

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

March 27, 2016

“Christ the Victor”

“24 Hours That Changed the World” part 8

Mark 15:42-47, 16:1-7

(Intro Video)

Happy Easter! I am honored that you are here to worship today. You are in the right place this morning. You are not here by accident. And God loves you and is delighted that you are here with us.

Would you please pray with me? If you are comfortable, I invite you to place your hands palms up, in a posture of readiness to receive what God has for you this morning.

Jesus Christ, Victor over sin and death, we worship you this morning. Hear us, heal us, help us to understand how your death and resurrection together are the deepest hope for our lives. Move among our hearts and minds this morning as we celebrate how you love us. In your name we pray. Amen.

I have presided at 15 funerals in the last year and a half. I have seen grief, sadness and loss. I've been there through the tough moments with the families, saying goodbye. I've seen the open casket, the final handshake, the kiss on the cheek. In the most meaningful services, the casket is closed, and wheeled down the aisle in full view of those gathered to mourn. We offer prayers, read scriptures, sing songs. We talk about the loved one, share memories. And then, there is a burial, and usually a meal to share, as we cry and grieve some more.

But in all the funerals I have witnessed, no one ever came to me days afterwards, saying they saw the dead person in the grocery store. Or that they met him at the coffee shop. That she showed up at their front door, alive.

Seriously, what would you do? If someone came to you after a funeral and shouted, “He’s alive”, what would you say?

You would say, “That’s impossible! I don’t believe you!” And yet this is the very truth we proclaim to you today. Jesus Christ of Nazareth, God’s own Son, died on a horrible cross on a Friday two thousand years ago, and returned to life on that very next Sunday. We proclaim, He is risen! He is risen indeed!

It’s crazy. And just to help us understand how crazy this resurrection story actually is, I want us to watch this short video as Adam Hamilton gives us a tour of a rock tomb in Jerusalem, similar to the tomb of Jesus.

VIDEO

I will be the first one to admit, the Resurrection is hard to believe. Couldn’t there be another explanation?

Let’s play conspiracy theory for a moment. We have the story that Jesus died. We know that at some point later in time, his disciples claimed that they had seen him alive. Let’s consider three alternative ideas:

1. Jesus wasn’t really dead. He just fainted.
2. The women went to the wrong tomb. Or,
3. Somebody stole his body.

Play along with me for a moment. Suppose Jesus wasn’t really dead. This is the hardest of the three alternatives for me to believe. After all, the Romans were experts in their methods of torture. Jesus endured terrible blood loss when he was whipped. Stretched out on the cross, he could barely breathe. He would have died by asphyxiation. Even the centurion saw him die. The Gospel of John says they speared him in the side – blood and water gushed out, because of the

fluid that built up around his lungs and heart. Joseph and Nicodemus thought he was dead, too, and they prepared his body for burial.

But let's say, for a moment, all of them really were mistaken. They didn't have the same medical knowledge we have today. So, Jesus, in a tomb, dehydrated, weak and beaten, somehow awakened, and by himself, rolled that huge stone away, from the inside of the tomb, no less. Then, he slipped past the guards, found his disciples....and looked like a zombie. Seriously. Bloodied and weak, he was supposed to impress his followers, who were shut away, hiding in fear? I am going to label this alternative as "highly unlikely."

OK, so we assume Jesus really was dead. Well, maybe the women went to the wrong tomb. There were lots of graves in Jerusalem. However, the Bible says that they were watching carefully as Joseph and Nicodemus laid Jesus to rest. If any of you have been at a burial, you are hardly likely to forget where your loved one lies. But even if they had gotten lost, that still doesn't explain the vision of angels and all the post resurrection appearances. What are you going to tell me, that those were just mass hallucinations? It's just not likely.

And that brings up an important point. If the women went to the wrong tomb, why didn't the Jewish authorities just go to the correct tomb and produce the body? "Ah," you say, "because the third scenario could have happened! Someone stole the body."

Then who stole the body? The Jews? What motivation could they possibly have had for doing that? And even if the Jews stole Jesus' body, why didn't they just bring it out and squelch the whole resurrection story right then and there?

So, it seems that the most likely alternative is that the disciples stole Jesus' body. Meaning, you believe they slipped past the guards, or bribed them, and after stealing the body, they told everyone that Jesus was alive.

But let's just imagine that somehow they pulled off the biggest body snatching in history. There is a major hole in that theory. The disciples all went to their deaths proclaiming that Christ was alive. These ordinary men were tortured, imprisoned, crucified, beheaded, and worse. They had countless opportunities to deny that Jesus ever rose from the grave. I grant you, some people are very sincere about what they believe, and actually will die for it, as evidenced by the terrible tragedies in Belgium this last week. But the disciples of Jesus were in a unique position to know whether or not they had seen Jesus. They died because of their faith in the risen Christ.

Tell me, would you die for something you knew was a lie?

No matter how you view the resurrection story, one thing is clear. The disciples were changed people because of the resurrection. They had new life. They had victory. And the only logical way I can explain it is that they met the miraculously, powerfully risen Jesus. Christ had conquered death.

There is more than one way to understand what happened on the cross. Some say Christ took our punishment upon himself. Even though we had sinned and betrayed God, Christ freed us by dying for us. Others say the death of Jesus is proof of his love for us, and what Jesus endured for our sake compels us to offer our lives to Christ, upholding love, grace and justice in the world.

There is one other view I want us to focus on today. "Christ the Victor." Through his suffering, crucifixion and resurrection, Christ conquered sin and death once and for all. Because of the resurrection, we have hope.

In all the funerals I have ever preached, I always make sure to say that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love that Jesus has for us. As Christians, we have the hope of eternal life, and that is powerful indeed.

So allow me to get personal. The resurrection is the greatest story I have ever heard, and I believe it with all my soul. The resurrection tells me that Christ is the final Victor in every area of my life. In the battle between fear and hope, even if fear seems to have the upper hand, Christ is the Victor. Terrorism may strike at us, but Christ has the final word. Cancer, heart disease, and a host of other sicknesses may oppress us, but Christ has the final word. Divorce may try to break our families, but Christ has the final word. Addiction, loneliness, loss, depression, anger, deceit, betrayal, denial and a million other things may try to slam us to the ground, but we are a people of hope, because we know Christ has conquered all things, even death.

A theologian once said, "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing."

The resurrection is about hope. Tell me, honestly, do you want hope in your life? The new members joining our church today are coming before you saying, they have found hope. Christ is the Victor in their lives. Listen closely to the vows we take together. If you are paying attention, you will hear the words of victory proclaimed that through Christ, we all have the power to overcome evil no matter how it presents itself in this world.

You can know that new life of hope, as well. Jesus Christ offers new life freely to all. We all have a choice to make. We must choose which side we will be on: fear or hope. But as Christians, we know which side eventually wins. Christ is the Victor. Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed.

(Invite the new members forward for baptism.)

Memory verse

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.” Mark 16:6 (NIV)

Reflection questions

1. What is your earliest memory of Easter?
2. If you saw Jesus alive, who would be the first person you would tell? Why?
3. How does Jesus’ resurrection give us hope in the face of evil and death?
4. Do you believe in the resurrection story? What difference does it make in your life?