

4-12-20 Easter Sunday

Raised to Life

Pastor Diana Ziegler

Scripture Reference: Matthew 28:1-10a

We can't get to this part of the story, the story of the resurrection, without really understanding the crucifixion and how they are each only half of the whole. Without the crucifixion there would be no need for a resurrection, and without a resurrection the sacrifice made at the crucifixion would be in vain. We talk of these as two separate events, but they are one. Let's go back just a bit so that we can get a better understanding of this one event, this one happening, that from beginning to end, took three days...

One of the last things Jesus said before he died was "It is finished". Imagine what some of those people were thinking when they heard those words: "It is finished"... What was finished? The crucifixion? The message he was bringing? Were these 3 years of His ministry simply a little "blip" and now life would resume? What the people who witnessed the death of Christ did not understand was that Jesus was not talking about what was right in front of them, what was tangible; He was talking about something bigger than all of that, something much more significant to their lives. "It is finished" was about the payment for the sins of mankind by his death that day. The sacrifice was made, it was finished, but the mission was not finished - the resurrection was still to come.

I read a story the other day about a young Sunday School class - I believe it was 2nd or 3rd graders - who were discussing the crucifixion and how Jesus' body had been placed in a tomb. This teacher told them the whole story - How Jesus was betrayed by his friends, arrested, and how he was put to death by hanging on a cross. And finished by telling them about how a great stone had been placed in front of the tomb, sealed so that no-one could get in or out, AND how a guard was posted at that stone to watch and make sure nobody got in or out. She had painted a great picture for them, and she paused to let it all sink in a bit. She looked out at those little faces that were so focused, and she heard little "ooo's and ohhh's" in their quiet wonder. Then, anxious to share the excitement of the resurrection, she let them know that even with all of that, Jesus did get out of the tomb. And she asked the students: "What do you think were Jesus' first words when He came out of that tomb?" A little girl shot her arm into the air, bounced to her feet jumping up and down shouting: "I know, I know!" The teacher was thrilled and praised the little girl and asked her to share what it was that Jesus said. The little girl answered by simultaneously raising both arms into the air in a gesture of "Victory" and saying: "TA - DA!"

Although I don't really believe those were the words that came out of Jesus' mouth, I do believe that His rising from the dead and coming out of that tomb was indeed a magical moment! Sometimes I think the children understand the wonder of this better than many adults. The older we get the more practical, less in awe, and often more cynical we become... That little girl was right: "TA -DA!" Christ is Risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

Easter is the great celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And today is Easter. A time when Alleluias fill the air... We began our time of celebration exactly that way: "Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia..." Death has been defeated!

The resurrection of Christ, Easter, although a wonderful time of celebration, is the ultimate test of faith. Remember this whole event began with the death of Christ, but it is the second part of this event, the resurrection of Jesus from death, that separates believers from unbelievers. Paul, in His letter to the Corinthians confirmed this truth: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain"

(1 Corinthians 15:14)

In our world of "gray", where there is so much that is not just right or wrong, black or white - this is not one of those things. This is truly a black and white kind of thing. , there is no middle ground here, You either believe that Jesus rose from the grave, or you don't. You are a believer or you are not...

The resurrection of the body of Jesus Christ brings great joy to believers everywhere. The resurrection offers us hope for the future. The resurrection shatters the grip of fear that each of us face... The fear that makes us ask the question: "What happens when my heart stops beating? Is there reincarnation? Is there nothing? What is there? What is waiting on the "other side"? We become slaves to that fear, and it is the resurrection that releases us from that fear, that frees our hearts and our minds from worrying about our eternal destiny.

Reading our gospel confirms for us that the death and then the resurrection of the body of Jesus Christ solidifies our eternal destiny. When Jesus took his last breath, "Then the curtain hanging in the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split apart, the graves broke open, and many of God's people who had died were raised to life." (Matthew 27:51-52) Jesus' death caused the curtain in the Temple, the barrier between God and man, to be torn in two - we could no longer be separated from God the Father.

There are many out there who will proclaim that Jesus' raising from the dead never happened, that the disciples somehow removed the body and that they were willing to die to keep alive this lie about who Jesus really was. There are a lot of people who will die for their beliefs, but I don't think there is anyone out there who would be willing to die for what they knew to be a lie... They knew the resurrection was not a lie. And that Jesus had been raised from the dead... That He was indeed alive, was confirmed for them because they saw Him with their own eyes. And it wasn't just them... After the Apostles saw him, more than 500 other people saw him. (1 Corinthians 15:6) AND it wasn't just a one time thing, these sightings happened over a period of 40 days. So, were all these people delusional? I don't think so...

Those of us who believe are not mistaken, we are not naive, we are blessed. We are blessed because we are no longer separated from God. We get to know the full impact of the grace of God our Father, who sacrificed his own son so that we might have eternal life. *"Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were spiritually dead in our disobedience..." (Ephesians 2:5).* Even though we are a sinful people, even though we are dead in spirit because of that sin, God made us alive again in Christ... We are raised to life through the resurrection of Christ.

As christians, as true believers, we began our journey into receiving the grace that is offered by God when we acknowledged the birth of Jesus as our savior. Son of God, born to man... We celebrate

Jesus' birth as the promise of eternal life. It is through Jesus that God is revealed to us. It is through Jesus that we will be saved.

That's where our journey begins, with the birth of Jesus, and this journey leads us to a time approximately 33 years later, to the crucifixion, death and resurrection of that same baby boy. The resurrection, the salvation, the raising to life in Christ Jesus. Where Christmas is the promise of eternal life, Easter is the proof of that promise.

And so I remind you that the cross does not have the last word, death does not have the last word... God alone has the last word...

"Ta Da"... Christ is Risen - and we are raised to life with Him.

I want to share with you now words written in a poem by Annie Johnson Flint:

*If Christ who died had stopped at the cross,  
His work had been incomplete.  
If Christ who was buried had stayed in the tomb,  
He had only known defeat,*

*But the way of the cross never stops at the cross,  
and the way of the tomb leads on,  
To victorious grace in the heavenly place  
where the risen Lord has gone."*

Raised to life... AMEN