

Easter: Triumph of God
Luke 24:1-6, 13-16
April 8, 2012
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As a child, Easter was one of the big four that I looked forward to every year. There was Christmas in the winter, my birthday in the summer, Halloween in the fall, and Easter in the spring. Even though two of the four had spiritual significance, those days were more about presents and eating candy. That was true for Easter. We had a certain ritual leading up to Easter. For weeks, my mother would collect egg shells. Every time she cracked open an egg, she would rinse it out and place it in a container by the kitchen sink. We would watch as the container filled. And on Saturday night before Easter, she would fill the kitchen table with coffee cups and we would drop the little colored pills into the vinegar and we would start coloring eggs. I didn't realize for a long time that Easter eggs could actually be whole eggs. Ours were always fractured eggs. My sisters and I would try to decorate the coolest egg. That night we would go to bed dreaming of the Easter bunny and when we woke up, we knew the Easter bunny had hidden a basket for each one of us. When we found our basket, inside there would be some of the eggs we colored and candy and always a hollow chocolate bunny. What's the first part you ate? I would always eat the ears first. And after we came home from church, we took turns hiding the Easter eggs outside if the weather was nice which it usually wasn't or inside. That was Easter. That part is still Easter. Even though our daughters now live far from home, this week they each received a basket in the mail from the Easter bunny – and this afternoon, I am going to my parent's home and I know there will be an Easter basket there waiting for me. But there was a point in my life where I wondered is that all there is to Easter? Because I no longer had to wait until Easter to get candy, so could there be something more – something more than Easter brunch and Easter lilies and Easter clothes and family gathering. All that stuff is fine but it is here one day and gone tomorrow. Is that all there is to Easter?

There is something profound about Easter, and if we trusted in it could change our lives. Easter is the greatest event in human history. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. What that means is that sin, evil, hate, hurt, suffering and tragedy and even death will not have the final word in our lives. It is an astounding message of hope and triumph. If it is true.

Can I prove that to you? Only if you choose to believe the witnesses. You know about witnesses. A few years ago, I was merging into traffic on the freeway. Suddenly the driver two cars in front of me slammed on the brakes, but the driver in front of me could not stop, swerved to the right but still hit the car in front rather hard and went down into the ditch. I narrowly missed them both by pulling over to the shoulder. I got out of my car and ran to the car in the ditch. The air bags had deployed and the woman who was driving was dazed and the car was still moving. I opened the door, reached in to turn off the ignition, helped her out of the car and waited for help. When the police officer arrived he asked me what happened. I was a witness. All I could do was tell him what I experienced. Either he believed me or he didn't.

All I can do this morning is tell what witnesses experienced. They saw the risen Jesus. They walked with him, talked with him, ate with him, and even touched his wounds and by doing so they were convinced. The Bible tells us that those who saw the risen Jesus numbered 500. Either we believe the witnesses or we don't. But we also have every person over the past 2000 years who said, "I experienced Jesus Christ in my life". "I saw him in this way" or "I felt him this way". "He changed my life." Could you be one of the witnesses?

