

EASTER SUNDAY
THE WILDERNESS ENDS WITH RESURRECTION!

(04/21/19)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 28:1-20

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.'"

(Mt. 28:5-7)

This past Thursday evening, we met in this sanctuary just as the disciples met with Jesus in the Upper Room the evening before he was crucified. We sang several of the hymns that we commonly sing during Holy Week and listened to an anthem that was written by Darlene and Michael. We shared the Sacrament of Holy Communion with our Lord and with each other, just as the disciples did at what we now call the Last Supper.

Following the communion service, we observed the ancient office of Tenebrae. Six readers, who were seated around a table, walked us through the scripture passages that describe the events of Holy Week. At the conclusion of each passage, the reader extinguished a candle. Finally, the Christ candle was extinguished, symbolizing Jesus' death on the cross. During the Prayer of Expectation, the Christ candle was relit, symbolizing the disciples' hope of the resurrection.

Many parishioners describe this service as the most emotionally moving service of the liturgical year. When, between each reading, Michael softly plays a verse of "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" we realize that although we were not there at the original event, in another sense we *are* there. We, like the disciples, betray and desert our Lord and our deepest values many times in our daily life.

The events of Holy Week: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, his time alone in the Garden, Judas' betrayal, the trials, Peter's denials, the scourging, the crown of thorns, the crucifixion, and the burial are central to our faith. Without them there is no Easter. We can't have a Promised Land without a wilderness experience. We can't jump from Palm Sunday to Easter without experiencing Holy Thursday and Good Friday.

Easter is just as special as Christmas, yet Christmas is a bigger holiday than Easter. Many people who are not Christian celebrate Christmas. They decorate their house, exchange gifts with loved ones, and enjoy listening to Christmas carols. Most

people celebrate Christmas without going to church. They feel no need to gather in worship during Advent, on Christmas Eve, or on Christmas Day. We apparently can have Christmas without church, but we can't have Easter without church. This is why I am happy to see so many of you here this morning!

If we isolate occasional days out of the liturgical year and celebrate them, we risk losing sight of their deeper meaning, their spiritual significance for Jesus in his life and also for us. Easter is a part of the story of God's loving presence in the world. It is, to be sure, the climax, but it only makes sense when we know "the rest of the story."

The people of Jesus' day longed for a savior. However, they weren't exactly sure what this savior would look like. Some visualized him as a warrior king who would free Israel from the oppressive yoke of Roman rule. Each person had his/her own expectations regarding the one whose coming was foretold by the prophets.

What they got was not what they expected. What they got was a baby! God sent them a vulnerable little baby that few people saw and even fewer recognized as the Christ. Three wise men followed the star that came to rest above the stable. A couple of shepherds left their flocks and went to see what the angels had made known to them. When they arrived, they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

Not everyone was happy about this birth. Herod was afraid that this new king would usurp his power. Herod did not realize that Jesus did not want what Herod had. The kingdom that Jesus ruled was not of this earth. He did not want to rule his nation; he wanted to rule over his people's hearts.

To escape Herod's wrath, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus became refugees in Egypt. If Jesus had been killed in the slaughter of the innocents, this story would have come to an abrupt end. But it did not come to an end. It lives on in us and in our world today!

Other than the account of Jesus in the Temple when he was twelve years old, a brief glimpse of a young man with exceptional insight into the scriptures, the next time we encounter Jesus is at the time of his baptism. We know he had brothers and sisters because they are named in scripture. We know he worked as a carpenter because he is referred to as "Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee." This ordinary life became extraordinary through his baptism and through the wilderness experience that followed.

At the time of his baptism, the heavens opened up to Jesus and he realized who he was. He was God's beloved Son. He was entrusted with a ministry that differed from that of everyone who had preceded him. As the incarnation of God's Spirit, he was called to show people what God looks like in human form. He was to carry out God's healing work in the world. He was to tell people about the kingdom of God and help them to experience it in this life. He was to serve as a mediator between us and God, that we might deepen our relationship with God through him.

Immediately following his baptism, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. There his spirit was tempered like steel in the hot desert sun. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and prayed. During this time, Satan tried to lure him into a different life than the one to which God was calling him--an easier life, a life filled with pleasure and temporal power. But Jesus would not be dissuaded. He knew who he was and who he was called to be. To become anyone else would be a sin against the Holy Spirit.

When he emerged from the wilderness, Jesus embarked upon his ministry. He gathered a small group of disciples. They were a motley crew: fishermen, laborers, even a tax collector. They were definitely not the sharpest bowling balls in the drawer! Time and time again during their travels with Jesus they demonstrated their inability to grasp the deeper meaning of his teaching. Yet it is to these that he entrusted his church. I guess this means that there is hope even for us.

