

# Resurrection Day Message

Preached at Community United Methodist Church, Romulus MI  
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Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

It's not that hard to imagine the scene. The brightening sunshine of morning; maybe a few clouds in the sky. The air has a chilly nip to it still. Yet new life is everywhere – the busy chirping of birds, the young shoots and buds of new growth on the trees, everything greening.

Three women appear rounding the curve in the garden path. One of them is carrying a cloth bag smelling of spice and earthy perfume. Their eyes are red with dark circles beneath – it's obvious that they haven't slept much; weariness and distress shows on their faces.

They have come to the garden of a wealthy man of Jerusalem who donated his tomb for the body of a wandering preacher, prophet, and teacher who had managed to get on the wrong side of both the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman Empire. The deceased had the bad luck to die just before the beginning of the Sabbath and so he was hastily wrapped in cloth and placed in the rich man's tomb cut in the side of a rock wall to await proper funerary preparation. As faithful Jews the women respected the tradition and law that banned any work on the Sabbath, but it was now time to prepare the unfortunate man's corpse for permanent burial.

When they arrived at the tomb, they found the large round stone that served as a door had been rolled aside. This was disturbing, it should have sealed the opening. Indeed, they weren't sure they would be able to find anyone to open the tomb for them. But it seemed that someone had arrived ahead of them ... but for what purpose?

Cautiously they peered inside. The rock ledge against the back wall upon which the body should have laid was empty except for a young man sitting on the right side of the ledge and wearing a white robe. He seemed to have been waiting for them.

The simple astonishment was short-lived. As soon as they realized that the ledge was empty and the body was missing they became visibly alarmed and frightened. Had someone removed the body? Who could be so heartless and evil as to desecrate a tomb by stealing its occupant? As if the untimely death wasn't enough sorrow...

In the few years that they knew him, the women found Jesus of Nazareth to not only be a gifted teacher and preacher but a good friend who treated each of them with warmth and respect. He had come on the scene when he was baptized by a street preacher out of the wilderness named John. Like John, Jesus preached a simple message of turning one's life toward God, but he went much further to teach and preach what it means to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind, and to love others as we love ourselves. And he didn't just preach it – he did it: befriending outcasts, curing the sick, helping the poor, and showing a grace toward people, especially women, that the rest of society would have nothing graceful to do with.

But what really stirred things up was how Jesus called out the high and mighty religious leaders who were demanding a piety of the people that they wouldn't uphold themselves. “Whitewashed tombs” he had called a number of them – looking good on the outside, doing all the right rituals and praying all the right prayers,... but inside they were rotten to the core with corruption. It was this and more than a few other provocative and insolent words and actions, things like healing people on the Sabbath and throwing moneychangers out of the temple, that got Jesus on the wrong side of some powerful people who didn't want him rocking the boat. Jesus' newfound enemies managed to swing a deal with their Roman overlords to have Jesus executed as a state criminal by crucifixion. And that – Jesus' enemies thought – was the end of the story.

For those who were drawn to follow Jesus, especially those closest to him, he was more than just a capable preacher and teacher; more than just a friend. He was a prophet in the purest sense – one who spoke the word of God speaking truth to power in order to bring God's truth into a world hiding behind its own falsehoods and illusions. He was a healer who cured the body and the soul. He was a miracle worker who did some amazing things, never to show off or entertain but rather to do something good for others or to teach about faith.

The longer people knew Jesus the more they realized that he was something very different from any other religious teachers and professionals that they had known. He taught and preached with authority. He was able to open the Scriptures and he taught the law – handed down to Moses on Mt. Sinai – in a way that changed it from a list of rules to obey into a framework for healthy relationships with God, healthy relationships within families, and healthy relationships within communities. And ... it appeared that Jesus was the Messiah – the Anointed One of God who would redeem God's people.

But the Messiah wasn't supposed to end up dying on a cross as a criminal.

For the crowds who had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem just a week earlier with the shouts of "Hosanna!" ... For those who had become believers in Jesus, coming out to be with him whenever he was nearby ... For the twelve, now eleven with the departure of Judas Iscariot, who had journeyed with their master these three years and who became a part of something they felt was larger than themselves ...

It was all over.

The bubble had burst.

High expectations and a winning optimism – crushed by a cruel world rushing in to remind us that our dreams are but wisps of fragrant incense caught in the wind.

It's not so far away, is it? The end of a good thing. The inevitable downturn – of our economy, of our society and its morality, of our government, seemingly so impotent to save or help us, ... Even the inevitable downturn in our health as we age. We know the disappointment.

When they took the lifeless Jesus down off the cross, threw some linens over him and shut him up tight in the tomb it was just another dream being buried.

Maybe the best we can do is show some respect for the dead and dying and anoint the corpse to minimize the offense of its rotting odor.

But ... the body is not in the tomb.

The three women stood there staring into the tomb, empty but for the white-robed guy sitting placidly ... was that a thin smile on his face? As astonishment began to turn to fear the mysterious man spoke:

"Do not be alarmed," he said.

"You seek Jesus of Nazareth." (Yes – the teacher, preacher, prophet, healer, hoped for Messiah, the boundary-breaker who loved the unloved and unlovable)

"He who was crucified." (Executed as a criminal; died, dead, deceased, paws-up, finished)

“He has risen.” (What? How? Resurrected ... not resuscitated but resurrected, mind and soul and body; winning against death! The Real Deal Messiah!)

