

## **We Are The Easter People**

**A sermon taken from Matthew 28. 1-10 and preached on Easter, 2011 at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter.**

The great claim of this day is that this story matters more than anything in the world, and that it is the truth. And it is not only a truth about someone else, about a person who lived 2000 years ago; it is also a truth about us. It is the truth, but as Jesus said, it is also the way and the life. To be a follower of Jesus is not first and foremost to believe a set of truths: it is, before any of that, to die and rise with him.

This event was and is at the center of the Christian movement; without the resurrection, we would not have been that interested in a Galilean Jew named Jesus. Without Easter, there would be no Christmas oratorios or pageants. If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, we would be about as familiar with his teachings as we are with the teachings of Josephus. Josephus was a Jewish historian who lived in the first century. Have you ever heard of Josephus?

And yet this event is more than a historical occurrence; from the earliest letters of Paul, the first writings in the New Testament, to the gospels in all of their detail, to the transformed lives of the second and third generation followers of Jesus, it mattered not only that this happened, once, but that it continued to happen, indeed that it continues to happen.

And so, on Easter Sunday, we make the bold claim not only that this is true, that this is real, but that it matters. **"Because I live"**, Jesus says, **"you will live also."** On Easter Sunday we make the bold claim that we are the Easter people. What does such a statement imply?

**First, Easter people have passed from darkness to light.** On Friday evening many of us sat in the darkness and listened to the last words of Jesus, from the cross. The environment of this sanctuary corresponded to the details of Good Friday—darkness over the whole land. The book was closed, the sound reminding us of the sealing of the tomb, the finality of death, and the dying of the light.

Matthew tells us that the women are walking just as the dawn was breaking, early in the morning, to see the tomb. Mark's gospel, the earliest, tells us that they are going to anoint the body, but here they are simply going to the place. Suddenly there is an appearance of an angel, a messenger of the Lord, who is dazzling, like lightning, with clothing as white as snow.

The meaning of it is not that morning naturally follows night. This is the inbreaking of God, the shock and surprise of light in the midst of darkness, a gift that comes

from beyond us. We don't create the light or will it into being; it is always grace, God the creator is still speaking a word, "**let there be light**" and there is light.

**Second, Easter people have passed from fear to joy.** In the resurrection we are given an additional gift. Forces from beyond us liberate us from slavery and take us into a new world. We move from being constricted to being set free. We replace a God whom we fear with a God in whom we rejoice. This is portrayed vividly in the angel, the messenger, who removes the stone and sits on it. We do not fear death. As the hymn expresses it:

The strife is o'er, the battle done/the victory of life is won  
the song of triumph has begun/alleluia.

And so Easter people have passed from fear to joy. Jesus says, **because I live, you will live also**. We have passed from darkness to light, from fear to joy. God wants to change us. This is not subtle, gradual. It is transformational, mind-altering, heart breaking.

**Third, Easter people have passed from hatred to love.** If you have lived through the events of Holy Week: the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, the denial of Jesus by Peter, the abandonment of Jesus by all of his disciples, the rejection of Jesus by the religious leaders and the punishment of Jesus by the political authorities, you will know the wounds and scars were deep, and indeed they led to his death by torture, on a cross, an act of excruciating physical pain and utter public humiliation. And so it is remarkable that in Matthew 28. 10 Jesus speaks to the women who want to worship him and says, "**Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me**".

The resurrection is the power of the gospel to make all things new, to transform bitterness into forgiveness and hatred into love. Go and tell those *who betrayed me...no*. Go and tell those *who denied that they knew me...no*. Go and tell those *who abandoned me...no*. Go and tell my brothers to meet me!

So what do you and I do with something like that? We are not in denial about any of this. Easter is not about the denial of death. Death is real. Betrayal is real. Abandonment is real. Sin is real. I am talking about more than positive thinking. I am talking about faith in a God who overcomes sin, death, betrayal, abandonment, evil, injustice.

If we are Easter people, we have passed from hatred to love. The resurrection is not only the truth, it is also the way and the life. These are the actions of God in us and for us and through us. In one sense this is already accomplished: "**love's**

*redeeming work is done*". In another, the resurrection continues to happen. We not only believe in the resurrection, we live it.

So what if Easter is true? What if all of this is true? I know that this can be a challenge, even for people of faith. In **The Brothers Karamazov**, a woman has an encounter with Father Zossima, in which she acknowledges that she is unable to believe in the resurrection. She believes in God, but not eternity, immortality, life after death. And so she does what any rational person does: she asks for a proof.

Father Zossima responds, *"one cannot prove anything here, but it is possible to be convinced."* "How, by what?", she asks. "By the experience of active love. Try to love your neighbors actively... The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul."

So it is not that if you believe in the right things, it will change you. If you love, you will be transformed, and it will become easier to believe in the resurrection.

A few years ago I met a physician and preacher in the British Methodist Church named Reginald Mallett. Dr. Mallett would come to the United States each year to speak in churches and at conferences. I heard him tell of an experience, years ago now, which he had heard at a funeral given by an Irish minister at the death of his 38 year old daughter. I have shared with you one year on All Saints one year, but it is an Easter story as well. It is a vivid witness to the passage undertaken by the Easter people.

When I came to this city, the Irish minister said, I discovered that it was divided by the river that separated two groups of people. On this side of the river we were Protestants. On the other side of the river they were Catholics. And we on this side of the river had nothing to do with those on the other side of the river.

And then God sent into our home a little girl, and as she grew up she went to school on the other side of the river. She made friends with people on the other side of the river. She brought them home and we met them and we came to love them.

As she grew older she brought home a fine young man who lived on the other side of the river. They married, and they went to live on the other side of the river. They had three children, our grandchildren, he said, and they lived on the other side of the river.

And I came to see that there was more of my heart on the other side of the river than there was on this side of the river.

The Irish minister said, referring to his deceased daughter, now my little girl has done it again. She has crossed another river, and I have to tell you, that my heart is no longer here. It is on the other side of the river.

I have reached the stage in life, and I dare say many of you are there, where I have as many friends on the other side of the river as I have on this side of the river. **He is not here. He has been raised. He is going ahead of you.**

And so we are in process, in motion, passing from darkness to light, from fear to joy, from hatred to love. We are the Easter people. We are the people of hope. He goes ahead of us, and to make our way to the other side of the river requires that we die and rise with Christ, in baptism and in faith. A few weeks ago many of us gathered in this sanctuary and received the ashes on our foreheads, a symbol of death. We remembered that the earliest churches saw these forty days as a time of preparation for baptism. The apostle Paul writes,

**Do you not know that all who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father, we too can walk in newness of life. If we have died with Christ, we have faith that we will also live with him.**

Maybe you are here this morning and the struggle in your own life is between darkness and light: there is sin that separates you from God and from God's dream for your future.

*So...if the stone has been rolled away, are you ready to walk out of the tomb?*

Maybe you are here this morning and the struggle in your life is between fear and joy: you have been paralyzed by some damaging, traumatic or scarring experience.

*If death has been swallowed up in victory, are you willing to rejoice?*

Maybe you are here this morning and the struggle in your life is between hatred and love: there is some relationship, some history, some prejudice.

*And so if Jesus can call his betrayers brothers, are you willing to actively love others, to live in the resurrection?*

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