

## Wesley United Methodist Church

April 5, 2015

"While It Was Still Dark."

John 20:1-9

Welcome to this Easter Sunday 2015 the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave. This is the most important day in the year for Christians.

Unfortunately, tomorrow is the biggest day of the year for some golfers. It is the start of The Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Georgia.

You think I'm kidding about their relative importance? Years ago, Frank Chirkinian, the head of CBS Sports, discovered that The Masters and Easter Sunday happened on the same day that year. Upset at this conflict, he demanded of his colleagues, "Who sets the date of Easter? Didn't they realize that they scheduled it on The Masters weekend? Let's go to that person and have him change it."

I don't know how they resolved that conflict. I'm pretty sure they didn't change the date for Easter though if they could, they probably would. Sports are a powerful force in our society.

You know how the drama of Easter unfolds. It begins two days earlier, on Good Friday. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman authorities at the instigation of the religious authorities. He was nailed to a cross and a sword pierced his side. The soldiers affixed a sign above his head which read, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Death came rather swiftly and mercifully, after only six hours. Some crucified men lingered for days, which has led some writers to propose that Christ died of a broken heart. After a Roman centurion confirmed his death, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect for that territory, granted permission to a man Joseph of Arimathea to claim his body.

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy and pious man, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who had become a follower of Jesus. Joseph was aided by a wealthy Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. It was Nicodemus, you'll remember, who had come to Christ under the darkness of night to ask him about his teachings. It was to Nicodemus that Christ said that in order for him to enter the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus would have to be born all over again. Evidently, the message took, for when Jesus' closest disciples had fled in fear, there was Nicodemus aiding Joseph of Arimathea in claiming Jesus' body. Carefully and with much effort they removed the nails from the Master's hands and feet and lowered him to the ground. Along with a group of women who had remained close by through it all, Joseph and Nicodemus hastily prepared Christ's body for burial.

They had to act quickly, these blessed saints who were there to minister to the mangled body of their Master. The Jewish Sabbath began on Friday evening and they would need to have him in the tomb with the tomb sealed before the Sabbath began. It most certainly is not how they would have preferred to have treated Jesus. They were perhaps risking their lives in performing this act of love and honor. Certainly they were risking their reputations. That showed how much he meant to them. Indeed, he meant everything to them, and now to have to hurry through the burial preparations was salt in their own emotional wounds.

It is significant that they laid him in a borrowed grave. Jesus said on one occasion, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). He owned no property on which to be buried. The tomb belonged to this same Joseph of Arimathea. Probably he had prepared it for his own burial.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us the tomb was "hewn out in the rock." This would confirm Joseph's wealth. Only royalty or wealthy individuals could afford to have their tombs carved out of a wall of stone on in the side of a mountain. Poorer people were buried in simple graves.

Some humor says that a couple weeks after the Resurrection, someone asked Joseph of Arimathea, "Why'd you let them bury Jesus in your brand new tomb?" Joseph shrugged his shoulders and answered, "He only needed it for the weekend."

Well, that's true. He only needed it for the weekend. But the act was done. Christ now lay in the tomb and these devoted friends were back safely in their homes as they grieved and awaited the dawning of the first day of the week when they could take their time and anoint his body in a more appropriate way.

This all happened before Easter Sunday morning. And so we can appreciate the words with which John begins his description of that first Easter. He writes, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb..." What that means to me is that before the resurrection of Jesus, the world was a dark, dark place.

So, early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. When she arrived there, she saw that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. This surely hit her like a punch in the gut. Her first reaction was that someone had stolen Christ's body. It's interesting to note that her first thought had not been that he had risen. This thought seems never to have occurred to her. I mean dead people don't rise from their graves, do they? John tells us, "She came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!'" Jesus' body had been sealed in a tomb, but now it was gone. Peter and John were mystified. They began running toward the tomb, John got there first, but for some reason, he didn't go in. He bent over and looked at the strips of linen lying there. Simon Peter, of course, wasn't so timid. He went straight into the tomb. He also saw the strips of linen lying there as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally John also went inside. Our scripture says, "He saw and believed." But the writer adds, "They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead." In other words, it was still dark that first Easter morning. The disciples were in the dark just like everyone else. And Mary Magdalene who loved the Master so much was completely in the dark as well, and her heart was breaking. It's a dark world without Easter. No truer statement can be made. However, with Easter, we see hope bursting forward with every blossom of springtime.

A Christian family lost their young son in a tragic accident on Good Friday 1996. The boy's funeral was on Easter Sunday. During the memorial service the father got up and shared with his family and friends that Easter had taken a new importance. "Until you stare death eye-to-eye," he began sobbing, "Easter is just a word. It's a nice day with bunny rabbits and eggs...but when someone so precious to you dies, Easter becomes everything...an anchor in a fierce storm...a rock on which to stand...a hope that raises you above despair and keeps you going." It's a dark, dark world without Easter.

I was amused to read about an elementary school class that was taking a test. One question was, "Upon what do hibernating animals subsist during the winter?" One child wrote, "All winter long hibernating animals subsist on the hope of the coming spring." That may not have been the answer the teacher was looking for, but that doesn't keep it from having a ring of truth to it. We do subsist on hope. There is amazing power in hope and hope is what Easter is all about. Without Easter this is a dark, dark world. With Easter, hope bursts forward with every blossom of springtime. And this leads me to say one last thing: thank God for Easter.