

**GOD HAS THE LAST WORD!
EASTER SUNDAY**

(04/09/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:1-12

“The men said to them [the women], ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen.’” (Luke 24:5)

I don't know if you have noticed that even though the Boston Red Sox are not off to a great start this season, having recently been broomed by the Pittsburgh Pirates and are currently tied for last place in the American League East, they have been involved in a couple of exciting come-from-behind victories in high scoring games. In addition to nurturing what I, a Yankee fan, consider false hope, these games brought back memories of a spectacular come-back victory by our New England Patriots in the Super Bowl six years ago.

You may recall that the week before Easter in 2017, I posted what I thought was an exceptionally clever sign on our signboard in front of the church. The sign read, “Super Bowl LI: The Second Greatest Comeback!” Get it?? The *second* greatest comeback! I hope I don't have to explain what the *greatest* comeback of all time was, especially to those of you who are here in church on Easter Sunday. Maybe in addition to being a Christian you have to be a New England Patriots fan to appreciate my subtle humor!

Super Bowl LI in 2017 was the greatest Super Bowl game of all time! (At least that's how we see it here in New England; people in Atlanta—not so much.) It seemed like the Atlanta Falcons were going to win because they dominated most of the game. Midway through the third quarter, the Falcons were ahead 28-3. However, the Patriots miraculously tied it up and pulled it out in overtime, beating the Falcons 34-28! Our Patriots snatched victory from the jaws of defeat! They had the last word! And, at least in sports, and perhaps in other parts of life as well, the last word is the one that counts!

It goes without saying that here in New England, Super Bowl LI makes us think of Easter—or vice versa. Throughout the last week of Jesus' life on earth it looked like the forces of evil were going to win, were going to take the day. But they didn't! What appeared to be a certain defeat turned into an amazing triumph! The message of Easter is that God always has the last word!

This past Thursday evening we met in this sanctuary just as the disciples met with Jesus in the Upper Room the day before he was crucified. We sang the beautiful hymns that we commonly sing during Holy Week, and we listened to the anthem *Alone in the*

Garden, that was written by our own Michael Larson and Darlene Sanderson and was sung by our choir. We gathered around the table with our Lord and with each other just as the disciples did at what we now call the Last Supper.

Following our sharing the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we observed the ancient Office of Tenebrae. Six readers shared the scripture passages that describe the events of Holy Week, ending with Jesus' burial. At the conclusion of each reading, the reader extinguished a candle. Finally, the Christ candle was extinguished, symbolizing Jesus' death on the cross, and the sanctuary was in darkness. During the Prayer of Expectation, the Christ candle was relit, symbolizing the disciples' hope of the resurrection and new life.

This service is the most emotionally moving service of the liturgical year, or at least it is for me. During this service we remember how Jesus was betrayed and deserted, how he was scourged and crucified. When between each reading Michael softly plays a verse of "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" we realize that we, like the disciples, betray our Lord many times in our daily life. When, for just a brief moment, we realize that the way we live our life can actually hurt Jesus, we are humbled.

The events of Holy Week: Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, his time alone in the garden, Judas's betrayal, the trials before Herod and Pilate, Peter's denials, the scourging, the crown of thorns, his crucifixion and burial are central to our faith. Without them there would be no Easter. We can't have a resurrection without a crucifixion. Easter only makes sense when we know "the rest of the story."

As we noted last week, on Palm Sunday, the people of Jesus' day longed for a messiah, a warrior king in the tradition of King David who would free his people from the oppressive yoke of Roman rule. However, God surprised them! What they got was not a warrior king but a little baby, a baby that few people saw and even fewer recognized as the Christ. Three wise men from a foreign country bowed down before the child and offered him gifts. A few humble shepherds heard the heavenly music and left their flocks to see what the angels had made known to them. When they arrived, they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in a humble manger.

Not everyone was happy about this birth. Herod was afraid of this new king. Herod did not realize that Jesus did not want what he had. The kingdom that Jesus ruled was not of this earth. He had no aspirations of ruling over the nation; he simply wanted to rule over our hearts. And he still does.

To escape Herod's wrath, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt. They became refugees—yes, they became refugees in a foreign land! If Jesus had been killed in the slaughter of the innocents, Herod would have had the last word. God would have been silenced. But God always has the last word!

Other than the brief account of his dialogue with the elders in the temple when he was twelve years old, the next time we encounter Jesus is at the time of his baptism. We know he had brothers and sisters because his brothers are named in the Bible. His sisters are not named because, well, they were just girls. We know that Jesus worked as a carpenter, probably with his father, because he is referred to as “Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee.”

At the time of his baptism, when he was about thirty years old, the heavens opened up to Jesus and he realized who he was. He was called to a ministry that differed from that of everyone who had preceded him. As the Son of God, as an incarnation of God's creative Spirit, he showed people what God looked like in human form. He was called to carry out God's healing work in the world, to teach people about the Kingdom of God and help them experience it in this life.

