

Easter Day 2019 Sermon

Luke 24: 1 - 12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5 The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 Now it was Mary Mag'dalene, Joan'na, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12 But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

The women come to the tomb expecting to find Jesus' dead body. But when they get there, they find that the stone which had covered the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away. They are "perplexed" by this, Luke tells us. Then, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes appear beside them, and the women are (understandably!) terrified. These two luminous men tell the women that Jesus has been raised from the dead; and the women go and tell the other disciples what they have seen and heard. But the other disciples do not believe them.

First puzzlement, then terror, then disbelief – *this* is the story Luke's Gospel tells of that first Easter morning. In fact, if we read the accounts of the resurrection in all of the Gospels, we will discover that **no** one, in **any** of the Gospel accounts, *expects* the resurrection.

And it's no wonder! For, as one author puts it, "If the dead don't stay dead, what can you count on?"

What *can* we count on? That's a question that goes to the heart of the meaning of Easter. What does the death and resurrection of Jesus tell us about what we can **count** on in this world, in this life?

Is the message of Easter like that song by Bobby McFerrin – "Don't worry, Be happy!"? According to biblical scholar N.T. Wright, that's what many people think: that Easter is basically a happy ending after the horror scene of Good Friday. If they think of Good Friday at all, they say to themselves, "Oh, that's all right, he came back to life; so everything's OK!"¹ But that's the *fairy tale* version of Easter. No one who has walked alongside Jesus this past Holy Week, when he

was betrayed and denied by his best friends, mocked and spat upon and flogged, and suffered the most excruciating death imaginable – no one who has, in his or her **own** life, suffered *similar* betrayals, shaming, and profound pain, grief and suffering – would easily resonate with an Easter message that blithely said, “It’s OK; everything will be alright.” Easter is not just a happy ending to a sad story.

But if the message of Easter is NOT a glib and simplistic “everything will be alright,” what *does* Easter tell us about what we can count on in this world, in this life?

Maundy Thursday and Good Friday tell us very clearly that **one** thing we can count on in this world is that there will be suffering. Easter does not come without Jesus first being betrayed, abandoned, denied, humiliated, and crucified. **He** does not avoid suffering and death; nor can **we**. In his farewell message to his disciples the night before he is crucified, Jesus tells them, “In this world you **will** have suffering.” But then he quickly adds: “Yet take heart! I have overcome the world.” (*John 16:33*) It is a reference back to the first chapter of John’s Gospel, where we are told, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not **overcome** it.” (John 1:5)

We can count on suffering in this life; we can count on darkness; but we can also count on the fact that darkness and suffering do not overcome God’s Light and Life. We will see this *graphically* depicted **next** Sunday, when our Gospel tells us that the resurrected Jesus, who has overcome death, nonetheless still bears the marks of the nails in his hands and the spear-wound in his side. Darkness and suffering are not *eliminated*; they are incorporated into, and transformed by, a *greater* Light and Life.

At our service on Good Friday, I mentioned that, along with Fr. Richard Rohr and a growing number of Christian authors, I do not believe that Jesus’ death on the cross was a *transaction* by which Jesus paid our debt of sin to God, thus allowing God to fully love us once more. Rather, I suggested that we take to heart what biblical scholar N.T. Wright says about the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross: “As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross,” Dr. Wright notes, “the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love.” Jesus’ willing death on the cross is the final self-emptying in a life in which he was constantly pouring himself out for others, emptying his life and love and energies into others. What we see on the cross is not a transaction Jesus makes to pay our debt, or to satisfy God’s wrath or God’s justice (as if God cannot forgive!); what we see on the cross “is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love.”

And my friends, it is this very self-giving, self-emptying love which death and darkness *cannot* overcome. And who is it that is **doing** the self-giving, the self-emptying? The One whom John, at the beginning of this Gospel, calls the “Word made flesh” – the **same** One through whom the universe was created!

There is a quote attributed to Albert Einstein which says: “The most important question you can ever ask is, ‘Is the universe a friendly place, or not?’”²

Easter tells us that we can count on the fact that, at the level of its very DNA, the universe **is** a *friendly* place. For it was created, and is sustained, by a God who loved the world so much that he emptied himself into human flesh, emptied his life-energy into healing and restoring people to wholeness, and then, loving us “to the end,” emptied his life on a cross in a final, outrageous, breathtaking act of total self-giving love – a love is so powerful that darkness and suffering cannot overcome it.

And as a result, what we **cannot** count in this this world, in this life, is that everything that is dead will necessarily stay that way.

AMEN

1 from a sermon by N.T. Wright at the Easter Vigil, 2010

2 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-the-doubt/201601/is-the-universe-friendly-you-decide>