

“Jesus’ Gift”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Luke 24: 1-12 Acts 10: 34-43

Luke 24: 1-12 -- The Resurrection of Jesus

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body.

⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Acts 10: 34-43 -- Gentiles Hear the Good News

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them:

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

The Christian Faith

They say that a local newspaper ran an obituary for a gentleman. The writing was fine; the only problem with the obituary was that the deceased

walked into the newspaper editor’s office to lodge a complaint, and shouted:

“How dare you print my obituary in your paper! I am alive. See, here I am!”

The editor admitted her error, saying, *“Yes, I see that you are. I’m sorry to say that there is nothing to be done about yesterday’s news.*

The best we can do for you is to list you tomorrow in the Birth Column and give you a fresh start.”

We invest much energy on endings and last, final moments of life,

yet the Good News of Jesus Christ is one of fresh starts, new birth,

forgiveness and reconciliation.

Where the world only sees finality, the Christian faith testifies to new starts and hope.

A Firm Faith

We have this faith, this trust, this self-assured understanding that by the grace of God

when we die with Christ we rise with Christ.

St. Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 5 that,

“If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation!

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

The Holy Scriptures tell the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

His story has become our own story,

that one afternoon at the place called the place of the skull,

which is called in Hebrew, Golgatha,

Jesus was crucified and with him two

others.

The soldiers cast lots for his tunic.

Standing by the cross were four disciples: one man and three women.

The women, including Mary Magdalene and his mother Mary,

stood firm in their faith.

As you may know, Jewish custom forbids women
to be near places of capital punishment, yet the women
stood firm.

In John 16 Jesus predicted that when he died
everyone would abandon him, scattering to their homes:
yet the women stood firm.

They gathered for the death watch;
they were ever-present for their Lord and Savior.

In the face of death and despite fear of reprisals,
the women did not abandon or scatter or flee; they stayed
like their faith,

pillars firmly planted on a solid foundation.

Like a tree planted beside the river, they would not be moved!
As described in the Gospel of John, the women were standing so
close

that Jesus could look down and speak with them.

Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved.

He loved them with agape, with unconditional love.

This is the love that Jesus has for us.

This is the love He calls us to have for one another.

This is the love that has the power to save and redeem, to forgive
and reconcile

-- both ourselves and the whole, wide world.

Jesus said, *"Woman, behold your son! Son, behold your mother!"*

The Word says, *"And from that moment on the disciple took care
of Mary."*

The Good Shepherd tends his lambs and feeds his sheep.

The Good Shepherd gives his life for the flock of God's people.

The Good Shepherd calls out to us, to his living, breathing flock of
souls, and says,

"Behold your mother! Behold your father! Take care of them!

Behold your sister, your brother, your neighbor! Take care of each

other!”

In life's shadow places, where pain and loneliness,
suffering and hostility make themselves oh so well known,
we hear Jesus' gift of compassion and
consideration and community
encompassed in His call to love, to love
unconditionally,
to behold one another as children of
God.

A Firm Faith

The firm faith of the women led them to go to the tomb on that first Easter morning.

Luke lists *“Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them.”*

They went according to Hebrew Law and with love to take care of his body,

to ensure that all was right with their Jesus.

Faith had already taken them so far, and on this day they drew deeply upon it

to take them into the dark, into the inner recesses of the tomb.

They were in for a surprise; theirs was not just the surprise of a life but for all time.

To their shock and amazement the stone covering the door had been rolled away.

“...when they went in, they did not find the body.”

We can well imagine the women peering, feeling around,

eyes slowly growing accustomed to the dark,

wondering where Jesus' body could be,

Mary pondering in her heart: Indeed, could his words have been true?

“While they were perplexed about this,

suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

*The men said to them,
“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here,
but has risen.*

*Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,
that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners,
and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”*

Then they remembered his words...

Sometimes we need to be reminded, reminded of what we
already know.

They remembered.

Their faith was rekindled, ignited afresh, flaring up stronger and
brighter than ever.

Hebrews 11 states: *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped
for,*

the conviction of things not seen.”

These wonderful women had this faith, this trust, that God loved
them

and was with them, giving them strength and hope,
friends and community,

new life and life everlasting.

With this faith they had stood by the Cross.

With this faith they walked right into the tomb, into the face of
death.

With this faith, they walked outside into the light of a new day.

The same deep and abiding faith that took them into the dark

was going to lead them out to be and share the Good

News.

A Firm Faith

Margaret Gilkey Richards shares this memory of her father, James
Gordon Gilkey.

While living in Portland, Oregon, James Gilkey was informed by his
physician

that he had an incurable disease.

Death could neither be averted nor long delayed.

Here is his final earthly story, including some of his own last words spoken to God's creation that he loved:

"I walked out to my home five miles from the center of the city. There I looked at the river and the mountain which I love, and then, as the twilight deepened – at the stars glimmering in the sky.

Then I said to them, 'I may not see you many times more.

But River, I shall be alive when you have ceased running down to the sea.

Mountain, I shall be alive when you have sunk down into the plain.

Stars, I shall be alive when you have fallen in the ultimate disintegration of the universe."

A Faltering Faith

"...returning from the tomb,

[the women] told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

...these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

But Peter got up and ran to the tomb;

stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves;

then he went home, amazed at what had happened."

As firm as the women's faith had been, Peter's had been faltering. Peter remembered the glad times and the bad, the sad, and the mad.

