

First Presbyterian Church
Greenfield, Indiana
Pastor John J. Paulson

April 24, 2011

Easter Sunday

Alive With Jesus!

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24	This is the day the Lord has made!
Jeremiah 31:1-6	Dancing with the joyful!
Matthew 28:1-10	Jesus lives!
Colossians 3:1-4	Be with Christ in glory!

Informally before the sermon: Isn't this a wonderful day? We are celebrating the most wonderful day of the year; in fact, the most wonderful day in all history. Don't you wish you had been there?

**Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer!
Amen**

Dawn on Sunday morning; possibly a Sunday morning just like this. We are walking along with Jesus' good friends Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary on the way to a garden cemetery to check out the tomb of their friend. Their friend who had been executed last Friday night. As they walk along and we listen in to their conversation, we learn of the events of the previous Friday when their friend had been tried, convicted, sentenced to death and crucified. He had died hanging on a cross! A cross he didn't deserve!

On Friday day they had followed a man named Joseph as he carried the body of their friend, their teacher, from the hill to this garden for his burial. They had stayed a distance away and watched silently as Joseph carefully laid Jesus' body down on the carpet of soft, green grass. They began quietly sobbing as he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and gently carried it into a tomb in the garden wall; a tomb they knew he had painstakingly carved out for himself. They shuddered as he rolled a big rock in front of the opening and sealed it for all time.

This morning they have come to pay their respects. As they enter the garden through an opening in a hedge, they expect to see the rock securely in front of the opening to the tomb. They expect to have a time of private mourning for this man who had made such a difference in their lives. They expect to cry in peace as they sit in the garden in front of the sealed tomb. That's all they expect.

But it is not all they get! Sometimes in our lives we get unexpected pleasures, and this is one of those times for the two women.

As they enter the garden, the ground shakes violently and they see, they both see what can only be an angel of the Lord dressed in dazzling white clothes come down from heaven. They know the stories from the scriptures about angels; they know an angel when they see one! The angel lands on the grass and approaches the tomb, and quickly rolls back the stone. They remember how hard it had been for Joseph to roll it the other way; the angel moves it with no effort at all. Then to their further amazement, the angel jumps up or maybe flies up to the top of the rock; they disagree on how the angel got to the top, but that is not important. The scriptures tell us that angels can walk or jump or fly whenever they want to.

When they had left the garden on Friday evening, everything was peaceful and quiet; just the way a burial place should be. They were the last two to leave; there was no one left in the garden, and certainly there were no guards around the tomb. But this morning, there are several Roman soldiers lying on the ground around the tomb; at the sight of the angel they must have been so afraid that they passed out from fear. They lie there motionless as the women get a bit closer to the angel.

As you can imagine, the two Mary's are shocked and speechless as they approach the tomb to get a better look at what is happening. Then the angel says: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said." The angel motions them with his hand, "come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

They go up to the tomb as the angel tells them to, and find it empty. Jesus' body is gone.

What has happened? Did someone steal his body? Where is he? Why isn't he in there? What is going on? "We need to go tell his disciples", Mary says.

They realize that they have to quickly share this story with his disciples.

Where are they this morning, you may wonder? Well, they are locked up in a room wondering when the Roman soldiers will come for them. As Peter found out, many people could identify them as followers of Jesus; they knew their lives were in

jeopardy. Jesus was dead. They felt all alone. This was the worst weekend of their lives. What could they do? What should they do? They thought Jesus was the one to bring change that would stick; they thought Jesus would be the next king of Israel; they thought that they would be in charge; they thought they were in the king's inner circle; now they were crushed. Their king turned out to be nothing at all. An imposter. A failure. A loser.

The women decided to hurry back to the disciples and tell them what had happened in the garden. About the angel and his statement that Jesus had risen from the dead. They still were not certain if this was good news or if the angel was just a vision of something they hoped would happen. Did they really believe the angel? They were not sure. Would you have been?

Twenty feet up the path out of the garden they are startled when they hear someone say "Greetings!." They look around to see who said it, and can hardly believe their eyes, it is Jesus! Standing their right in front of them, talking to them. Is this a ghost? Is this a vision? It's not. They rush to him and clasp his feet and worship him. These are real feet. Jesus is real; this Jesus is not a ghost. This is true flesh and blood; Jesus is alive! They would be willing to stay there forever.

But, Jesus has a mission for them. Before they hardly have time to react, Jesus says: "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Reluctantly they let go of his feet, stand up, and rush off to tell the disciples; as they are running, the younger Mary says "Mary, do you really think they will believe us? Will they really believe that Jesus is alive?"