Early on what would be the first Easter morning, women arrived at the tomb and found it empty. That's not what they expected. They didn't leave home that morning saying, "We're taking spices just in case he's still dead." Dead people stay dead. Jesus was dead. They saw it happen. They buried him. His disciples did not expect the resurrection. If Luke was making this up, he would not have had women going to the tomb because in the first century, women were not regarded as credible witnesses. It's why the disciple had to see for themselves. They saw an empty tomb but Luke says that's all they saw – until the road to Emmaus. **that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened.** I'll bet they were! Why did God let this happen? If God is good and all powerful, this wouldn't happen. Maybe it means God is not all powerful and if God isn't all powerful then maybe God isn't good. Maybe there is no God. This journey to Emmaus was a journey of disappointment, sadness and despair. And as they were talking, Luke says that Jesus came alongside them but they didn't recognize him. They didn't know it was Jesus, because they knew Jesus was dead. This stranger to them asked what they were talking about but **They stood still, their faces downcast.** Barclay translates it this way: **Their faces were twisted with grief.** Every one of us will take a journey to Emmaus – some of us more than once. A journey where our faces are twisted with grief, a journey where the world seems to be crumbling around us and there is no hope. If there is a God, then how did this happen? For some, your journey to Emmaus is a walk to the unemployment line. How can I be 40 or 50 and be unemployed? This is not how I pictured my life. How did God let this happen? Or maybe it is a walk away from the doctor's office when you received a diagnosis that terrifies you. It's your journey to Emmaus. Or maybe it is when you walk from the courthouse after your marriage is pronounced dissolved. And you make your way home and it is so empty – inside you are empty. How will I make it? Last Sunday's newspaper had an article about a man who turned 50 and took his life. 50 years old and he had nothing left to live for. And nobody knew his pain, the painful journey to Emmaus. At some point in our lives, all of us will walk on a journey to Emmaus. And when Jesus came alongside the travelers, **Jesus asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"** And they pour out their pain. Haven't you heard about Jesus of Nazareth? We thought he was innocent, but the authorities found him guilty and they killed him. And now we don't know what to do. Jesus comes alongside them but he doesn't say – "Hey guys, it's me, Jesus! Don't be sad." Instead he walks along as if a stranger and says, **"Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"** **And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.** As far as they know, Jesus is still dead. But Jesus comes alongside, listens to them and then changes their perspective. Maybe there is a God. Maybe God is at work in this. Maybe God is doing something through Jesus. Maybe all is not lost. Could there be hope after all? Life hasn't changed. They face the same struggles and challenges. They are still on the road to Emmaus, but their perspective is changed. Jesus changes how they see what is happening and that's when their eyes are opened and they recognized. That's when they saw the risen Christ. And they said: **Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road**

It's a matter of the heart. You may have seen this video. I think it fits here this morning. [YouTubevideo: stethoscope] There's a gospel song that says, "you ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart." This week one of the mothers in our church took her daughter to the doctor's office, and the nurse took her stethoscope wanting to listen to her daughter's heart. She said, "I have to see if Barney is in there." And her daughter replied: "No, no, no! ... I have Jesus in my heart", "Barney is on my underwear." Don't miss her message. She wasn't trying to be cute. You and I would say that to be cute. She knows. She knows who lives within her heart. She is the witness to the resurrection.

What are we doing here today? You are not here to listen to me. This is not about me. We've heard outstanding music, but we are not here for the music. We have come here to meet with the risen Christ. When you woke up this morning and you thought about going to church or someone else helped you think about going to church – it was not your idea or their idea – we were just listening to the invitation from the one who wants to meet with you this day. Were not your hearts burning?

A couple of the summers when I was going to school, I worked as a nurse's aid in a nursing home in Montevideo. I worked the evening shift in the wing that required constant nursing care and each night there were several residents that I would help into bed. There was one woman in particular that I have not forgotten. She had dementia maybe even Alzheimer's and as often as I helped her get ready for bed she did not remember me or much of anything else, didn't even realize she was in a nursing home. But as I would tuck her in, she wanted me to say a prayer with her and she would lead – "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." It was the one reality that still lived deep within her and it never let go of her. And then we would sing: "Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so."

For those who believe, who welcome Jesus into their lives – that is hope, a hope that will never let go. Is that your witness? This is Easter and Jesus has come here to meet with you. Let's invite him in.

Let's pray:

Jesus, I want to know your presence in my life. I haven't always listened to you. I have not followed in your way. Forgive me. I trust in your love for me. I trust you with my life. Help me to follow you and to see you in my life. Amen.

Prayer

Gracious and Patient God, we come before you with so many things which weigh us down. We would like an "easy" faith, one that doesn't cause us to look within ourselves, but faith is not easy. It requires our souls. Forgive us, God, for all those things which we have neglected to do that would have helped someone else to be closer to you. Heal our hearts from the wounds which have been inflicted upon us by the anger and misunderstandings which occur in relationships. Prepare our lives to be of service to you. Open us up to the joy of the resurrection. Help us to fully experience the risen Christ. We long for your presence and your healing touch. Amen.

Study Guide

Monday Read: Isaiah 56-58

Over the past six weeks, we have been reading the book of Isaiah. This week, we will completed our study of Isaiah. Chapters 56-66 can be dated to the period when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem, began rebuilding the Temple, and reestablishing Judaism. The books of Haggai and Zechariah also describe this period. Today's reading provides evidence of the disputes that emerged among the people which dominated the shaping of Judaism. Two main claims were being made.

