

"The Joy of Forgiving As We Have Been Forgiven!"

Luke 24:1-35

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St. James UCC

Preached by Rev. Dr. Robert Matlack

Church attendance on Easter is usually very good, in most years second only to Christmas time. Yet, when we think about what the meaning is of Easter, it is really second to none. The birth of Jesus Christ, which we celebrate at Christmas, is great and wonderful good news, but Jesus' resurrection is absolutely the best news of all.

Yet in our society Easter is a tough sell. We're content to celebrate the coming of spring, that's certainly a comfortable way to think about and deal with resurrection. We love chocolate Easter bunnies and jelly beans and all of the trappings of this holiday. What's uncomfortable about Easter is that to really celebrate Easter we first have to deal with death. We have to deal with the death of Christ on Good Friday - a day where some come her for prayer and meditation, but most people are busy with other things. After all, we don't want to really face the pain and anguish that Jesus suffered. That might confront us with our fears about our own death, and we certainly don't want to approach Easter by facing the reality of our own death! And yet that's precisely what our faith calls us to do.

Death. We don't like it. We don't want to face it. It's painful. It's uncomfortable. It's something that we'd like to avoid if at all possible. As the old saying goes, the only things in life that are certain are death and taxes. Just as we have been born, each of us will one day die, and it is only in the facing up to the reality of our own mortality that we get a glimpse of the real meaning of Easter. What does resurrection really mean if you haven't died first? Christ's Resurrection can't have the same profound impact on our lives, until we first face up to the reality that we too will one day die. It is then and only then that we start to glimpse the very personal and profound meaning that resurrection has for our future.

If Easter is seen as a confusing and uncomfortable holiday, that's probably historically appropriate. That very first Easter was certainly a confusing and uncomfortable time. The women went to the tomb to prepare the body as was their custom. When they got there, nothing was as they expected. The stone was rolled away from the entrance, the tomb was empty, and two angels spoke to them telling them that Christ had risen. The women ran back and told the apostles what had happened, but they did not believe them. So Peter ran down to the tomb to see for himself, found it empty, and came back amazed.

That first Easter was a day filled with surprises that were not easily understood. Jesus' followers knew that something special had happened, but they didn't really understand the full implications of it until much later. They were amazed. They were confused. In spite of all that Jesus had said to prepare them, they never really expected things to happen this way.

Later that same day, two of Jesus' followers were walking to the village of Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. As they walked along, they talked about what had happened. They were probably trying to sort this all out, trying to make sense of what was happening.

As they walked along, we're told that Jesus joined them, but somehow they did not recognize Him. Something was different enough about Him, that they did not know who He was, although they willingly walked with Him and responded to His questions as to what they were talking about.

They explained to Him who Jesus was, how He had been put to death, and how some of the women could not find His body at the tomb, but had seen a vision of angels who told them that He is alive.

They shared all this, talking with Jesus about what had happened. It was only after they arrived at the village of Emmaus, when they sat down to eat and Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them that their eyes were opened and they recognized Christ.

How foolish they must have felt! These were people who had followed Christ because they believed Him to be the Messiah. They had traveled long distances to hear Him, to follow where He led. While these were not two of the twelve disciples, and so were not among the closest of Jesus' followers, they were two who knew Him well. To walk and talk with Jesus for what was probably several hours without even recognizing Him was inconceivable. Yet that is precisely what happened. The mystery of that first Easter day is added to by their absolute inability to recognize Jesus. Then, suddenly their eyes were opened by Jesus in the most appropriate way of all, in the breaking of bread.

What does all of that mean for us today? We are among those who have thought that it is important to worship on Easter Sunday, but what does Easter really mean to us?

When Jesus died on the cross, we all had a hand in the crucifixion. I say that not in the sense that we were there making the decision or literally yelling out "crucify Him", or even driving the nails into his hands and feet. Yet all the same, we had a hand in Jesus' crucifixion.

You see, it was people like you and I who crucified Jesus. It was people who failed to understand, who at times got jealous or fearful, whose faith wasn't always strong enough, who had other priorities and concerns that sometimes just seemed more important - it was people just like you and I who crucified Jesus. Even more, we crucify Him again today - every time we do those same things. Every time we turn away from Christ, every time our faith isn't strong enough, or we set other priorities first - every time we are among those who crucify Christ. It was the whole weight of that human tendency to sin that Jesus took upon Himself. It was my sin and yours, as well as the sin of people like Pontius Pilate or Herod or the Pharisees...

Jesus died because we need to be forgiven. Jesus died because the weight of our sins is more than we can overcome by ourselves. We can never do enough - by ourselves - to make up for the wrong that we have done, and Jesus died so that we don't have to. He has taken that weight upon Himself and said to those who crucified Him back then, and to us today - "I love you, I forgive you, I will set you free from the burden of your sinfulness."

Jesus does this by letting us do the most hateful things we can think of - to Him. Jesus let humankind kill Him in the most painful, humiliating way possible. He was nailed to a cross between two criminals and all of the time people mocked Him, spat on Him, and even fought over His clothes. Jesus let us do our worst. He could have stopped it, but He willingly allowed it all to happen, and just when everybody thought that human sinfulness had won, Jesus rose from the dead! All of that hatred and jealousy and pettiness, all of the spite and mockery, all of the sin that was focused on Jesus had no power over Him. In the midst of our sinfulness, the grace of God was revealed in all of its glory.

God not only forgave us, but He gave us the most precious gift we can imagine. In spite of our sin, God loves us so much that we are given the gift of eternal life. Death is not the end. It is not an empty blackness from which there is no escape, rather, it is a new beginning, the beginning of a new and even better life. We are given a glimpse of the power of God. We can do our very worst. We can all do it together, only to discover that we are powerless before God. God is able to use even our sinfulness to teach us about faith. God is able to turn death to life, to forgive us when we act in seemingly unforgivable ways, and to challenge us to go and do likewise.

Thomas G. Long talked about a legend that goes like this. A long time ago birds did not have wings. One day God decided to give every bird on the face of the earth a pair of wings. At first the birds complained bitterly. Were not their legs small and weak enough without the extra burden and weight of wings? Then one day one of the birds began to try these new wings and discovered he could fly. As you can imagine, their lives were never the same again.

When Jesus and His two followers reached Emmaus and broke bread together, the eyes of the followers were opened and they recognized. Because of that experience their lives were changed. Suddenly the mystery was gone, what had happened made sense, and even though they might not understand everything, they knew that their task was to live faithfully, following the example of Jesus, and seeking to share the Good News. That day, they tried their wings for the first time, and they began to fly.

That's the message of Easter for us today. God has taken our sinfulness and given us a wondrous blessing in return. In spite of our efforts to turn away from God and to deny Christ, God loves and forgives us, and God gives us the amazing gift of eternal life. If our eyes are opened so that we recognize Christ's presence in the midst of our lives, then our lives are forever changed, and we too are challenged to live faithfully and fully, following the example of Christ, joyfully and freely forgiving one another as we have been forgiven. In fact, the greatest joy that we can experience is to forgive someone as freely and lovingly as we have been forgiven.

Today let us go forth with lives that are forever changed, for in Jesus Christ God has brought something new, something absolutely amazing into our lives. Let us go forth joyfully celebrating the Good News, for "He is Risen!"

Amen.