

## LELC Easter Day 2019

Week by week, through the Sundays of Lent, I have been talking about how the systemic evil of Jesus' day, the social, political, and economic powers of Roman-occupied Galilee and Judea were pretty opposed to just about everything Jesus was doing and teaching in his years of ministry. They didn't like that he healed people – for free. They didn't like that he ate with riffraff, sinners and outcasts, treating them like they were real people, worthy of love and respect. The powers that be didn't like that Jesus disrupted their abuse and exploitation of the least powerful. Or that Jesus repeatedly rejected their systems of power-over and violence; calling them out for their greed, arrogance, and cruelty.

Jesus went around teaching people a whole other way of being: a way of radically inclusive communities that lived out equally radical equality and mutual care. It was no surprise that the keepers of the status quo – both the political and religious yippity yups – wanted to be rid of him. The protest march into Jerusalem and the disruptive act of civil disobedience in the Temple on Palm Sunday were the last straw. The keepers of the status quo set out to get rid of Jesus once and for all, and all his freaky followers if need be.

All it took was someone who was just as sucked in by the Devil and the Devil's evil ways as they were, someone who was willing to stoop to their level and use violence to get what he wanted. Judas took the bait and the keepers of the status quo thought that, at last, they would have what they wanted: an end to this whole Jesus nonsense. Kill the leader and all the followers will get a good dose of reality and get back in their place. I imagine the powerful who ridiculed Jesus on that cross went to bed that Friday night feeling pretty smug; secure in the thought that, while there might be one or two rebels who might need to be dealt with, the whole Jesus problem would soon be over. The forces of evil that keep power in the hands of the privileged few breathed a sigh of relief. The same-old, same-old ways of the world were safely intact.

The followers of Jesus, on the other hand, where were they? Hiding probably. Grief-stricken and afraid. Their cries of anguish at the loss of Jesus and all the hopes and dreams he embodied were stifled only by their fears, their fear that they would be next, hunted down and hung to die too.

In that context, on what appeared to be yet another day when the forces of evil: greed and violence and fear, had won yet again, we read that, "On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared."

~~had prepared.~~” Grief or not, fear or not; there was task that needed to be tended to. Some combination of love and duty compelled them to rise and go. Jesus’ lifeless body needed to be properly anointed for burial. They brought the spices, probably just the usual, nothing more, but certainly nothing less. I suspect these women could not imagine not doing this one last final act of tender loving care for one they had loved so well.

In my experience, in the midst of grief – even the most tragic of losses and anguished grief, somehow life always finds a way to demand that we, the living, go on. Often as not, a child cries and someone has to get up and go tend to that little one. Life demands to go on. The women going to the tomb that morning were only doing what life going on demanded of them: the basic tending to the tasks of loving. Doing what needed to be done. And sometimes – in the midst of the death-dealing brokenness of life’s defeats and loss and heartbreak – that is all we can manage to do. We put one foot in front of the other and life goes on.

But this day, we remember and celebrate that those women, who went expecting nothing more than the stark confirmation that the same-old, same-old ways of the world had destroyed Jesus the One in whom they hoped, were met with the glorious discovery that God had other plans.

What?! The stone was rolled away. The body was not there. They were met by an angel who asked the oddest of questions; why were they looking for the living among the dead? And the strangest of messages: that Jesus wasn’t there, that he had risen. What on earth?! It is none other than the great and glorious news that God did not, does not, ever let the same-old, same-old ways of greed and violence, fear and death (especially not fear and death) have the last word.

No doubt, those women had expected that the story of Jesus was over. All the hopes that they had in Jesus, that God would bring about God’s new creation, a new kingdom where everyone was loved and everyone mattered was lost, left to lie forgotten in their memories as but a dream they once had shared. But what they found instead was that was not what God had in mind. What the followers of Jesus saw as the end of the story was, to God, only the beginning.

