

Calvary United Methodist Church  
April 21, 2019  
9:30 AM Service

## **THE EASTER MESSAGE**

Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

### **Message:**

Luke 24:1-12

May God bless the hearing and reading and preaching of the Word. Amen.

So, I greet you again with this historic blessing: Christ is risen! He has risen indeed! And this is the Good News of Easter. This is the day that the Lord has made by raising Jesus from the dead and all that is asked of us is simply to rejoice and to be glad in it.

Now, on Good Friday, the powers of death did their dirty worst. But on Easter, what we see is God's level best. At Easter means that death does not have the last word, but life does and love does. That hatred and death is defeated. It's still around, isn't it? But it is in check and one day check mate.

So, as the Psalmist proclaims: this is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.

I am told that in medieval times, particularly in Bavaria, there was remarkable custom in the churches that at the end of the Easter service, the priest would come down among the people. He would lead the congregation in something called the Easter laughter. He would tell funny stories, sing comic songs, tell jokes and everybody would just be rolling in their pews with laughter. And the laughter echoed in the church as a living witness of joy born out of the great news of this day that Christ is alive and among us and the defeat happened to death and the powers of evil and the devil himself, that all the forces that schemed to kill him, the wrath, the hate, the fear, the violence, the mighty powers of kings and empires all of these failed to be powerful and instead they have become ridiculously absurd because they don't have the ultimate power.

So, the laughter of God, the laughter of the people would roll out in the springtime world through the doors of the church and out into where the story would be told in all the streets.

And so we with Christians everywhere, we joyfully proclaim this story once again, which began in darkness, with women going to the tomb. And you have to ask: where are the men? Well, they are still in the upper room, amid stale wine and fading leftovers from the Passover feast, but they are in great fear. And not only are they beside themselves with fear and the authorities who they assume would kill them, they are devastated not only by the loss of their teacher, but by their abandonment of him, their dearest friend.

And so, their world had come to an end and here they are paralyzed by fear. And the memory of that malignant Friday is very fresh in their minds, that they knew Jesus hung between heaven and earth on a cross, beaten, humiliated, tormented, abused, all of his disciples save for the women, stayed at this very safe distance to protect themselves.

And then it was fitting that once more the women would go and look after him, so they went to that garden tomb and they wanted to be there at the very end, but instead they got a brand new beginning. In the Gospel there they wanted to just finish their last act of love and put the spices and embalm the body of Jesus, but they found that the stone was rolled away, the body was missing. And in their confusion, two angels show up who have these clothes gleaming like lightening, the scripture says, and they say so calmly: Why are you looking for the living among the dead? They said: He's not here; he has risen, just as he told you. And it reminded the women what Jesus himself had said and it's all coming back, too phenomenal almost to take in at once and so they run back to the upper room.

The men hear the story and dismissed them as though they are crazy, this is nonsense. But what would you have thought? Nobody rises from the dead. They don't come back. But here they had this crazy story that Jesus is alive and he's with them and they can go and meet him again in Galilee.

And so those men in that upper room have a decision and it is doubt or it's belief. And that is the same decision we have on this Easter Sunday, that all we have is their witness. All we have is faith. You can find all kinds of things we can call proofs, but what we have is simply faith. You can have abstract theologies, you can have abstract thoughts, you could try to reason it, you could try to dismiss it, but the question really is: can God do this? Can reality, the reality of death, be reversed so that it now goes from life to death to life again?

We have no proof, we have no evidence. We have no fingerprints, we have no video tapes. I wish we did. What we have is the testimony of the people least believed: the women who had no voice, no vote, no standing, in their community, but these are the ones that God has chosen to tell the story. They and a group of formerly frightened men. And they believed it so much that they spent the rest of their lives telling this story that Jesus has arisen from the dead and has conquered death and the grave and this is God's great joke on death.

And one of the proofs that they offer is simply in their lives. Who would die for a lie? And when Jesus was raised from the dead that began a great reversal in human history that death no longer consumes life and the time is coming when death will be swallowed up by life itself and when it does, all creation and all people and everything in creation will ring with Easter laughter.

So, the Easter truth that we live by is simply this: that God gives us grace in the worst of times; that all things will work together for good to those who love God, who are the called according to His purposes and when the worst has happened, the Easter message reminds us

that death does not have the final word. Only God does and it is joy and joy is at work.

We stood in the cemetery at 6:30 this morning. It was actually a beautiful scene of sunrise, the spring air, the birds chirping, all of us standing there because all of us will one day walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but we are there to affirm Christ is alive and when we walk through that valley, he will walk with us.

Now, this Easter message is not understood intellectually, it is understood simply by taking the risk of living into it, a stepping out in faith and believing it. And to believe is to believe that a new day is coming. In fact, the day is already dawning upon us when God's Kingdom will cover this earth. It is to believe that God is at work redeeming all people and redeeming all things. It is to believe that the worst of us by grace are able to turn around and claim our truest heritage as children of God. It is to believe that the world is not going to Hell in a handbasket, but rather that it has a future, hope and a destiny and because of this, we can live without fear. Fear marks our time. It marks our age. The media, the politicians, well, everything, has made us crazy with fear. But we don't have to live that way because Jesus comes to us and says: fear not.

And we can also let go of those hurts and those wounds and find that as we do, not only are we healed, but those we have withheld forgiveness from, who have not forgiven us.

And the best thing of all is that every day we find that Jesus is present with us. That's the one thing that sets apart this faith: that Christ is risen and is alive in you and when you are quiet enough to understand and to hear you will sense his presence very near to. And someday, sooner or later, you and I will stare at death, feel the breath on our neck, give up everything we know, everything we have, everything we love here. We have to come to terms with this, that life, however we've lived it, is one of which goes only in a straight line. But because Christ has been raised from the dead, there is no fear, that death becomes a friend and gives us the power to live now not fearing it. I don't think that God sees His loved ones die. He only sees them coming home.

And yes, our eyes will close here. We will open them in the presence of Christ and I do believe he will reach out that nailed scarred hand. He will welcome us with joy unspeakable and full of glory, as St. Paul says and the joy that floods our soul will ring throughout eternity. And because of that hope, you can live here right now in the here now, just with that same joy and faith and hope and love. You don't have to wait. And God gives you this peace, he gives you this purpose, and you know what? He gives you laughter.

We all should be flying Frisbees today because Christ has risen! (He has risen indeed.) Amen.