

Scriptures: Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

Focused on Christ

Happy Easter! In our reading from Acts this morning, Peter tells us, "We are witnesses of everything He did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed Him by hanging Him on a cross, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day and caused Him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead," (Acts 10:39-41). That's the greatest news the world has ever heard. God-with-us, loved us enough to take the nails on Good Friday's cross and to die in our place, for our sins and the sins of the whole world.

In recognizing this, we hear a call to action from Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. We can't be content – we shouldn't be content – to ever be bench warmers in the Church. Paul writes, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God," (Col. 3:1-3).

It's Easter, and so I'd like to spend some time this morning looking at the Resurrection account recorded by John. I'll be reading from the New International Version. If you have a Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to John 20:1-18. **Read John 20:1-18.**

Lenten Review

Each Sunday during the Lenten season we traveled through a variety of different events while Jesus was physically present, doing His ministry on earth. We looked at His temptation after fasting for forty days. We heard about a high ranking Pharisee who came by night to ask Him about life, and who heard about the love God has for all people. We watched a shameful, shame-filled woman come at mid-day to draw water, and then run to tell the whole town that the Man at the well had told her everything she had ever done.

We learned of a man who had been born blind – hadn't ever seen the sunlight before – miraculously healed by Someone passing through who had mixed the dust of the ground with His spit and rubbed it into unseeing eyes. We thought of the horrible smell there must have been at Lazarus' tomb after Lazarus had been dead four days and Jesus came to Bethany and told them to roll the stone away, and then called out, "Lazarus, come out!" We heard of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem – we even shouted along with the crowd, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes

in the name of the Lord!” Thursday night some of you experienced the tastes Jesus’ disciples experienced in the Upper Room at their Passover meal, and on Good Friday, we heard John’s account of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and how much He suffered for us.

Because of our distance in time from the original occurrence of these Biblical events, and others, we view things through the lens of hindsight. But to the original people involved, nothing that happened to them had ever been done before. It was all new. Jesus was doing a new thing. Sometimes, we get so focused on looking behind, that we lose focus on the possibilities ahead.

Not What They Expected

God knows who we are, and what we were made to be. Only God knows what we will become. We used to sing a song here at New Hope, written by Natalie Sleeth in 1986, called *Hymn of Promise*, which captures this idea very well. “In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree; In cocoons, a hidden promise; butterflies will soon be free! In the cold and snow of winter there’s a spring that waits to be, Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.” (UMH, 707). God sees the world as it was created to be – and as it will be at the new creation. We often do not!

The disciples, the women who went to the tomb, they didn’t understand what God was doing. On that first Easter morning long ago, we read that “While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance,” (John 20:1). She was going there to grieve, to weep, to mourn. Luke’s account of Resurrection morning (Luke 24) suggests that Mary and some other women brought spices they had prepared to put on Jesus’ body. So maybe she came to do that, too.

What she found wasn’t what she expected. The stone was rolled away, and the tomb was empty. She runs back to tell the disciples – but notice, she still doesn’t understand what God is doing through the empty tomb. “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put Him!” (verse 2). They, of course, is the key word there. No one had ever heard of someone ever coming back to life after being dead for so long – with the exception of Lazarus – who had been raised from the dead by Jesus.

Didn’t Understand What God was Doing

Two of the disciples run to the tomb, we’re told, and see the empty tomb, with the linen wrappings that had been on Jesus’ body laying inside it. They went back home. Meanwhile, Mary comes back to the tomb, and stands outside it crying. She looks in, sees two angels, and they say to her, “Woman, why are you crying?” She explains why she’s crying. “They’ve taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they’ve put Him!”

(verse 13). Can you imagine that? Consumed and lost in her grief, Mary isn't able to see things as they are, or ought to be.

You'd think she would have questioned where the angels came from when she saw them sitting in the tomb. Often when we experience the death of a loved one, we eventually find ourselves in a cemetery. We're surrounded with visual reminders that these bodies wear out. There have been committal services at cemeteries I've been to where the family of the deceased are overwhelmed with grief. The service ends, and rather than leaving, they linger at the graveside. They sometimes experience guilt – sometimes caused by a fall out over something quite minor in the grand scheme of things – along with their grief because they recognize that there were missed opportunities to spend together with their loved one.

Once upon a time there was a great sultan who asked his grand vizier to put together a history of the human race. After years of hard work, the vizier came to the sultan with a caravan of donkeys carrying 500 volumes. The sultan was not happy. He told the vizier, "Condense it! Shorten it! Cut it down!" The vizier responded, "But Sir, all these volumes can be reduced to a single sentence that tells the story of the whole human race – they were born, they suffered, and they died." Our human wisdom teaches us to use our time wisely. But divine wisdom teaches us that much of what we find so important boils down to vanity.

The End That Wasn't

The Scriptures tell us that God's gift is not just this life, this world, this time – there's more in store for us. This life is not all there is. Whatever mistakes – sins – we've made and regret, we get a second chance. We can confess our sins and be forgiven. We can be filled with God's strength and presence each day. We have hope that beyond this life, there is eternal life.

Mary went looking for Jesus on Easter morning, and found Him. "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?" (verse 15). Thinking it was the Gardener, she pours her heart out to Him, only to hear Him call her by name. "So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what He had told her," (verse 18). It was the end that was least expected.

That is the message of Easter. Jesus suffered and died on a cross, was buried, and on the third day, rose again. The good news is not the miracle that a Man lived 2,000 years ago and died and then came back to life – that is an amazing thing – but the Gospel is that we who believe will also have eternal life. Jesus is the firstborn of the dead. His resurrection will also be ours. We will have new and unending life through Jesus Christ!

Victory at the Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus Christ shows us God's victory over sin, death, and the powers of evil. The wounds Christ received in the crucifixion were transformed into marks of victory at the resurrection. So our wounds will be, too, when we join our friends and family at the throne of God. We will enter a house with room enough for all people – a place with no more tears, suffering, or shame in God's kingdom. The promise of all this is ours today. Believe in Christ. Put your faith in Him.

Know that you are adored by God – so much so that He willingly laid glory and His own life aside in exchange for yours. As you allow Him to not only be your Savior, but also your Lord, rest in the assurance that you are growing into the person He wants you to be. God already knows you, and He loves you anyhow! He's already redeemed you. God sees you not just as you are, but as He has made you to be. Believe in the promises of God – because they are for you! The *Hymn of Promise* ends, "In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity; in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity. In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see." Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Amen!

Prayer: Resurrecting God, You conquered death and opened the gates of life everlasting. In the power of the Holy Spirit, raise us with Christ that we, too, may proclaim healing and peace to the nations. Amen.