Jesus taught people about the kingdom of God. Though he was the Son of God, he did not present himself as someone to be worshipped. He pointed past himself to the Kingdom of God which is already present both within and among us. Though he was primarily a teacher, he was moved by compassion for those who were suffering. He stopped what he was doing to attend to them.

Jesus reached out to people. He brought a healing presence and he awakened a healing power within them. He opened the ears of the deaf and restored sight to the blind. He healed a man with a crippled hand and empowered the lame to walk. He cast out the demons that cripple people psychologically just as surely as a twisted body can cripple them physically. He healed people simply by touching them. Because of their faith, lepers were cleansed from their disease. A woman was healed when she touched the hem of his garment.

Where did he get this great power? Jesus knew that his healings were from God. The healing power of God, the healing power that is present in every living being, was incarnated, was channeled in a special way through Jesus. By awakening the healing energies that were already present within the afflicted person, Jesus showed us that through faith we can strengthen the healing powers that are already present within us and also within those for whom we pray.

Jesus not only brought people back from the dead, he gave life to those who were spiritually dead though still physically alive. He gave people hope for the future, a faith that could sustain them in the darkest times, and courage for the wilderness experiences that they would encounter. He called people back to the essentials of their faith. He told them to love the Lord our God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength. He told them to love their neighbor as themselves. Then he greatly expanded the concept of neighbor so that it included *all* of God's children.

Not everyone was thrilled with Jesus' teaching. He threatened the authority of the religious leaders by removing them from the position of gatekeepers between people and God. His popularity threatened the secular rulers, who feared he might lead an insurrection. They arrested him, tried him, and sentenced him to death.

In our Maundy Thursday service, we sang the hymn: "Ah, Holy Jesus, How Has Thou Offended?" The hymn asks us to name the crime for which Jesus was tried and executed.

Jesus' only crime was what he taught. He taught us to love one another. He told us to take care of each other. By the way he related to people, he showed us that since *every single person* is precious to God, *every single person* should be precious to us, even those who do not look like us or believe exactly what we believe. When, on the cross, he forgave those who crucified him, he challenged us to forgive the petty wrongs, the petty wounds and insults to which we so shamelessly cling.

What was his crime, his offense? He told us to share what we have with each other. He called us to form a church, a new community that would be his mystical body in the world. He called us to search for the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl of great price, the kingdom of God that lies within. He told us that once we find this treasure within ourselves, we will be able to use it to enrich an impoverished world.

This was the crime for which he was crucified. He believed in his message so strongly that he endured a brutal scourging. His enemies taunted him, spit on him and smashed a crown of thorns on his head. They nailed him to a cross where he died a painful, agonizing death. The authorities that were responsible for his death thought that the story was over. They thought that this humble man's impact on the world would swiftly fade away. In a short period of time he would be nothing but a distant memory.

But this was not the end of the story. The forces of evil did not have the last word. They will never have the last word. God will have the last word through the eternal power of the resurrection!

The good news that we celebrate this morning is that God, who surprised the world with the birth of a little baby, surprised the world again with an empty tomb. The good news that we celebrate is that death did not have the last word! The One who died on the cross still lives! He lives in our world! He also lives within us!

Jesus' disciples, who were undergoing a wilderness experience following the death of their Lord, suddenly began to experience him in different settings, in different ways. Like the disciples, if we listen carefully, we will hear his still small voice. If we look deeply within, we will find him. We will experience his healing presence.

The angel tells Mary, "Do not seek the living among the dead." Jesus is alive in the world, within the church, and also within us. The healing power that he manifested while he walked with his disciples has been set loose in the world. The teachings that he shared so many years ago are just as true for us today. He can help us find that which we seek, that for which we hope, that for which we long: the kingdom of heaven within.

Jesus is with us here this morning. He speaks to us as he spoke to those of old. He tells us to love one another. He tells us to welcome *everyone*. He scolds us for being so petty and so judgmental. He empowers us to overcome the fears that hold us back from life. He tells us to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven. Then he tells us to forgive again. He reminds us that we are called to be servants, that we are called to feed those who are hungry not only with physical bread, but with the bread of life. He helps us to break free of the chains that keep us from experiencing the fullness of life that God intends for all God's creatures. He invites us to become disciples of the Way, to be to our time and place what his disciples were to theirs.

If we commit ourselves to this great quest, if we respond to our Lord's call and his challenge, we will discover that, no matter how dark and discouraging the wilderness experiences of life may appear, God empowers us to move through them to new life, just as he did with Jesus, just as he did with Mary and the disciples.

This is the meaning of the resurrection that we celebrate this morning. This is what we are called to incarnate in our own lives and to share with a world that desperately needs it.

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