has been raised from the dead. Just as he had said he would. And the guards who were supposed to be protecting the tomb became so frightened at what was happening, that they shook and became like dead men. Like dead men! Now that's an interesting way to describe someone. But that's what fear and uncertainty does to you, don't you think? You become like a dead man, a dead woman. Oh, you're still living, but not really. Going through the motions, but feeling numb. Like when any of those things I just mentioned happen – you learn your child is addicted, bills keep piling up because you want more, you hear the word “terminal,” the relationship ends, a spouse dies. The truth is, life can and will deliver us those fearful experiences. But nobody should have to live like they're dead, not while they're still alive.¹

¹ Lillian Daniel, “When “*Spiritual But Not Religious*” is Not Enough”

So what's the answer? Again, we turn to the resurrection story. Because when we think of all the things we have to face in this life, don't we want... don't we need... a Christ who overcame all the forces of darkness and who can now help us overcome all our sorrows and pain and fears. You see, the resurrection is God's promise, God's assurance, that nothing is too hopeless, too desperate, too lost, that God cannot overcome it! And that, my friends is called, *grace*. *Grace*. God's power and help given freely and unconditionally to you and to me. God's grace can be a mighty force in your life, if you have faith and just believe and trust in him. And then, in turn, you can be an agent of God's grace to those around you, so that the resurrection becomes relevant to others who need to hear this wonderful story.

Getting back to the scripture again, the angel tells the women, "Go quickly and tell the disciples that Jesus is going to Galilee." And just how cool is that? "Jesus. Yeah, I just saw him headed to Galilee. And you better get there fast because wonderful things are going to happen!" Now did you ever wonder why Jesus went to Galilee, and not back to Jerusalem or to Rome or even to Washington D.C., or to wherever the rich and powerful may be, who want to tell us what's best for us and how to think and act? Well, that's because Jesus knows who's really important. So he goes to Galilee. Because who lives in Galilee? Nobody... except his followers. Those he taught, those he healed, those he forgave, those he loved, those he showered his grace upon. And he goes to share with them his victory. To prove that there is nothing is so terrible, so desperate, so painful that he can not overcome it. And today he comes to Falmouth – to his followers here in this sanctuary to tell us the same thing. As Bishop Will Willimon says, "The implications (of Easter) are this. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, time and time again we look up and realize that we're not walking by ourselves. When we come to some dead end in life, when we look over the brink, into the dark abyss, we will find to our surprise and delight, that there He is, awaiting us, a light in the darkness of this world." Yes, a light that offers his love and grace, and a hope and assurance for the future. Because one of the last things he said to his disciples, was a promise meant for both them and us: "I will be with you always, to the end of the age."

So can you see why today, Easter, is the most important day in the life of a Christian? And why I shout, hallelujah! Won't you join me, again? Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen!