



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE DAWN OF LIFE”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-215; Luke 24:1-12

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019
for the Sunrise Service at the Battery.*

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. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 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. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 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.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: *Thanks be to God.*

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

If there are any among us this morning who feel as though some past experience continues to define who they are; if there is anyone who, in the face of life and living, finds it difficult to be hopeful; if anyone finds themselves longing to be reassured in their faith, then this day is for you! Because, on this day of days, the story of God’s salvation, which testifies to who we really are – it moved decidedly in the direction of life, which, by grace through faith, proves to be an abundant life, filled with faith and hope and love. Yet, because life, at times, can be difficult, and precisely because Good Friday remains part of that story...we begin our reflection of Easter through the eyes of those people who were not so different from us...Jesus’ first disciples.

They were the ones whom Jesus called – the ones who had followed Jesus for nearly three years and knew him better than anyone else...they were the ones who were blessed to have seen the very Son of God face-to-face. And having seen Jesus up close for so long, having witnessed firsthand the healings and the miracles...oh, I imagine them having said, in a manner

of speaking: "If ever we had a winner, we have it in Jesus the Christ." After all, Jesus possessed the kind of God-given power and authority that captivated and changed people. Crowds flocked to him as he taught as no one had taught before, and not as the Scribes and the Pharisees.

In fact, on the occasion that Jesus entered the Holy City of Jerusalem to begin the final week of his life, one Gospel writer tells us that: "all Jerusalem came out." And I suspect that some of them came out because they knew him...maybe they had been born blind and Jesus had restored their sight; maybe they had been caught in the act of adultery and shown mercy, forgiveness and called upon to go and sin no more; maybe they had heard some of the amazing stories that surrounded his life and ministry, like the time when Jesus fed 5,000 people with only two loaves of bread and a few fish.

Imagine how excited the disciples must have been to be a part of last week's Palm Sunday parade...to be so closely associated with Jesus who not only gave meaning and purpose to their life and their life together, but who now inspired a whole city to come out. Oh, but just as a beautiful spring afternoon is cut short by a thunderstorm, so too was this triumphant parade seemingly and abruptly cut short as well.

On Good Friday, we began our annual Stations of the Cross procession at the Gazebo behind you, and, as we walked through the city, we considered again some of the final moments of Jesus. Some of his last words.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark we hear Jesus say, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In Luke we read: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And in the Gospel according to John, Jesus simply says: "It is finished." And as far as the disciples were concerned, it was finished. No longer could they sit in the stands and shout "Hallelujah," because, as far as they were concerned, the parade was over, and, as Jesus was soon to be handed over to the authorities and killed, it seemed to be the most catastrophic defeat of all time.

It is in this way that the disciples are so very much like us. We who perhaps throughout another day have felt the pressures of the world mount upon us; we who have also been tempted to deny Jesus and turn from him; we who would assume that death marks the end of the story...oh, if we have lived at all, then we too have experienced the fallenness of humanity, but friends, today we celebrate the risenness of Christ! For on this day some 2000 years ago, God revealed to his disciples, and, through the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, he reveals to us, that God has the capacity to part the waters, to make a way when there seems to be no way at all; and, yes, God has the power to conquer death!

Consider how it is that there's not a single place in the New Testament where someone dies in the presence of Jesus; and, on the occasion when someone does die, Jesus reverses death and brings them back to life. Take Lazarus, for example. The Gospel of John goes to great lengths to let us know that Lazarus really died; and so, when Jesus' disciples suggest that maybe Lazarus has gone to sleep, Jesus says it so bluntly that it cannot be missed: "Lazarus is dead."

When Jesus finally arrives in Bethany and learns that Lazarus has been dead for three days, Jesus cries. It's the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." You know, too often we forget that Jesus weeps for us – we forget that God's heart breaks when ours does. But we are also prone to forget another very important thing, and that is this: the last word – the definitive word – it always belongs to God.

Jesus said with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth from the grave." And he did! And we do! And this is not to suggest that we will not all die. Lazarus really died! He was raised from death to life, but he would one day die again.

Death is real. Jesus' death was real! Consider how the Apostle's Creed goes to such lengths to communicate Jesus' death – it says he was crucified, dead and buried. Any one of those words would have expressed the reality of death well enough. Why is the church compelled to say all three? Well, I for one believe that it is because the framers of the creed wanted us to know that Jesus really died...and so will we. And most of the time death is not pretty; it isn't beautiful. Sometimes it is long and drawn out, and, other times, it arrives as an intruder upon life, as it apparently did with Lazarus.

For me to stand up here and to say that simply because someone believes that Jesus is the son of God that somehow they are exempt from the pain and suffering which sometimes accompanies a physical death, would be to preach from something other than the Bible. What the Bible does say is that God has the last word, even when other voices seem to prevail...and, at the end of the day, God's Word is about life!

Oh, it may have sounded like Pilate had the last word as he washed his hands and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood..." It may have appeared that Judas had the last word; Judas, who, for his 30 pieces of silver, had since hanged himself. It may have looked like the soldiers who mocked Jesus had the last word as they took off his purple garments and put his own clothes back on him and led him to be crucified. But when it comes right down to it, Pilate had no power over Jesus that God would not allow him to have. And that kiss of betrayal could never thwart the loving purposes of God. And the clothes on Jesus back, they were the garments of a new kind of king, not a king who would sway a scepter, mind you, but a king who would wield a cross for far greater things.

Oh, the final word always belongs to God and God's is a word of **comfort** for all those who face the Pilate's of this world, and who even now find themselves yielding to their verdicts; it is a word of **assurance** for any and all who know what it means to be betrayed, either by people or life's ambitions or by our own self-destructive habits; it is also a word of **peace** for all those who find themselves stripped down to nothing and who feel washed up and spiritually deprived. For all such people, this day, this dawn, it is about a new message! It is about a new hope and a new life that comes from the grandeur and the glory of the Risen Christ.

And, oh, how Jesus suffered to make it so! He died to make it so! When Jesus cried out from the cross and quoted the first line of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," wasn't that an apt description for what Jesus was experiencing? And does it not stand to

reason if Jesus wept for Lazarus, how much more so did God in heaven weep over his only Son, our Lord...the very one in whom he was well pleased.

Make no mistake about it, God could have stopped Jesus' death on the cross at any moment. God could have taken that vinegar on the hyssop branch that they gave Jesus to drink –could have taken that bitter drink and made of it the sweetest wine this side of heaven. God could have yanked Jesus from that tree with a legion of angels numbering the stars and lowered him down gently...lest he dash his foot against a stone.

But God didn't do any of that. No! God did something much, much better. God showed us that just when we think that it is time to throw in the towel and give up...that Jesus Christ has already won the victory. And it is indeed none other than Jesus' victory – there was nothing that we could do to make ourselves right with God. We could not atone for our sins – we needed Jesus to do that for us. Yes, it is a victory over sin and death in which we share, no doubt, but it was God's victory to win. And in this way, isn't it wonderful to know that we have a Savior who understands exactly what it feels like to be alone; and to know that, no matter how far apart from God we feel, Jesus has been farther still on our behalf.

I like to think of it in this way: God doesn't save us *from* death at Easter...He saves us *through* death at Easter. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Friends, the triumph of Easter is based entirely upon what Jesus did on this day so many years ago. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "If Christ is not raised from the dead, then your faith is in vain, and we are most to be pitied."

Oh, praise be to God, Jesus' life didn't end with the crucifixion. Had it ended there, I suppose we would have also been left with the disciple Peter having denied Jesus three times -- there, after the crucifixion, huddled with his friends and acting the coward...probably wondering to himself if his old fishing nets were still any good. But, because Jesus lives, we are left with a Peter who rises to a deeper level of Christian maturity than ever before – and, by God's grace, so can we. For we are invited by the Risen Christ to a common call and ministry: to bear witness to God's redeeming love with a love of our own, a love that reaches out its hands in praise to God just as quickly as it reaches down to pick up one of the least of these. God always has the last word, and on this day of days, God says to you and to me and to the world through us: "Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!"

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, we know that there is not a single person here this morning who has not known something of defeat – or who has never felt lost, or alone or afraid. Yet yours is a victory, Gracious God, a victory over the very power of sin and death. And so we would be so bold as to ask that for those whose faith is strong, that you would make it stronger – may they know your victory in their life as never before, and for those whose faith is weak, lift them up – roll the stones away again, Dear Lord, and for those who this day have felt your Spirit move in their hearts to know you and to love you, to affirm you as Savior and Lord, assure them of your goodness, and your profound victory in their life. Let it be, Merciful God, that all your children,

wherever they are found – that they would be well equipped to celebrate life and life abundant, not just today, but forevermore, in Jesus' name. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*