“He is not here.” (Not here among the dead but ... alive and with the living!)

“See the place where they laid him.” (Empty)

“Check in with his disciples and let them know that he is headed to Galilee where you will see him later.” (Huh?!?)

The three women just stood there, minds racing but going nowhere. Could it be true. It must be true. But if it's true then how?!? Dead people don't come back to life. Dead people stay dead! After all, Jesus was just a man – right?!? How could he be alive? Someone must have stolen his body... But the guy in the tomb said “risen” not “stolen”. Besides, who would want his body? But he can't possibly be alive ... can he?

The women took a couple careful steps backward from the tomb ... panicked ... and ran.

Standing back a few thousand years it's a little easier for us. The story comes down to us as legend with a mythic quality that floats above us. And we've heard it so many times – that Christ is risen – that we no longer think much of it. But try – for a moment – to re-experience the empty tomb at that pivot point in history... that moment from which nothing would ever be the same.

Jesus, beaten bloody to within an inch of his life was nailed to a cross upon which he soon died. A Roman centurion put a spear in his side just to make sure. Then the unexpected has happened.

The tomb is empty. Jesus refused to stay dead. The promise he made to rise again is fulfilled. The impossible has happened. The surest, most inevitable thing known to happen to the living (death) has been defeated.

Jesus would not be put down.

And there's nothing in our genetics or our upbringing that prepares us to hear an angel – a messenger from God – calmly and clearly saying to us ...

“You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen; he is not here.”

“You seek Jesus of Nazareth (whom you knew as a good man, nice to people you are generally loathe to get near, who taught a high moral standard, and who asked you to love even the unlovable), who was crucified (died, dead, and buried; put in his place for asking you to give priority to God and others in our lives). He is risen (alive again, body and soul); he is not here (in this tomb where we you put him).”

It is news that confronts what we know of the world causing us to reconsider what we think and what we believe. It is news that puts substance to the promise Jesus made to the thief on the cross to whom he said, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise,” and to this disciples earlier when he told them, “In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” Death is not the end but a moment of transition from this life to the next.

But Jesus' rising is news that means more than a hope for an afterlife. For not only did God bless humanity by coming to earth in human flesh – one of us, fully God and fully human – but in his rising from death he not only came back to consciousness but redeemed his body, the very body that had been so abused and broken. God values us – soul and body – so much that Jesus didn't leave his body moulderin' in the grave. That means that each of us are precious and beloved creations no matter what condition we are in. No matter how wounded and broken we now are, we are of no less sacred worth to God than we always were. For God knows us as whole persons with unique value, potential, and purpose.

Just as we are not prepared for the empty tomb, neither is the world. Indeed, Jesus' empty tomb is more than inconvenient, it is an affront and denial to everyone and everything that wants to put God in a box, constraining God with boundaries.

The empty tomb defies the liberals on the left who want a God of love but resist the sovereign God who rules over the universe and places a call on each of our lives to be cross-bearing, Kingdom of God people 24x7.

The empty tomb defies the conservatives on the right who want a God who harshly judges the rule-breakers, bans the undesirables, and blesses the conservatives' narrow-minded legalism while resisting a God who loves everyone, even those who don't appear to deserve God's love.

The empty tomb defies those who would use God for political gain or who would use God to give legitimacy to an evil cause.

The empty tomb defies the secularists who want God to stay out of our daily lives and out of our communities.

The empty tomb defies the atheists who simply want God to go away.

Most of all and what we seem least to understand these days, the empty tomb and Jesus resurrection means victory – not over those misguided folk who put him on the cross, for, as Jesus himself said from the cross, “They didn't know what they were doing.” No, in a world that has known suffering, brokenness, disaster upon disaster, war, famine, disease, poverty, and oppression, all seemingly without end, Jesus' resurrection means that over it all, God wins!

There is no economic downturn that puts God into recession.

There is no tornado, hurricane, flood, earthquake or any other natural disaster that is more powerful than God.

There is no disturbed killer's bullet that can destroy what the cross could not kill.

There is nothing in this world that God, through Jesus, has not overcome and overcome decisively. The brokenness and relationship-destroying evil we call sin has been broken. Even death has been put down. And for we whose lives are hid in Christ, there is nothing in this world that we cannot overcome as well, for the chains of sin and evil are broken – they no longer bind us – and death is no longer an enemy to be feared.

When we catch our breath and stop running from the empty tomb and let the Holy Spirit, Christ's Spirit, reassure us that Christ is risen and that his victory is our victory, then we come to know the power that inspired the Christians in the early days who spread the Good News of Jesus all over their world, sometimes at the cost of their own lives. The power that emboldened those who fought injustice, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. The power that carries missionaries today all over the world to tell the Good News and to show it through the works of their compassion. The power that will keep the church – and this church – a vital and important part of what God is doing in the world today.

As the community of Jesus' presence in this place, we are witnesses, testifiers, and even bearers of Jesus' victory, a victory over the evil powers of the world. And it is a victory that so many out there do not know. Let's tell them – tell them all, through our

words and through our actions – that our Lord lives! And because he lives, we have no doubt that God wins!

Amen!