

“Resurrection People”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 24:1-12
April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday - Resurrection of the Lord

At early dawn they went, with spices, to the tomb. The dawn. The spices. The tomb. Their shattered hearts. It all cried “death.” The sun was just rising, but it wouldn’t matter. The world had been dimmed and would never be as bright again. Life would never be as vivid and hopeful as it was when he fed them, and taught them, and loved them. They believed him to be salvation from this dusty, craggy existence. And now all they could see was a stony landscape, sapped of sacred surprise.

But when they arrived, the stone was rolled away. And his body was not there.

And they rejoiced and boiled some eggs and ate a few Peeps.

No, the text says they were perplexed. They had not found joy. Not yet. They had found confounding evidence, but of what? The first response to Easter is to be baffled.

“Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.” The women were terrified. They looked down, as if to avert their gaze from something they couldn’t handle. A corpse, they would have looked at. Dazzling unearthly visitors — dazzling, not dusty and dim — scared them. The second response to Easter is fear.

The men asked the women why they came here. Then they reminded the women of Jesus’s own words telling how all this would happen. And the women remembered his words and they went to tell the rest of the disciples. The next responses to Easter are memory and witness.

The women told what had happened: the stone was moved, the tomb was empty, there were these dazzling men, and they reminded us of what Jesus had said. But the words seemed to the eleven disciples to be an idle tale. “Idle tale” is a nice way of saying “they’re off their rockers.” I can’t imagine fishermen in the depths of grief saying “hmmm...sounds to me like an idle tale!” These were crusty guys. It’s more like “hogwash!” or “balderdash!” or “fake news!” The fifth response to Easter is incredulity.

But, just to be certain, Peter ran to the tomb. The next response to Easter is curiosity.

Peter got to the tomb and saw nothing but the linens. Part of the women’s story checked out. He went home, astonished. The seventh response to Easter is amazement.

Confusion, fear, memory, witness, unbelief, curiosity, amazement. These all come before joy in the Gospel of Luke. Beyond our reading today, we don’t find joy until the very end of the Gospel. First Jesus will appear on the road to Emmaus, and the two walking won’t know who he is until he breaks bread and they recognize him. Then Jesus will appear among the disciples, and they will be “startled and terrified.” It isn’t until the last verse of Luke, as Jesus is blessing the disciples and ascending into heaven

that we hear that “they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” It is the end of a very long day.

We know what has happened. We know that disciples of Jesus will be visited by the Lord. We know that the community will grow. We know that believers will spread the Good News. We know that martyrs will die for their belief. We know that Christianity will become part of the empire. We know that reformers will shake things up. We know that the faithful will find more and more ways to tell this story. We know that a couple billion Christians around the world today — in both the Eastern and the Western Church — are celebrating with deep joy that Christ is risen.

But on that first morning it wasn't clear at all what had happened. And I cherish that part of the story, because even with all that we know, confusion, fear, memory, witness, unbelief, curiosity, and amazement are on the table for us. We are thankful that the women and the disciples don't make us feel faithless by instantly comprehending the enormity of what had happened, and not batting an eye, and immediately being transformed into good Christians.

Nearly two thousand years later, we find the empty tomb, and even as the gorgeous hymns of celebration pour from our lips, we have so many questions. We hear this story and it is weird and mystical and elusive. And terror and fear and puzzlement and doubt seem to be reasonable responses. And don't forget curiosity, because without that one, I don't think any of us would be here.

What are we to make of it all? Well, what we proclaim here is that death is overcome. And that it's not just that this one man lives again, but that God is up to something so big. And we proclaim that salvation can't be snuffed out. And that this resurrection event changes everything on a cosmic scale. In November, I wrote a piece of a Great Prayer of Thanksgiving and used it in our communion liturgy. And I've used it pretty much every Sunday since. Part of it goes: “death could not hold him. The tomb could not contain him. We are his resurrection people and we are resilient.” Just the other day, a member asked me what I mean when I say “resurrection people.”

