

Visions of Jesus for Our Time: Living Lord
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
8 April 2007 EASTER
Text: Luke 24:1-12

The poet called April “the cruelest month” and I believe him. In the upper Midwest we hold our breath, even when Easter is relatively late, remembering how wind and icy rain and even snow can freeze out the earth’s rebirth. (I’m pretty sure we can assume the weather today is God’s judgment on holding the Indian’s home opener on Good Friday) One year when I was a pastor in Michigan, I got the notion of purchasing monarch butterfly chrysalises from a company that sent mature ones ready to emerge during Holy Week and then setting them free at the outdoor sunrise service, a joyous symbol of new life. My colleagues greeted this idea with disdain, pointing out the certain death sentence to the butterflies immediately after their release. Still, I’m glad that Easter falls in Spring, as the dark and cold of winter give way to tender green buds, brave flowers, and lengthening light. It’s easy to associate nature’s cycle of dying and new life with resurrection. *For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come.... [Song of Songs 2:11,12]*

Yes, but what a far cry from the biblical accounts of Jesus’ resurrection! All of them are shrouded in fear, amazement, perplexity, and disbelief. The reaction of the women who came to the grave that morning was not the disappointment of unmet expectations, like hoping for a sunny day and getting...well, *this!* No, they greeted the empty tomb with utter astonishment. News that Jesus was not dead but alive was the last thing in the world they would have predicted. Resurrection is not natural. It is something other than rebirth, and the faith we have in the circle of life. Spring *will* come, absolutely. The dead, however, are not ever raised. They knew this. We know this. So let us approach Jesus’ grave on this Easter Day and hear God’s Word of life, unnatural—and yet

more true than even nature itself. The resurrection of our Lord according to the gospel of Luke, in the 24th chapter at the first verse. [LUKE 24:1-12]

Every year, it seems there is a flurry of excitement about some new discovery which purports to unhinge biblical truth—an unexplored archeological site; a previously-unnoticed gospel; an article of clothing with distinctive markings. This year it was a set of 2000-year-old ossuary boxes excavated from a tomb in Jerusalem and inscribed with “Jesus, Son of Joseph” and “Mary.” *Time* and *Newsweek* covered the story, and the Discovery Channel aired a documentary, interviewing biblical scholars and speculating as to whether these indeed contained the bones of Jesus and his family. Pardon me while I recover my faith! Don’t misunderstand: Christian belief does not depend upon acceptance of illusion, and in fact welcomes scientific research, scholarly debate, and intellectual inquiry. But it also recognizes the limits of reason to plumb the depths (and heights) of transcendent reality. Just as science cannot produce faith, neither need it destroy faith.

Easter remains, on one level, a mystery. No amount of evidence-- archeological, forensic, or otherwise-- will finally reveal what happened between Friday afternoon when Jesus’ dead body was placed in the tomb, and Sunday morning when the women went to anoint his body, and found the tomb empty. Luke’s account doesn’t try to explain; rather, it proclaims that “he has risen. Two men, whose apparel described as “dazzling” may suggest angel messengers, provide an explanation for the inexplicably missing body of Jesus. They remind the women of Jesus’ own prediction of his death and rising, and it is this prompt that sends them running to the disciples with the startling news. If you have ever questioned the resurrection, or doubted its reality, you share good company with the disciples. The women’s announcement seems “an idle tale,” preposterous and not to be believed. And that makes perfect sense. Resurrection is not natural; they had no experience through which to

understand it—not even their remembrance of Jesus’ earlier words.

Yet it is these very doubters who would shortly be transformed from fearful and perplexed mourners into bold apostles, who felt the living presence of their teacher and friend and were compelled to share it. They could not be silenced or dissuaded from the inner conviction that their leader, whom they had seen crucified, was alive. Alive! –and with them in a new and powerful way. It was not simply his beloved memory or his righteous teachings that changed them; it was the experience of his presence, en-couraging them, loving them, that made them courageous and loving, eager to serve and witness. Though it merited only a small footnote in the writings of the first-century historian Josephus, his observation is significant: *Those who in the first place came to love Jesus did not give up their affection for him after he died so that the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.*

And here we are, some two thousand years later, inheritors of the mystery of resurrection. The Church today is animated by the same conviction of the women and apostles: Christ is alive! He has overcome every power that would hurt or destroy us. Even death has been vanquished; its back broken, and its choke-hold released. That’s the heart of the Christian gospel: we are saved—from fear, meaningless, despair, and the finality of the grave.