One fine day Jesus had called to him to follow God, back when he went by Simon Peter.

He recalled connecting with the Holy,

gaining for the first time a sense of something greater than himself,

a higher power he could not see yet could sense

and experience and claim,
a Great Love that gave him meaning and
purpose.

He remembered that he had aspirations he might help someone.
He remembered getting sent out two-by-two to serve and love in
Jesus' name,

and how frightening and exhilarating it was, and how well
it worked!

He remembered Jesus asking who He was,
and being inspired, saying *"You are the Messiah, the Son of
the Living God!"*

and being praised, and how good that felt.

Yet when Jesus said he was going to be killed and on the third day
be raised,

Peter forbade that should happen,
and Jesus scolded him, and he remembered how
much that stung.

He remember the thrill of the transfiguration of Jesus on the
mountaintop,

and the anguish of Jesus' arrest, and especially what was
said before,

how Jesus predicted Peter would deny him three
times.

Peter wanted to forget,
to forget how he had distanced himself from God,
disengaged himself from the faith community,
distrusted his own ability to stand up for
who and whose he was.

He remembered...he was ashamed...and all he wanted was for
God to forget.

A Faltering Faith

Here was Peter standing on shaky, unsure legs

near Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women,

who stood firm like pillars on a sure foundation.
Sometimes being in the shadow of the faithful helps us out and lifts us up,
and sometimes we feel intimidated and shrink away.

There is a psychological phenomenon called “reference bias.”
Shankar Vedantum said,
“Our peers often shape our behavior, but sometimes they don't.
Let's say that you're training for a 5K race, and you learn that a [friend] is a good runner.
It might be a good idea to start working out together.
But what if your partner was not a little better than you,
but an Olympic distance runner? What would happen to you?
You and I would be really intimidated and not want to run with that person.

The difference between being with peers who are a little better
than you
and being with peers who are way better than you effects
how we cope.

When someone sees someone who's doing great things,
they worry that everyone is that great, which makes them
feel inferior.

It's fine to recognize work that's extraordinary,
but you shouldn't assume that everyone other than you
is performing at that extraordinary level.” [\[1\]](#)

We get partnered with someone who seems so much better,
braver, more believing,
and you hesitate to run, to walk the journey with that
person.

I've experienced tastes of reference bias
in middle school typing class, in high school sports, and in
church settings.

One night I heard Walter Brueggemann and Barbara Brown Taylor
preach,

and afterward I walked outside, looked up at the heavens,
and yelled, “I quit!”

Five minutes later I remembered I was baptized, so I re-upped.
How many of us have been lifted up and affirmed

by simply being in the presence of a soul who has a deep
and abiding faith,
the kind that stands by the cross, that boldly walks
into darkened tombs,
that shares the Good News that Christ is
risen!

Sometimes we want to walk together into the great beyond;
other times we disengage.

How many of us at times feel intimidated or inferior,
so we shirk or shrink or shy away,
make little use of our talents and gifts
and avoid Church and Serving and look
Elsewhere,
Anywhere else to spend our time and resources
and energies?

It's hard to build a firm faith foundation if you feel like you can't
keep up.

Even if some have attained a higher plane of spiritual formation,
persevere anyway!

Know that God loves you, needs you, calls you and affirms you,
that intimidation and confidence come from the same
source.

A Forgiving Faith

A woman bought a parrot for a pet.

All the parrot did was treat her badly, insulting her and biting
when she picked it up.

One day she got so fed up with the parrot
that she opened the freezer and threw him in and closed
the door.

From inside, the parrot was still going on and on and then it got
quiet.

She thought, "Oh no, I killed it!"

She opened the door and the parrot just looked at her.

She picked it up.

Then the parrot said, "I'm very sorry. I apologize for my bad behavior.

I promise you from now on I will be a respectful, obedient parrot."

She said, "Well, okay. Apology accepted."

The parrot said "Thank you. Can I ask you something?"

She said, "Yes, what?"

The parrot looked over at the freezer and then asked, "What did the chicken do?"

A Forgiving Faith

After the resurrection God returned to earth in the form of Jesus Christ.

After the resurrection the first person Jesus sought was Peter.

Jesus forgave him once, twice, and three times,

called him forth to love unconditionally and to lead accordingly,

and then sent him out to be a light to the Jewish and Gentile peoples,

to take the unwavering love of the Gospel to a unilateral and universal level.

Where there are walls, build bridges; where there is hate, sow love.

Because wherever there is forgiveness there is new life.

Wherever there is forgiveness there is firmness of faith.

Wherever there is forgiveness there is something worth saying.

Then Peter began to speak to them:

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality."

Look at me! says Peter,

I was lost and afraid and faltering,

and suddenly, to my shock and amazement,
I was forgiven. I truly understand now!
Listen to our story, say the women!
We were in the dark and we saw the light; we listened and we
heard the Word.
He is not here! He has risen! We have a story to tell!

The boundless and limitless and graciousness of God's love saves
and forgives,
and sets us up like a pillar of faith on a bedrock of love.
On such a firm and faltering and forgiving rock Christ has built His
Church.
Come, let us stand here together, side by side by side, basking in
the light of God's love.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!

[1] "Peer Pressure May Not Work The Way We Think It Does" Shankar Vedantum,
Hidden Brain, National Public Radio, March 25, 2016.