Good question! The two dazzling men say to the women, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” That is the question and the reminder that make us resurrection people. These women, they were going with burial spices. They didn't know they were seeking the living! Everything screamed death, and they found holy messengers pointing them toward life.

We don't find Christ at the tomb. The tomb itself offers confusion and bewilderment and curiosity, but the tomb is not where we find resurrection. We have to go from there to find what we are looking for.

I do most of the laundry in our house. I'm very good at separating. I'm all over water temperature. I am an expert at folding. I very rarely lose socks, but when I do, I have the decency to lose both ends of a pair. But there is a separate basket for special sweaters and blouses and skirts that I am forbidden to touch. These items require extra special care. They have labels with unintelligible code on them: squiggly lines and triangles and a whole of bunch of symbols with Xs through them. Every item of clothing requires care, some more than others. Do it wrong, and you can make things smaller, or cause them to bleed, or tear them right up.

People are the same way, each requiring different care. And this dusty, craggy existence isn't interested in reading the care instructions. It throws us all into a big ugly scratched up tub and turns the agitator on high and pours in the scalding water and harsh chemicals and lets it rip. Then it's straight into the hot air, without even any fabric softener. It's a tumble-dry-high existence. Or sometimes it just throws us on the floor in a sopping wet heap. This existence is rough and wrinkle-inducing. It beats us up. It makes us feel small. It can makes us bleed. It tears us to shreds.

How many times in the past year have we joined together to worship after some tragedy, some horrific violence, some injustice, or some heartbreaking reminder of the cruelty of life right within our own community?

We get sent to the tomb so many times — the big deaths and the little ones hit us left and right and we find ourselves living in worlds that scream death. Life knocks us to our knees.

When you're living on your knees, you rise up.

I don't find my resurrection answers at the tomb. I find them elsewhere. I find them in you. Christ is risen. Everything is different. As we said back just after Christmas, for us, existence is no longer a matter of life and death, but of life and death — and life.

And that is who you are. Resurrection people. A smile and a good attitude and the power of positive thinking and a belief that God wants you to be rich will serve you — and only you — just fine, some of the time. But what happens when you've been brought to your knees? What do you do when you or someone you love is lost in the graveyard? Resurrection people know death. They know suffering. And they know what comes next.

Resurrection people get scared and confused and they doubt, but they go in search of an encounter with the risen Christ. And when they can't rise up and move themselves, they know that other resurrection people will sit with them and make them coffee or cookies until they're ready, and then help them up off their knees. They know that they can count on that because they've done it for others; it's what resurrection people do.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” Christ has risen indeed. I have no proof for you. But I know it to be true. I know it — not because of the empty tomb. I know it because of the full life. Life, with the mess and the dustiness and the sopping pile of laundry! Life - indeed! - life in *response* to the mess and the dustiness and the sopping pile of laundry. It's been said that the resurrection is God's commentary on the crucifixion.

You are Christ's resurrection people. I have been privileged — and it is a deep privilege, y'all — to be the pastor for this congregation for what'll be three years this summer. I wish I could tell you all the things I've seen. The quiet outpourings of astonishing generosity. Instances of folks helping one another with wild heaps of faith. Moments of tender grace. Acts of divine mercy.

I am the luckiest pastor in the world, and I believe that with my whole heart, mind, body, and soul,
because I live among people who know the tomb
and who are okay with a bit of confusion
and who stand together when fear creeps in
and who help each other remember
and who have the grace to believe a little extra when one of us just needs to sit in doubt for a bit
and who thrive on curiosity
and who testify in amazement to all that God has done, is doing, and will do.

I live among resurrection people who refuse to let death deter them from seeking the living Christ in their neighbor.

My prayer for this congregation is that we will strive to seek further what resurrection means to us. We will wonder, aloud, in all our varied ways, "If God has done this, if this is God's response to the worst of life, what else can this God do?"

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.