

Sermon Text – Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**OT Reading: Isaiah 65:17-25, Epistle Reading: I Corinthians 15:19-26,
Additional NT Reading: Acts 10:34-43,
Gospel Reading for Message: Luke 24:1-12
An Empty Tomb**

What does all this mean? We've arrived at what some would consider the most important date in the church liturgical calendar. But why is that so? I mean the church liturgical year does not start or end on Easter Sunday and that's a whole other issue because why wouldn't it? There is significance in the fact these events occurred during the time of Passover, and we therefore remember them at that same time every year. This ties our celebration of Christ's resurrection to the Hebrew celebration of deliverance that Passover recalls.

But what is the meaning of Easter to us today? Like I mentioned already this morning, there are the family gatherings, the "Easter" wardrobes, the heralding of spring with its flowers and new life, there are also the "Easter" baskets with candy and toys for the kids, Easter feasts featuring roast lamb or hams. Is that why Eastertime is so popular? I think maybe it is because these are things that bring joy to our lives – but why pick this time of the year and why is that important to the church? We come to church and sing the songs, like we sang this morning praising a resurrected Christ, we serve a risen savior, but do we even know what that means or is this just something we do at Easter?

This scripture from Luke offers a glimpse into our reason for rejoicing – an empty tomb. Last week we started our walk with Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem toward the hill called "Golgotha" and watched bearing witness as they mocked Jesus beat him and crucified him. On Maundy Thursday we saw Jesus wash the feet of his disciples and with them took the bread and cup offered by Jesus in remembrance of him. On Good Friday we spent time in silent meditation and prayer recalling the moment of Jesus death, mourning with his followers and contemplating all that had occurred. Now, we approach the tomb only to find it empty!

How can we help but ask why, why was all this necessary? Why did God not intervene to ease the suffering and violence of Jesus death? I certainly cannot answer that. What was all of this for and what does it mean for us living in this world so far removed from those events of two thousand years ago? Maybe that can be answered by considering what difference an empty tomb makes to our faith.

Maybe we can begin our search for meaning by taking a look at the scripture from Isaiah that our elder read this morning. This scripture comes from what scholars call third Isaiah and is presumably written around the time the exiles were returning from Babylon. Isaiah chapters 56 through 66 express God's sovereignty and God's compassion. What we read from Isaiah 65 is a vision suitable for Easter, for Passover, and for springtime – it is a passing away of old things and the creation of something new. These words call on the people to rejoice and they bring words of hope. They shall not labor in vain, they shall be blessed by the Lord. There will be an end to violence on God's holy mountain. These words also give us a forward-looking vision of what Christ's return will be like, a vision of peace and tranquility in all of creation. A vision of longevity and prosperity for God's people. Isaiah tells of God's new creation and that is important to us and maybe that gives us a glimpse of meaning to the resurrection and empty tomb. What has been, will be no more.

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians explains things a little differently but with the same conclusion. Christ, raised from the dead becomes the first fruits of those dead but made alive in Christ. Christ's reign will see all his enemies under his feet and death will be no more. The former things – death – will be no more and we will rejoice in the new heavens and earth of the Kingdom.

Now we come to this story that Luke tells – Jesus crucified in the most horrible manner imaginable, and his followers have laid him in a tomb – provided by a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea. The women who were closest to Jesus come to the tomb when the laws of Passover sabbath allow and find it empty. “They found the stone rolled away but they did not find the body.” This was perplexing, of course. Two men in dazzling white clothes appeared and reminded the women of the things Jesus had been teaching them. “Then they remembered his words” the remembering here is important so hold on to that.

Finally, the women told what they had seen and heard to the men and the rest. The men thought their story was a load of crap! So, of course Peter had to go and see for himself and went home amazed at what had happened. Curious that the ‘two men’ were gone by the time Peter arrived, maybe it was God's plan that women be the first to witness these things.

We can again ask ourselves the question, why? What difference does the empty tomb make to us – today, in 2022? What does it mean to accept another's witness? What does it mean to remember Jesus' words? Then, as we remember why do we rejoice?

Here are a few thoughts – first, the empty tomb means that God, through Jesus, has defeated death, defeated Satan's hold on humanity. Satan thought to claim the victory as Jesus suffered on that cross but now it is Satan's defeat we

are looking at in that empty tomb. A victory for Satan would mean an end to hope and the beginning of darkness in the world – rejoice for the light of the world has arisen.

Then there is the empty tomb as a reminder of and testimony to the living Lord, an awareness of the real presence of Christ in the midst of his people. This remembering is essential to upholding a firm belief in Christ. Like the women at the tomb that day, belief comes when we recall what we have heard. The stories of Jesus and the symbol of the empty tomb are reminders of the prophets' words and God's promises to create new heavens and a new earth. This is a reminder that God is faithful in all things, keeping promises and restoring and renewing covenantal relationships.

The resurrection of Christ proves for us the cornerstone of our faith. A faith that looks forward to that day on God's holy mountain. Resurrection is a transformation from mortality into immortality. The resurrected never again die, but live forever. Christ entered into the glory of the resurrected life when he burst triumphant from his tomb. That is what we can recall, and this empty tomb is a symbol of our transformation as well, "dying to an old identity and way of being in this world, and rising to or entering into a new identity and way of being centered in Christ's message of justice, mercy, and love . . ." ¹

Finally, there is the notion that Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection is the mechanism for salvation through the concept of 'substitutionary atonement.' This brings to mind the oft quoted passage of the "suffering servant" Isaiah 53:4-6 – "Surely, he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." We can believe that Christ was a substitute for the "wages of sin" to which we are all subject.

These are all reasons to rejoice – are these what we consider on this Sunday of Sundays – this Easter day of Resurrection? I think there is much more, things not stated in scripture but are obvious to those of us who are following Christ some two-thousand years later. We rejoice because the gift of the empty tomb is proof of living presence of the risen Christ. It is confirmation of God's promises, confirmation and reminder of Jesus' words to his disciples on that last day "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am

¹ Cummings, Duane D. *A Handbook for Today's Disciples in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* 5th ed. Chalice Press. 2017. 22. Print.

going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14: 1-3).

The story of the events of Easter are reminders that affirm our faith. Maybe we affirm truth when we tell the stories and remember the events. I don't know that for sure – but I do know that repeating these stories about Jesus and remembering God's promises reported by prophets and recorded in the Hebrew Bible [our Old Testament] strengthens our faith.

The bottom line is we find joy in this moment recalling the significance of these events. Christ's obedience on the cross is the fulfillment of the revelation of God in our world. The entire events of Jesus' life are to reveal God to the world, just as the events of Exodus were to reveal God to the Hebrew Nation. The joy of Easter comes to us in the revelation of God's presence through the story of Jesus. The joy of Easter comes to us when we realize that we too are risen to a new life through faith in Christ. New life is possible for believers in Christ – this story of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection to eternal life at the right hand of God reminds us of that truth. So, bring on the Easter parade because – HE LIVES.