- In Isaiah 58:6-8, there is an insistence that Judaism must practice inclusiveness within the community: "all who keep the Sabbath". How hard is it to include those whom others would

exclude? This was also a point of contention among the early Christians and without Paul's insistence Christianity might have been open to Jews only.

- The other dispute in Isaiah 58:6-7 argues for a faith that emphasizes the care and wellbeing of neighbors. Faith must have an outward focus. Where do you see such a focus in this church?

Tuesday Read Isaiah 59-60

We see how justice is the major theme of these final chapters of Isaiah. Chapter 59 begins with a long poem that reflects the conflict within the community. Isaiah is willing to enter into serious discussions with those who hold other viewpoints. Something is missing within this community, namely that the covenant agreement is not being honored. Some want to blame God for this breakdown in the relationship.

- Isaiah 59:1 refutes the claim that God is responsible. When bad things happen that are beyond your ability to control, what role is God playing? Is God responsible?
- By the end of the chapter, it is clear that God is innocent. It is the people who are guilty of breaking the covenant. We often go through times when we wonder if what we suffer comes from God (i.e. God is responsible for what's happening to me). If you have experienced such a time, what enabled you to move beyond that moment to embrace God's love and faithfulness?

Wednesday Read Isaiah 60-62

In chapters 56-59, we saw the deep divisions that divided those returning from the Exile. Chapters 60-62 reflect an excitement about the future. Chapter 60 is filled with good news to the emerging Jewish community. The writing seems to be a divine oracle of the promise from God's own mouth. God promises to work for the good of Jerusalem. Chapter 61 continues the promise of God to reverse the fortunes and coming abundance of Jerusalem. In the middle of the chapter there is a conversation between God and a human speaker. This indicates how closely God's resolve is connected with human vocation.

- How does good news and a message of hope empower us to accomplish far more than we imagined possible? The New Testament tells us this is the power of the Holy Spirit.
- In Isaiah 62:7, God asks the people to "give him no rest" but to intercede for Jerusalem and Israel – that is, to pray continually. How can praying for others – turning their needs (and our own) over to God accomplish what God wants?

Thursday Read Isaiah 63-64

The beautiful poetry of the previous chapters that anticipates God's breaking into the world is now replaced with the action of a warrior. The enemies will become subservient. Then in verse 7, the mood shifts again, praising God for God's goodness and love. Isaiah called on God to display his power.

- Israel realized that God identified with their sufferings as God does with us today. How do you respond to those who would ask – where is God and why is God not working on our behalf?
- Isaiah says (64:8): "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." How is God shaping you?

Friday Read Isaiah 65-66

Throughout the book of Isaiah, God is the very center of Israel's life. God is always available. In verses 17-25, God is about to bring into being a new heaven, new earth and new Jerusalem. It is only for those who are obedient to God's ways. This newness will be known by its peace, justice, righteousness and faithfulness. Chapter 66 speaks of "right worship" over against political power. God's focus is upon those who are humble and contrite. There is no easy path for those who are serious about their faith. We are called to examine our path to God in our daily living.

- There is always the issue of Inclusiveness versus exclusiveness. It was a problem in Isaiah's time. It is still a problem today. Who are included in God's kingdom and who is excluded? Isaiah would say that those who follow God's way will always be included in God's kingdom.
- Read Revelation 21:1-5. How is this vision similar to the vision with which Isaiah concludes?

Saturday Read Psalm 88

Today's reading will prepare us for the new preaching series that begins tomorrow – Making sense of God's will. Psalm 88 is one of many psalms of lament. It is a cry, a prayer from one on the edge of death. The writer's whole life has been lived near the grave. Maybe your life has been filled with struggle and grief and so much so that it is all-consuming.

- The writer knows the nature of God, identifying what God could or should provide, and yet that's not what the writer experiences. What is it that God could provide? What do you experience that prevents the best of God from touching your life?
- The Psalm ends as it began - with utter hopelessness. This is where we will begin in our study over these next three weeks. Read Psalm 89:1. Sometimes we need help in stepping back from the reality of the moment and allowing others to help us see the fullness and richness of what God has to offer. Where do you see God at work when others suffer?