

The First Community Church of Southborough
137 Southville Road
Southborough, Massachusetts 01772-1937

The Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. – Pastor

www.firstcommunitychurch.com

Church: (508) 485-2607

Pastor: (508) 543-7160

Text: (508) 873-0534

Email: paulsandersonphd@gmail.com

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The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form on our "Pod Cast" site as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lesson: John 20:1-22

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb." (John 20:1)

He was a young man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family.

He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

While he was still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial.

He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth, and that was his robe. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race and the leader of the column of progress.

All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of people upon this earth as has that one solitary life.

It's a true story! If we think about it, we will realize that it is not only an improbable story; it is against all odds. A man named Jesus, who was rumored to have been conceived out of wedlock by a teenage peasant girl named Mary, was born into a relatively insignificant period of history in a small, obscure, occupied nation. We know very little about his life except that he was a carpenter until age thirty, when his cousin John baptized him. We know he traveled with a small group of followers for at least one and at most three years, which is not very long. We know that he fed the hungry, healed the sick, cast out demons, and proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God. We

know he was perceived as a threat by the religious hierarchy of his people and by the Roman authorities that crucified him. We know he was buried in a tomb donated by Joseph of Arimathea, one of his followers.

That is about all we know. From that point on, all we have is the report of a former prostitute that when she went to the cemetery in the early hours of the first day of the week, the stone was rolled away from the opening to the tomb and the tomb was empty. Then we have the testimony of Jesus' followers that over the next 39 days they saw or experienced him in different forms.

One solitary life. A former prostitute. A small unorganized band of disciples. Yet this one life changed the course of human history. It changed the lives of billions of people--for the better. This one person has been the single most powerful force in the evolution of life on this planet, and he will remain a living force calling people forth into a spiritual life, a life of love, for as long as life exists. That this should happen is not only improbable, not only against all odds; it's as close to impossible as you can get. But it happened! It is a true story!

Many of the great figures of history had a powerful impact on a particular region for a limited length of time. Alexander the Great's kingdom extended from Macedonia to India. Genghis Khan ruled a large area in central Asia, all the way to Tibet. The Roman Empire stretched as far as Great Britain. Napoleon's conquests covered Europe and halfway through Russia. Adolf Hitler ruled for a relatively short time and in a fairly localized area. None of these military giants has had the impact on history of this one solitary life.

Why is this so? It is because the great military leaders throughout history worked from a base of power. The more powerful they were, the more territory they could rule. Jesus didn't work from a base of power; he worked from a base of love. He came not to conquer but to serve. He fed the hungry. He healed those who were sick from various physical and mental diseases. He washed his disciples' feet. He told people about God. Jesus didn't want to rule over a territory; he wanted to rule over people's hearts. In this sense, he was a mystic revolutionary. Through his resurrection, through our experience of his presence with and within us today, he still does.

Jesus was a rabbi, a great teacher, but his teachings were hardly new. He told us we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He told us that we should love one another. He told us that God loves us like a father or a mother loves his/her child. These are valuable teachings, but they are hardly original or revolutionary.

Why, then, has Jesus' teaching had the tremendous impact it has had on history? It is because Jesus not only taught the great lessons of life; he also lived what he taught. He lived these teachings so fully that people began to realize that he was an incarnation of God. They realized that he was the Word of God become flesh. He showed us what God looks like in human form, and he showed us what we would look like if we lived our lives as he did. He taught us not only how to live but also *how to be*.

Jesus of Nazareth was a person, a human being who lived two thousand years ago. He had feelings just as we do. He experienced physical and emotional pain just as we do. He left us his teaching and his example, but he left us much more than this. He also left us himself. He lives on in us. Through his resurrection, through our experience of his presence with and within us today, he lives!