Immediately following his baptism, the Holy 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 pull him off center, to lure him into a life filled with pleasure and temporal power. But Jesus 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 not the sharpest bowling balls in the drawer! Time and time again they demonstrated their limited understanding of the deeper meaning of his teaching. Yet it was to these that he entrusted his church. I know—that sounds crazy, almost as crazy as his entrusting his church to us!

Even though he was primarily a teacher, Jesus felt a deep compassion for those who were suffering. He couldn't not help. He opened the ears of the deaf and restored sight to the blind. He healed those who were crippled and empowered the lame to walk. A woman was healed when she touched the hem of his garment.

Jesus had compassion for those who were suffering from emotional as well as physical infirmities. He cast out the demons that possessed people's minds as well as

their bodies. He had compassion for those who were suffering spiritually because of their distorted belief systems. He not only brought people back from the dead; he gave life to those who were spiritually dead though still physically alive. He can also do this for us!

Just as not everyone was thrilled with Jesus' birth; not everyone was thrilled with his teachings. The religious authorities took offense at being removed from the power position, the position of gatekeeper between people and God. His popularity unsettled the secular rulers, who feared he might instigate and lead an insurrection. They arrested him, tried him, convicted him of being both an insurrectionist and a heretic, and sentenced him to death. They thought that this would remove the thorn from their sides. They thought they had the last word. But God always has the last word!

During our Maundy Thursday service, we commonly sing the hymn: "Ah, Holy Jesus, How Has Thou Offended?" This hymn asks us to name the crime for which Jesus was crucified. 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, the petty 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 when we find this treasure, we will be able to incarnate it in our lives and in the world. And this incarnation, our incarnation, is what the world desperately needs.

This was his crime! It was for this teaching that he endured a brutal scourging. His enemies taunted him, spit on him and smashed a crown of thorns down on his head. They nailed him to a cross where he died a painful, agonizing death. The religious and secular 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, the carpenter from Nazareth, the itinerant preacher, 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 has the last word! In fact, God is still speaking! He is speaking both to us and through us!

The good news that we celebrate this morning is that God, who surprised the world with the birth of a little baby two thousand years ago, surprised the world again a few years later with an empty tomb! The good news that we celebrate this morning is that the one who died on the cross still lives! The authorities did not have the last word. Sin did not have the last word. Death did not have the last word. Jesus still lives! He lives in our world! He lives within us!

The good news of Easter Sunday is that Jesus rose from the dead! After his resurrection, his disciples later experienced him in several different settings, in different ways. He showed them God's power over sin and death, God's constant presence in our lives. However, only his disciples, only his followers experienced the presence of their risen Lord. This is because we can only see our risen Lord through the eyes of faith. If we open our hearts, we will be able to hear that still small voice within. If we look deeply within us and deeply within our world, we will find him. We will know that he lives, and because he lives, we live!

The joyous message of Easter is that Jesus is not in the tomb! As the angel told the women, "Do not seek the living among the dead." Jesus is alive in the world, within the church, and within us! The healing power that he manifested while he walked with his disciples has now been set loose into the world. The teachings that he shared with the world 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 and long: the peace that passes all understanding.

Jesus is here with us this morning—right here in this sanctuary, right here in this little church. He speaks to us as he spoke to those of old. He tells us to love one another. He tells us to welcome *everyone* into our church and into our hearts. 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 also with the bread of life. He helps us break free of the chains that hold us down, that keep us from experiencing the fullness of life that God intends for all God's creatures. He invites us to become a disciple of the Way, to be to our time and place what he and his disciples were to theirs.

I know that things don't always look sunny and bright. We are going through dark and difficult times in the world, in our nation, and we may be going through dark and difficult times in our own life. At times it may seem that the forces that seek to pull us apart, that seek to turn us against each other, that seek to render the fabric of deep

community, that seek to silence the voice of reason and compassion, that seek to extinguish that little flame, that little light that helps us find our way through the darkness, that these dark forces will have the last word. But they won't! God will always have the last word—and that word is love!

If we accept Jesus' invitation to be his disciples, to become disciples of the Way, if we respond to his call and also his challenge, we will discover and incarnate the true meaning of the resurrection. Then, like Jesus, we will discover that, no matter how dark and discouraging our life may appear at times, we should not lose hope; we should not lose heart. If we remember what the women at the tomb realized that morning long ago, we will know that God will always have the last word!

What the Boston Red Sox did yesterday afternoon was at least promising. What the New England Patriots did during Super Bowl LI in 2017, was truly impressive. But neither holds a candle to what Jesus did—and what Jesus told us we can do! We can triumph over sin and death, the death of the soul that so many people experience long before the death of the body. When we realize that God will always have the last word in our lives and in the world, then, like Jesus, we will experience the message, the truth of Easter both now and forevermore!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.