The other Mary looks at her and says, "you know Mary, I think they will believe us", and they kept on running, and the rest is history.

History, think about it, History. H I S T O R Y. History. His Story. That's why we are here this morning, because it is His Story. The story of God and God's love for each and every one of us that is revealed page after page, story after story, chapter after chapter and book after book in the Bible. His Story is a wonderful story of unconditional love and forgiveness. It is the story of a loving, caring God who created and cares for everything in creation.

We heard the prophet Jeremiah telling us about part of His Story in the passage that Dennis read a few minutes ago. Jeremiah tells us about God's unending love and grace for his "chosen people," the people of Israel. Jeremiah is telling this story to the people in a time of great trouble. He is telling it to a people who don't feel God's unending love and grace; the Hebrews have been captured and are living in a foreign land with a people who worship different gods and they are being forced to serve foreign leaders; some of them have even begun worshipping the gods of these foreigners and marrying foreigners themselves. The people are feeling crushed and forgotten. You can almost hear their cries: Where is God! Where is God!

The Psalmists captured their feelings:

O God, why have You rejected us forever?

Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?

Remember Your congregation, which You have purchased of old,

Which You have redeemed to be the tribe of Your inheritance;

And this Mount Zion, where You have dwelt.

Turn Your footsteps toward the perpetual ruins;

The enemy has damaged everything within the sanctuary.

Your adversaries have roared in the midst of Your meeting place;

They have set up their own standards for signs.

It seems as if one had lifted up His axe in a forest of trees.

And now all its carved work they smash with hatchet and hammers.

They have burned Your sanctuary to the ground;

They have defiled the dwelling place of Your name.

They said in their heart, "Let us completely subdue them."

They have burned all the meeting places of God in the land.

Another psalmist put it this way:

How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever?

How long will your jealousy burn like fire?

*Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you,
on the kingdoms that do not call on your name;*

for they have devoured Jacob and destroyed his homeland.

Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers;

*may your mercy come quickly to meet us,
for we are in desperate need.
Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and
forgive our sins
for your name's sake.*

God has instructed the prophet Jeremiah to speak to the people at this time. Jeremiah tells them to remember the past. To remember that God has always been there in tough times. To ask them to think about it. Why would God do any different now? He tells them to keep their faith. He knows, and wants them to know and believe that God will step in and save them, as God always has done in the past.

God speaks through Jeremiah and in an effort to give the people hope, says: “**When I restore the people, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they will be my people.**” Not if, but when. God intends to restore Israel to greatness! Jeremiah is the messenger, the spokesman of God.

And, his message is one of promise: "The people who survive the sword will find favor in the desert; I will come to give rest to Israel."

Then Jeremiah reminds the people to remember the past. Remember history; remember His Story. He reminds them that how the Lord appeared to them in the past, saying:

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful. Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit. There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim, 'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.'"¹

Jeremiah reminds them, and us, that God will come and save them and us, just as God has always done. There is hope, he says. There is hope.

In the midst of trouble, there is God. In the midst of exile or injury or pain or financial problems, there is God. In the midst of our lives, God is there, reaching out

¹ Jeremiah 31:1-6 (NIV)

and waiting for us to reach back. God continually offers comfort and hope to us as today as God offered it to the Jewish Nation during the time of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah continues to speak to many of those in the world today through these same words. Remember the past; think about what God has done! God has not forsaken you; God is with you today as God has always been with you. No matter what your circumstances, God is here for you.

For all of us here this morning, and for the millions of other Christians throughout the world, Jeremiah does not have to speak for God. God has spoken for himself. When Jesus emerged from the tomb, the final enemy of ours was defeated. Jesus overcame death to rise again and rejoin his Heavenly Father.

As the writer of John put it, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John continues and tells us the only reason that Jesus came into our world: “... God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”²

That’s the wonderful mystery of this day. Why does God care so much for us that he sent his only Son to die for us? That’s the mystery of Easter. Jesus is alive, and we are alive with Jesus!

We celebrate that first Easter morning when the two Mary’s found the tomb empty. We have the hope that Easter morning brings! And what does it mean to us today? Paul tells us. He says that it gives us the hope and promise of life with Christ for eternity.

And, besides that hope, we also have a new outlook on life. We can take the positive approach towards life. For us, the glass is half full, not half empty. We see the promise that God offers. We see the good side of whatever is going on. We have hope in spite of what is going on! We are Easter people!

And that not only affects the way we see the world, it affects the way we think and act. Paul says that “Since, we have been raised with Christ, we should set our hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. We should set our minds on things above, not on earthly things.”³ AMEN

² John 3: 16 – 17 (NIV)

³ Col. 3:1-2 (My paraphrase)