

Easter in Us (John 20:1-18)

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Easter Sunday (Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/easter-in-us

Easter begins with running legs and the sounds of sandals slapping the well-worn paths that led to the tomb.¹ The news of an empty tomb dawned sleepily upon the disciples as they were jolted awake with the news of the missing body so they came running to see for themselves. Peter and John get first credit for arriving breathless at the tomb, when in truth it was the women who were there first. All four gospels make plain the news that the tomb was empty.

- In Mark's gospel it's Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome who first heard the angel's announcement, "*He is risen,*" who then assigned them the task to tell the others.
- In Matthew's gospel, there are only the two Marys. They're told to go tell the others but as they were going to do that, they ran into Jesus and fell down to worship him.
- Luke puts a gaggle of women at the tomb before John and the other men showed up. When the women report this good news to the men, they *disbelieve* it with this explanation: "*These words seemed to them an idle tale.*"
- In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene came alone and when she found the empty tomb, she wept. Two angels showed up to comfort her and asked, "*Why are you weeping?*" Mary said the only thing that made sense to her: "*They've taken my Lord away and I don't know where they've laid him.*"

She was left with the only explanation that made any sense at all: Dead bodies simply do not disappear; *someone* must have moved it. But the mystery deepens as she turned around and saw Jesus standing there watching her. In her grief and the limiting light of dawn she mistook him for the gardener until he called out her name and the veil of the unexpected was lifted and she replied, "*Rabboni,*" which means "*my dearest teacher.*" Mary reached out to touch him but he quickly warned her "*Do not cling to me, for I am on my way to the father.*"

So, Jesus told her to leave and go back to the disciples to tell them he had emerged from the tomb. She did what he asked with the first gospel message of the day, "*I have seen the Lord!*" Mary was thus the first witness to the resurrection and in Euripedes' 4th century play,

¹ Stephen Shoemaker, *GodStories, New Narratives From Sacred Texts*, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1998, 287

Hippolytus, he nicknamed her, Apostola Apostolorum, “the apostle to the apostles.” She delivered the news they would carry all over the world: *Christ is risen!*²



A few years ago, on a Palm Sunday, tornadoes ripped through northeast Georgia. Homes were lifted off their foundations and pine forests were flattened.

The news from Alabama was even worse, where workers pulled bodies from the ruins of a Methodist church. The pastor’s family was struck by death just like many of her parishioners. No one said it out loud, but it seemed to be a kind of betrayal on God’s part. If anyone in the world *should* have been spared destruction, surely it was those believers gathered for worship in God’s house. The nightmare continued through Holy Week. Survivors woke up screaming from nightmares in their sleep. Chain saws roared through the day and into the night as they attempted to cut their way out of their destruction.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal minister in the area, wrote, “I thought of that Methodist pastor when it came time to write the Easter sermon. I thought of everyone who had literally been scared to (or by) death. I thought of the Alabama mother burying her child, the church members burying their dreams of safety, everyone whose trust in God had been dealt a deadly blow that Palm Sunday afternoon and I wondered: Does this ruin Easter? Or is this what Easter is all about?”³

Maybe Reverend Taylor is on to something. For Easter faith is not just about all the niceness of the happy and the lovely who gather for the pageantry of the church’s celebration of Jesus’ victory over the grave. It’s also about the kind of faith that is willing to meet us in the garden of our pain and sorrow.

Some of you are here this morning because for some reason you feel a need to be here. Easter is the message that all things old and dead will be renewed by the God whose power transcends life and death. A renewal takes place at the entrance of the grave where the stone has been rolled back because Jesus is the one risen from the grip of death.

In Bill Moyer’s PBS special on Addiction, Wendy Walker tells the story of overcoming her soul-killing addiction to alcohol. Remarkably today she is a counselor at Hazelton, an addiction

² Shoemaker, *Ibid.*, 287

³ From FBC newsletter, Clemson, South Carolina, Michael Massar, Pastor

recovery program in New York City. But two decades ago, her life was immersed inside a bottle. So deeply was she hooked on alcohol she took a razor and cut both her cheeks from ear to chin.

One day, she was so desperate for a drink she went to see Genevieve, an old friend, to ask for a few bucks for a cheap bottle. Genevieve told her that she would give her the two dollars if she would go with her to a meeting first. At this point, Wendy would have done anything to get the money, so she agreed to go to the meeting. Genevieve told her they would have to ride a city bus to get there. A wave of shame swept over her because she had let herself go. Her hair was a matted mess and she wore the same threadbare clothes for weeks at a time without washing them. She stunk and knew that getting on a crowded bus would be humiliating and would only deepen her already broken sense of self. As they got on the bus, Wendy figured Genevieve would sit somewhere else so that no one on the bus would know they were riding together. But she didn't! Genevieve sat right next to her, talked to her as if they were friends. She treated her with dignity and respect, even in her disheveled condition.

In telling this story to Bill Moyers, Wendy's face and composure began to break down. Tears ran freely down her scarred cheeks. Honesty is a terrible price to pay when your story is so painful. You know already where they went. Genevieve took her broken and humiliated friend to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting where honesty and humility are the only requirements needed to find support. Wendy realized at that meeting that she was helpless. "Powerless" became a new word in her vocabulary. She learned God was her "higher power" and her only hope was to let go of everything and cling to her new friends for support. Mostly, she learned to lean on God for her healing. By this, she is overcoming her addiction and living a transformed life. She has something powerful to give back and through her broken tears she understands she is a message of hope for others.³

Don't you see it? "*Christ is risen!*" is the proclamation that death and brokenness are not the final words said about our lives. Wendy came to recognize the truth of the resurrection came only when Genevieve gave her an incarnational presence so real she came to know God loved her through this human messenger.

In Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," he tells about the death of five nuns in a shipwreck at the mouth of the Thames in the winter of 1875.⁴ In the last few lines of this moving poem, he turns the word "easter" from a noun to a verb and writes,

"Let him Easter in us,

³ Rev. Larry Bethune, "Morning in the Garden of Good and Evil," University Baptist Church, Austin Texas, 4/12/98

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," *Poems and Prose*, London: Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, 1953, 24

be a dayspring to the dimness of us.”

Maybe that’s the key to unlocking the mystery of Christ’s resurrection! The risen Lord wants to “Easter” in us this morning so the world can be transformed by this earliest confession.

The poet is right. The key to living Easter faith is to turn Easter from a noun to a verb. Easter is not “a person, place or thing.” Easter is not something “out there,” it’s right here in our thoughts and in our deeds. Easter breaks open every time we live a renewed life. When we can take Easter as an event “out there” and turn it into our response to life, we are living Easter.

When we rise in the morning after sleeping death-like through the night ... We rise to bind the wounds of the broken-hearted. We rise to raise our families in the love and hope of God. We rise to labor another day in Christ’s service. We rise to bear one another’s burdens. The darkness of night gives way to the breaking light of dawn signaling yet another day of resurrection.

*Easter in us, O Lord, for your sake alone we pray,
Easter in us this day.
Amen.*