There are many myths about the archetypal, the universal theme of death and rebirth. In Egyptian mythology Osiris was betrayed and killed by his brother, Set. Isis, Osiris' sister, put his dismembered body back together. The ancient Egyptians worshipped Osiris as the god of the wheat, the god of the dead, the god of new life. This myth transports us; it puts us in touch with a fundamental truth about life and about our

lives. It reminds us of the cycles of life, of death and rebirth, of the times when our lives need to break apart and then come together again in a new way. But Osiris didn't make the impact on history that Jesus did, nor does he touch us the way Jesus touches us.

Jonah, who ran away from God's call, was thrown into the depths of the sea where he was swallowed by a great fish. He lived in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, the same amount of time that transpired between Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection. Then Jonah was thrown up onto the land; he was given a second chance. The legend, the archetypal motif of Jonah and the fish is a story of death and rebirth. The story transports us; it puts us in touch with a fundamental truth about life and about our lives. It reminds us to be true to our calling no matter what the cost. It reminds us that the night sea journey, the descent into the darkness, into the depths, is often in the service of new life. But Jonah didn't make the impact on history that Jesus did, not does he touch us the way Jesus touches us.

The phoenix was a legendary bird that built its nest in the Egyptian city of Heliopolis, the temple of the sun. Every year the phoenix would immolate itself and a new phoenix would rise from the ashes. This legend, this story transports us; it puts us in touch with a fundamental truth about life and about our lives. It reminds us of the eternal cycles of coming into being and passing away. It tells us that we can rise from the darkness of defeat and despair even if the darkness of defeat and despair is of our own doing. It tells us that new life can spring from the ashes of the old. But the phoenix didn't make an impact on history, nor does this legendary bird touch us the way Jesus touches us.

Why is this the case? It is because the story of Jesus is a true story. It actually happened. The fundamental truths about life that found expression in these ancient myths became incarnate in the realm of space and time, and it did so in the life of this man. This is why we celebrate Easter Sunday. We celebrate the resurrection that happened and the resurrections that continue to happen in us and in our world. It is because of the resurrection, the empty tomb, that this single life changed human history.

Though he was an historical figure, Jesus is not confined to a period in history, just as he was not confined to the tomb in which his broken body was laid. Jesus touches us today because just as the stone was removed from the tomb, symbolizing his transformation and emergence into new life, so, also, he is present to us and to our world--seeking to roll away the stones that imprison us in the tombs of death.

What are the stones that imprison us? What are the powers of darkness that cut us off from life? What are the forces, outside us and inside us, that hold us back from becoming the people God wants us to be? The myths of Osiris, Jonah, and the phoenix are psychologically and spiritually true, but they are not true in the way that the story of Jesus is true. They cannot roll away the stones from the tombs in which we are trapped. Just as the stone was somehow rolled away on that first Easter morning, so also Jesus can remove the stones from the tombs of our lives as individuals and as a world.

The stones that seal off our tomb may have been set in place by events in our past. The traumatic experiences of our childhood, if they are not faced and healed, can cut us off from life. In those moments when we are honest with ourselves, we also have to admit that we are not helpless victims of our past, of what C. G. Jung called "the accidents of our upbringing," that the choices we have made and the choices we continue to make create the world in which we live. We may be entombed by an addiction that is destroying us and hurting those whom we love. We may be paralyzed by fear or anxiety, lacking the courage to undertake the very change that would lead us forth into new life.

Some of the stones that entomb us are what the Bible calls false gods, idols around which we have consciously or unconsciously built our lives. When we build our lives around the pursuit of material possessions, those material possessions can become the stones that entomb us. When we build our lives around a need for security and control, the impenetrable walls that we have built to protect us can become the stones that entomb us. When we believe that we are the center of life, when we live for ourselves alone, our self-centered narcissism can become a stone that entombs us, that consigns us to a very small world. Whatever keeps us from loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, whatever keeps us from loving our brothers and sisters, whatever keeps us from a healthy self-love--these are the stones that entomb us.