But are we all that different from the terrified women, or the scoffing disciples? There is frankly too much evidence that contradicts new life and the promise of transformation. We are drawn to worship today by inspiring music, colorful flowers, the message of hope. But we will leave here and return to the real world, with its headaches and heartaches, anxious fears, and dulling routine. What does Easter mean to the family who lost their young wife and mother to disease last week? Or to the family facing end of life questions for a father imprisoned by a debilitating stroke? What does resurrection

mean to the man on the fast track who wonders if the sacrifices to family life are worth it? Or to the youth besieged by pressure from parents, teachers, peers? Or to the young adult trying to find a vocation, a partner, and a life? What does it mean to any of us as we read the long list of persons memorialized by these flowers, the most recent names of American soldiers who have died in Iraq, or the daily newspaper? What does Easter mean to you and me? And what will it mean to us tomorrow?

Not long ago I heard a caller on National Public Radio protesting a piece that had been aired earlier in which a reviewer had revealed the ending to *Anna Karenina*. He was miffed because as it happens he was well into the novel and was disappointed to learn the outcome prematurely. The reporters jokingly suggested that the program deliver “spoiler alerts”—announcements interrupting reviews or articles alerting listeners that upcoming commentary will give away endings, punch lines, or surprising developments. It struck me that Jesus’ resurrection functions as a kind of “spoiler alert” to human life. Because Jesus rose from death, in every chapter of our lives, we already know the outcome. We know how this is going to end. And it is beyond our imagining. Our lives count. We can look at the plot developments including self-doubt, disappointments, and apparent dead-ends, and take heart. Spoiler alert! This is not the conclusion. We can grieve at the grave of our beloved and not despair. Spoiler alert! Jesus defeated death; life is their outcome—and ours. Now we can plunge into the impossible mission of God’s kingdom: to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, love the unlovable, do justice, make peace---in the face of overwhelming odds, without fear of failure. Spoiler alert! Jesus is with us, using our efforts to complete the redemption of the whole creation.

On that first Easter, the women who had followed Jesus went to his tomb to anoint his body with spices that would mask the scent of death. They went to grieve, to remember, to hold him once more. Completely understandable; the most natural thing

in the world. But the question put to them in their perplexity over the empty tomb is telling: Why do you look for the living among the dead? Everything is different now. Jesus died. But he is not there. He is risen.

Among the notes I wrote myself during the preparation of this sermon was one that I underlined: *Give evidence of this; don't stay in the purely theological.* So here goes; two examples of that Jesus is alive, and with us today: A church member told me that she brought her seven-year-old granddaughter to worship one Sunday and left her in the pew for a few moments unattended. When she returned, she discovered the little girl had filled out one of the pew cards asking for prayers for her maternal grandmother who had been in a coma for two years. She hadn't ever spoken of her fears about her grandmother; or even been able to see her during that time. Her family had carefully explained that grandmother couldn't get better. But perhaps she knew, better than we grownups, that God's help is real and available, and she reached out and claimed it.

Among the Easter flower dedications listed in the bulletin today is one in honor of "Vin, Dan, Bob and Jan, for their tender care of Nick" by his family. Nick Pope is a Fairmount member who has struggled with Alzheimer's for more than a decade, and now, in the late stages, resides at Menorah Park. His memory is spotty, it's hard to converse, and it would be natural to conclude that visiting is a waste of time. But the men mentioned in the dedication each visit Nick and Jan sends a card or note, every week. These gestures bring cheer, a break in the monotony, and perhaps most important of all, say to his family, Nick is not forgotten. He is still a beloved child of God, and dear friend. I can't help but think their actions reveal a deeper truth than what meets the eye: Jesus Christ is alive. The proclamation we make on Easter that Christ is risen indeed means that he is with us always, imbuing each one of our days with meaning, our lives with purpose and our hearts with joy.

Jaroslav Pelikan was a church historian, Yale professor, and author who died this past year. He stood out because even though his writing demonstrated scholarship of the first order, undergraduates showed up in droves for his course on Jesus, and envious New Haven townspeople begged to get in on his lectures. His Christian faith was universal yet personal; brilliant yet accessible. Near the end of his own life, he offered this "bottom line." *If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. If Christ is not risen, nothing else matters.*

Christ is risen. Christ is alive, today. And that makes all the difference. Why look for the living Lord among the dead? Friends, rejoice in Christ's presence with you today, in the glory of Easter flowers, music, brass, and beauty---and tomorrow, whatever it holds.

**NOW TO THE RULER OF ALL WORLDS, UNDYING, INVISIBLE,
THE ONLY GOD, BE HONOR AND GLORY FOREVER AND
EVER. AMEN.**

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