



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE FACES OF EASTER”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; John 20:1-10

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, April 4, 2021
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 20:1-10

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So, she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

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.

Last week we looked at some of the people and perspectives, one might even say, the faces of Palm Sunday. The Bible presented us with the image of a large crowd of people lining the streets and spreading their cloaks on the road; some of them cutting branches from the trees and spreading them on the road. We imagine people like Zacchaeus perched in strategic locations along the way. Having heard what Jesus had done in the neighboring villages, how Jesus had healed the sick and performed various other miracles. Ah, we I imagine them finding sycamore trees or rooftops or whatever was available to them in order to see Jesus, as he passed by. Of course, there were those whose more desperate eyes searched not as much for a person as they searched for meaning and purpose. They were the ones who struggled to make sense of an overbearing world whose authorities had run roughshod over God’s people. They were the ones who hoped against hope. Praying that Jesus was, in fact, the one who would set the world right again! Ah, but for others, their eyes testified to a kind of inward plotting. The questions in their hearts may have gone something like this: “How can this man be helpful to me? How can all of this fit into what I know is best for God’s people?” One thing is for sure, no matter where they came from - no matter what their spiritual posture - we know that a great many of the people

that day, they joined in the refrain: “Hosanna,” granted, that refrain reverberated at different heights within each human soul.

Such was also the case on that first Easter morning, whereupon hearing from Mary Magdalene that the tomb was empty and that Jesus was nowhere to be found, Peter and John make haste to the tomb. The Bible goes so far as to tell us that they ran! There’s a beautiful painting of this scene, this moment in time and it is located in Paris, but it will not be found in the Louvre. The last I heard, it was in an old railway station called, Muse d’Orsay.

Just inside, there is a work of art by a Swiss artist named Eugene Burnand. It is called, *The Disciples*, because, in it, Burnand sought to capture the emotion of Peter and John as they are hearing for the first time this incredible news of Jesus’ resurrection! In the painting, the two of them appear poised, as if at a starting line, as if they have heard the countdown themselves...5...4...3...2...1. The rush of energy is almost palpable, each of them leaning headlong into the wind. But do you know what really sets Burnand’s picture apart? It’s the expressions on their faces. In the painting, John is situated just behind Peter, and his hands clasped together, but not in the scheming way. No! He appears anxious, almost scared. The look in his eyes tells us that he’s not sure he can believe what’s happening. If the body has been taken, for example, that’s one thing; but, if Jesus is alive – well, that changes everything! And John knew this as well as anyone. After all, three days earlier and at the foot of the cross, John was the only disciple to be found. He had been with Jesus right up to the bitter end, right up to the point when Jesus had said that “it is finished”, that point when into God’s hands Jesus commended his spirit and he breathed his last breath! And then there’s Peter. In the painting, Peter looks petrified. His eyes seem transfixed and they communicate all kinds of emotions, from disbelief to humility, to a kind of knowing awareness, that his recent denial of even knowing Jesus, if not the entirety of his life, it was now fully exposed. In the painting, he touches his chest, and we can almost hear him: “Could it be? Has my Savior risen from the grave?”

Friends, this is the moment we have been waiting for throughout the season of lent. We began the season 40 days ago with Ash Wednesday and we looked at the frailty of the human condition, to be sure, but we also managed to look ahead, to look forward. And that for which we have looked, and that toward which we have traveled, this is it! This is the mending of that which has been broken; this is the hope that overcomes despair; this is the very blessing of God’s love! And it is glorious news, no doubt, but it is also incredible news! Mary bore witness to this when she said: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” And so, it happens that whatever our spiritual posture we have also come. We come to this place, we come to this service of worship! And I can’t help but to wonder, if a portrait were painted of us, if Eugene Burnand were able to capture the expressions on our faces, what would that picture look like? For some, the wide-eyed wonder of this day might resemble that of a child, like the energy and enthusiasm with which many of our children participated with Miss Suzy in the creation of our lovely Easter video! Of course, age is not a prerequisite for a youthful and joyful exuberance. I suspect a great many of us would be like that little girl who, when asked what Jesus said when he exited the tomb, and who responded, “Tada!” we delight in the story, because we know the story!

Oh, praise be to God! We know what the empty tomb means and so most of us do not hesitate. We rush boldly toward the tomb and that is a good thing. But maybe we should pause. I mean,

knowing that what we behold on this day is the world's central miracle. Maybe we should be a little more anxious than we are, maybe a little hand ringing is in order, perhaps not out of fear, mind you, but perhaps out of astonishment and reverence for God having accomplished the seemingly impossible. Now, I realize that, for some people, a measure of astonishment comes naturally, because not everyone is so sure about what they will find upon arriving at the tomb. I dare say that some of the eyes that would be captured on the artists' canvas would be evidently more pensive, more probing, if not sad. Such are the eyes that belong to those who know all too well that hurt and pain, and, sorrow and loss, can seem to have the last word; theirs are the eyes that either have not yet perceived or can scarcely perceive, the profound difference that the power of God can make in their life. It will come as no surprise to hear that some of the faces would be pictured as if they were lagging behind, as if coming to the tomb was simply a matter of course, we're supposed to worship on Easter! Right? And so, this strange and glorious news is heard, once again, as has been heard so many times before, but it has never been truly experienced and so the skepticism in those eyes, that look of disbelief, it gives that blessed soul away! And if that describes you, please, please hear this: Before this morning, Jesus was dead! He died for our sins. He paid a price that we could not pay ourselves and he rose again to forever break sin's power and to reconcile us to God! And when we put our trust in Jesus and when we believe that he is God's Son, we are given new life in his name! Now, that doesn't mean that we suddenly have some magic "cure-all" type of elixir, but it does mean this the paint on our life's canvas is not yet dry. Indeed, by God's grace, there can be a future where there was no future before!

There is no doubt in my mind that if such a painting existed of our life lived together as a community of faith, as the Body of Christ, collectively arriving at the tomb this day, it would present a very strange blend of emotions; scared, hopeful, embarrassed, determined, ecstatic. Our faces and our bodies, they would illustrate the story of modern-day disciples. A collection of people who believe and who desperately want to believe; a people who struggle and a people who overcome; a people whose faith is at once and the same time both weak and strong! Yet though, we each look different and though we each come to the tomb from different life experiences, this one most important fact remains. When we do finally arrive at the tomb, we will most assuredly find it empty! For Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Let us pray...

Gracious and Loving God, praise be to you for on this day of days we find the tomb empty, and we give you thanks and praise for that message of the angels: "He is not here!" May we know that truth in our minds and believe it in our hearts, to the end that we too would live is your Easter people...restored, forgiven, and raised to new life! In Jesus' name we pray. 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.