There are also stones that entomb our nation and nations around the world. In the past century over one hundred million people died as a direct result of war. There must be a particular stone that closes off our hearts, not only as individuals but also as a world. How can we not be horrified at the evil that we human beings have acted out, have incarnated? In our greed, our need for power, we have literally entombed others and figuratively entombed ourselves. In our prejudices against people of a different ethnic background, a different race, a different gender, a different religion, a different sexual orientation or gender identity, we have literally entombed others and figuratively entombed ourselves. The stone that weighs down our hearts is the stone of all we do that is contrary to the teachings and the example of Jesus.

The message of the resurrection is that through the presence of the risen Christ our lives can be transformed! The power of God can roll away the stone! Although, as we travel through the labyrinthian maze of this earthly life, we will have our Gethsemanes, our moments of feeling alone, and although we will have our Calvarys, our times of physical and emotional pain, and although we will have our moments of emptiness and isolation in the tomb, the times when we feel imprisoned by inner or outer forces, we have the promise of the resurrection, the promise that the angel of God will roll away the stone and lead us forth to new life!

God has all kinds of ways to open closed tombs! Sometimes God rolls away the stone through love. Sometimes the stone is removed when someone reaches out to us, when someone cares. Sometimes we remove the stone ourselves as we open our heart and our hands to others. God has an answer to immovable stones. God's answer is the risen Christ, he who stood by the tomb of his good friend, Lazarus, and told the men to "take away the stone," he who said to Lazarus, "Lazarus, come out!" God's answer to immovable stones is the risen Christ, he who told his disciples, "I am with you always, even to the end of time."

If Easter is about the joyous experience of removing the stone, then it not only happened to Jesus; it also happens to us. It happens in small ways and in large. It happens whenever God's redeeming love rolls back the stone and leads us forth into new life. It happens when emotional wounds are healed, when spiritual distance is replaced by an experience of presence. It happens whenever the darkness of despair is driven back by the shining light of hope. It happens when we have the courage to change. It happens when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, when we open ourselves to the soothing balm of healing. It happens whenever we choose life over death, when we choose to walk in the light rather than the paths of darkness. The message of Easter is that we do not have to remove the stones that imprison us all by ourselves. Jesus is with us and within us to help remove the stones. As the German mystic Angelus Silesius has said,

*The name of Jesus is as ointment poured forth.
It nourishes, and illumines,
and stills the anguish of the soul."*

That one solitary life continues to make such a tremendous impact on history because it is not just history; it is eternally present. In fact, this may be the true meaning of eternity. Eternity does not mean a very long, a very, very long period of linear time. We experience the realm of eternity when we experience the transcendent dimension of life and of ourselves, that dimension that is beyond space and time, but which manifests in the realm of space and time. So, when we say that Jesus is risen, we are not simply talking about the empty tomb; we are witnessing to an eternal presence. We are opening ourselves to the experience that our risen Lord is within each and every one of us, guiding us through the dark days of our lives, leading us forth into new life. Once again, as Angelus Silesius has said,

Paradise is at your own center.

*Unless you find it there,
there's no way to enter.*

What is true of us as individuals is also true of us as a church. Our risen Lord is with us as a church as we struggle to be true to our mission in the world. He is with us as we celebrate his resurrection and dedicate our lives to the joyous task of bringing his light and life to a darkened and broken world.

Jesus the Christ was not only an historical person who lived a long time ago; he lives within us. As Angelus Silesius said so long ago:

*Christ is forever rising from the grave;
the Spirit cannot be held captive in a cave.*

This Easter, though, sadly, we are not gathered together by the side of the lake in Hopkinton, though we are not gathered together in our beautiful sanctuary, I invite you to enter into the spirit of a very simple prayer. Ask God to remove the stones from your tomb. Ask God to open your heart to the healing power of the risen Christ. Then, through the experience of his presence, like Mary and the disciples so many years ago, you will know the true meaning of Easter.

May the peace that comes through death and resurrection, the peace that comes through the inner journey Good Friday and Easter be with us in the days to come. And as we journey forth in this Easter season, let us pray that the light within us and the light that we can bring to a darkened world will never go out.