

## Wesley United Methodist Church

April 20, 2014

"On that First Easter Morning..."

John 20:1-18

Eureka Springs, Arkansas is the home of the Great Passion Play in the Ozarks. There is a humorous story going around about the actor who at one time played the part of Christ in this passion play. As the actor carried the cross up the hill of Golgotha, a tourist began heckling him, making fun of him and shouting insults at him. Finally, the actor had taken as much as he could take. So he drew down his cross, walked over to the tourist...and punched him out.

After the play was over, the director told him, "I know that guy was a pest, but I can't condone what you did. Besides, you're playing the part of Jesus and Jesus never, ever retaliated. So don't ever do anything like that again."

Well, the man promised he wouldn't. But the next day the heckler was back worse than before and finally the actor exploded...and punched him out again. The director said, "That's it. I have to fire you. We just can't have you behaving that way while playing the part of Jesus." The actor begged, "Please give me one more chance. I really need this job and I can handle it if it happens again." So the director decided to give him another chance. The next day he was carrying the cross up the street. sure enough, the heckler was there again. You could tell that the actor was really trying to control himself, but it was about to get the best of him. He was clinching his fists and grinding his teeth. Finally, he stopped...looked at the heckler...and said, "I'll meet you after the resurrection."

No, you won't find that story in the New Testament. It's not part of the passion narrative. It certainly doesn't actually reflect the story of Christ's character. Thank goodness. If Christ came back from the grave seeking revenge on all who persecuted him, or let him down, or denied him, who of us wouldn't be on his list? We call ourselves Christ-followers, but we are also those who from time to time have disappointed Christ. I'm glad the real story ends just the way it does.

Each of the eye-witnesses in the New Testament gives differing accounts of Christ's resurrection. Here is the Apostle John's account: Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from its entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and another disciple, who seems to be the Apostle John, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and John started for the tomb. Both were running, but John outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and, true to his impulsive character, went straight through the open door into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen and the cloth that once covered Jesus' dead body, but the body

was gone. The tomb was empty. Finally John also went inside. The Gospel writer says, "He saw and believed." However it also adds, "They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."

That's interesting, don't you think? The disciples didn't have a clue what Jesus' missing body meant. You and I come to this sacred place on this Easter Sunday morning assured that Christ has conquered death. The early disciples had no such assurance. That first Easter Sunday morning was, rather, a time for grief and reflection. They had followed a man named Jesus. They had come to know him as someone special, someone unique. They believed he was the Messiah, the one who would come to save Israel, but they were unsure what that really meant. There was certainly nothing militaristic about him. It would be strange to hear someone who's getting ready to lead a revolt against Rome say something like "love your enemies." No one recorded him saying anything like this to an adversary, "I'll take care of you after the resurrection." What kind of Messiah was he?

We know he wasn't a wimp. No wimp could have driven the tax-collectors out of the temple. No wimp in the midst of terrible suffering could have forgiven those who had put him on the cross. He was a strong man, but not a man given to vengeance or violence. More than anything else he was a man of peace. He even spoke peace to the angry waves on the sea. He was a man of healing, acceptance and love. Now he was gone. Crucified...dead...buried. That's the reality that confronted his followers on that first Easter morning. And to make things worse, his body was gone. They are confused and they are afraid. What's going on here? Who's playing these tricks?

Then the stories are tumbling in. Mary has a conversation with a man whom she thinks is the gardener and it turns out to be the risen Lord. On the same day, two men on their way to Emmaus encounter a stranger who asks them about the events that have transpired that day, and in breaking bread with the stranger, they discover they have been having a conversation with the Master himself. Later that evening in a room behind locked doors the risen Christ appears in the midst of his followers and shows them the scars on his hands and his feet and they are overjoyed to discover that the Master is alive. It's an amazing story. Jesus' followers go from despair to joy all within the bounds of one day. And that joy still resounds today...more than two thousand years later. He is alive, he is alive, he is alive!!! We hear that same message every Easter, but it never grows old. Christ has conquered death. He made the journey from this world to the next and he returned to tell us that death can no longer sting. No matter what happens, life goes on!

Dr. W. A. Criswell, the former pastor of the 1st Baptist Church of Dallas, TX, told a story he experienced on an airplane when he found himself seated next to a well-known theologian. The man told Dr. Criswell about how his little boy had recently died. He said that the child had come home from school with a fever. They

thought it was just one of those childhood things, but it turned out to be a very severe form of meningitis. The doctor said to this theologian and his stunned wife that they could not save the boy. He said the child whom they loved so much would die. And so this seminary professor, loving his son as he did, sat by his bedside while his son passed from this world to the next. It was the middle of the day, and the little boy's vision began to get cloudy and dark and he said: "Daddy, it's getting dark, isn't it?" "Yes, son it's getting dark, very dark." "Daddy, I guess it's time for me to go to sleep isn't it?" "Yes, son, it's time for you to go to sleep." The professor said his son had a way of fixing his pillow just to, and putting his head on his hands when he slept, and said, "Good night, Daddy. I will see you in the morning." He then closed his eyes in death and stepped over into heaven.

Dr. Criswell said the professor didn't say any more after that. He just looked out the window of that airplane for a long time. Then he turned back and looked at Dr. Criswell with tears coming down his cheeks and said, "Dr. Criswell, I can hardly wait til morning." That professor knew that death had been conquered and he could go on with his life til morning comes for him.

That's why church bells ring around the globe this day and why choirs lift their Alleluias. We are free to live and to love with the knowledge that, whatever happens, life and love extend beyond the grave. This is what gives us hope and a sense of peace regardless of our situation. Life is not easy and sometime we falter and fail, but Christ's resurrection tells us that life has meaning and our efforts have lasting value.

We no longer need to live in fear because Christ said, "Because I live, you will live also" (John 14:19). And that is the greatest good news in the world. Amen.