You see, you can’t kill someone who has freely offered his life. Jesus couldn’t die because you can’t take a life that is being freely given. So Jesus’ death on that cross, his giving of himself, of his own life, in obedience to God’s way of love was just the beginning. Now God raised Jesus up from the grave to live on in eternity,

to reveal God's way of love to those first few fear-filled followers, to the scores of courageous early Christians, and to the thousands of millions of Jesus-followers who have come to know a connection to God's love and forgiveness and a life abundant in that risen one ever since.

Those early Christians experienced Jesus' presence alive among them as they gathered in his name, as they shared food, and cared for one another. (Fed the hungry, clothed the naked, ....) His presence gave them the courage it took to continue to gather in radical community, to live out all that he had taught them – respecting and caring for everyone: no exceptions. They proclaimed the folly of Jesus' self-giving love on that cross and how it saved them from the death-dealing same-old, same-old way of the world.

As they came to understand and articulate that Jesus was risen, that he was somehow still alive among them in ways that defied explanation, they also came to believe that God would raise them up too. Jesus was but the first fruits of the resurrection from the dead. They too would have a new life, a resurrection to eternal life. This is what made them bold, fearless even. Fearless enough to continue to gather and to live out all they had learned from Jesus even when that meant they might be persecuted and face their own deaths.

In my opinion, one of the most subtle and devious things the Devil has managed to do over the course of human history has been to strip away all the real world, here and now, implications that Jesus' teachings, his life and death, had for those early Christians. I think it has been the craftiness of the Devil to make Jesus' death on the cross about nothing more than giving mental assent to a particular theological proposition about Jesus in order to go to heaven when you die.

Please hear me correctly. I'm not saying this promise of resurrection to eternal life that we have in Jesus is not important. To those facing death – be it their own or that of a loved one – this promise brings immense comfort. I'm counting on it myself. *Comfort not the only purpose of this cosmic event.*

But, and here is the essential "but", the promise of resurrection to eternal life was never meant to be the "be all and end all." Eternal life with God is not the goal of our faith or of our following Jesus. This promise of eternal life was, for those early Christians, the foundation, no – the springboard that launched them into a bold new way of living out the love they had come to know in Jesus.

This promise of eternal life is meant to launch us into boldly living out that same love in our time. Following a risen Lord means we can be living out the love that seeks to find the lost, welcome the least, accompany the last, and even seek to dismantle the very systems of evil that harm or destroy the little ones among us, Daring to embody the Gospel, you might call it.

Now, one last thing. And this one is for all y'all who are here out of respect for grandma or grandpa, mom or dad, but who just aren't too sure about this whole Jesus is risen deal. The rest of y'all can close your ears for a bit.

I want to get back to the last little bit of our Gospel text for today. The part where the angels remind the women about what Jesus had said, and them remembering (but still probably not totally understanding). Then the text tells us the women went back to tell the guys, and to the guys it all "~~seemed an idle tale and they did not believe them.~~" I get how a person could think it all this "Jesus is risen" stuff is just "an idle tale." Been there myself. So I never want to be seen as being in the crowd of folks who are trying to tell you what you should or shouldn't believe. And I'm sure not going to be one of the ones who like to add in some nasty kind of "or else" to go with it.

I can only stand here, with my science background and all, and tell you I believe Jesus is risen. I believe it with all my heart and soul. Now I sure don't believe because somebody told me I should. I believe Jesus is alive because I have experienced him alive in my own life. In ways that I can't explain, but that I also cannot ~~deny~~ <sup>explain away.</sup> Jesus, the friendly face of the Sacred, has been present with me, in moments of pain and alone-ness, when I've been scared and uncertain. And since then I've learned to recognize him also in moments of joy and finding courage. Like those women way back when I too can proclaim, he is risen, he is living.

My prayer for you this Easter is that one day, Jesus will make himself present and alive to you too. If there haven't been already, there will be times in your life that become marked by the cross, touched by the broken-ness of the sin of the world. That of others, and your own. My prayer is that in those moments, in ways that can't quite be understood, but also can't be explained away, Jesus will be alive in your life. Giving you new hope and new joy. Raising you up to new life. It seems to be God's specialty.

Until then, we will celebrate it for you, with you. And we'll do our humble best to live it out. Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!. Amen.