

Easter Sunday
April 8, 2007

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Isaiah 65:17-25, 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, Luke 24:1-11

It is very easy to picture in my mind's eye the women who went to the tomb on that first Easter morning. I can almost see them, bundled up a little against the cold of early dawn. Moving quietly, but purposefully. Their eyes red from days of weeping. Glancing over their shoulders, a little afraid of who might be following them. There wasn't much to say; only this one last task, one last thing to do for One they loved so much. And so they went, full of sorrow, full of despair.

And then there is the unexpected reversal. They expected to find a lifeless body in a dark tomb. Instead they encounter two messengers who ask them, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" Well, the short answer is they weren't looking for the living, they were looking for Jesus' lifeless body. They were expecting to confirm again the reason for the end of their dreams and the loss of their hope.

But that was not what God had in mind. God raised Jesus from the dead. He wasn't in the tomb. Jesus was alive. And that changed everything. Friday night we talked about how Good Friday is about forgiveness. But forgiveness didn't require the resurrection. Good Friday doesn't require an Easter. Easter is something else altogether, as if the forgiveness we have through Christ wasn't enough. Easter is about hope. The resurrection after the crucifixion shows us God's promise that sorrow will give way to joy. There will be comfort for the pain, healing for the woundedness, peace after strife, and life after death.

In the Northern Hemisphere, Easter comes in the spring. With the onset of spring, life is returning to the earth after the winter. I am always a little distressed when Easter is reduced to a simplistic celebration of spring. When Easter is so much more than flowers blooming again. A closer example would be the tree in Oklahoma City they call the Survivor Tree.

Back in 1991, a troubled young man parked a truck filled with explosives next to the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The explosion of that truck destroyed the building and killed 168 people and wounded 850 people in the process. Just a few yards from where the truck was parked there was an 80-year-old American elm tree. After the explosion that tree was buried in the rubble of the collapsed building. It was stripped of many of its branches. No one expected it to survive. Until it began to bud. Sprouts pressed through damaged bark; green leaves pushed away gray soot. Life resurrected from an acre of death.

That's closer to what Easter is. Easter Resurrection is when we see that the power of God's love is stronger than the forces of evil, death and destruction. No matter what, eventually, Love and Life win.

The other part of this story that I see so vividly in my mind's eye is the women as they ran back to tell the others. My guess is that they dropped their vessels of ointment. And they ran back, veils streaming out behind them as they ran as fast as they could. Once

they reach the others, they tell their story in gasps, still breathless from their run. And the texts tell us that the others “thought it an idle tale.” I can almost hear their protests, “You have to believe us. The tomb was empty. The angels told us Jesus is alive.”

We shouldn't be too hard on the disciples. We probably would have had the same response. The disciples were deeply sorrowful too, and probably afraid, full of despair. When a person is overwhelmed by grief or hopelessness, the possibility that there might be some kind of comfort, or hope, or life seems hard to believe. It might well seem that the sorrow or despair will never end.

Take a look around. There are so many situations that seem hopeless: there is the seemingly intractable violence everywhere. There is crime, addiction, poverty, greed, oppression, exploitation. There is the loss of loved ones from disease or tragic accident.

Any suggestion of life might seem to be an idle tale for us too. We look for changed hearts, changed lives, changed relationships. In our cynicism, we say, ‘Yeah right, I'll believe it when I see it.’

That's okay. Peter had to go see the empty tomb for himself. The two travelers on the road to Emmaus got to see the Risen One for themselves. I think a person has to experience a few resurrections in their own life to truly understand. Faith in the resurrection comes from resurrection experiences; those times in our own lives when we see how God brought about new life for us, for those close to us.

And, like the two on the road to Emmaus, we don't realize we are having a resurrection experience until it is over. Only then can we look back and see God's hand in the midst of the events of our lives, working to bring life out of death. It is those experiences that deepen our faith and sustain us in all the other events of sorrow or despair that come into our lives.

One last little footnote about these earliest witnesses to the resurrection; they went and told the others. That was how the news spread. That was how people heard about what God had done. At some point, it almost seems as if the women couldn't help but tell what they had seen and heard. And their witness was a gift to all of humankind.

We have the same opportunity, to witness to the ways in which God has resurrected something in our life. Few of us come from traditions with a lot of emphasis on giving one's personal testimony. But that doesn't mean that we don't have such experiences. It only means we don't often get a chance to practice. But our stories are gifts, gifts to those who haven't been open to experiencing God at work in their lives. Maybe the time will come when we are as eager to tell what God has done as the women were.

Because, to be sure, God is still at it. God is still bringing life out of death, joy out of sorrow, hope out of despair. Alleluia. Amen.