

Cashmere Presbyterian Church
Worship on Easter Day 2020 - Resurrection
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Introduction

This day is about hope – in our context of C 19 we need to keep hope alive. The resurrection is the antidote to the despair and hopelessness we sometimes feel about the way our world is going. The key question we will explore today is this: How does the resurrection bring us hope in times such as these?



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Call to worship

Imagine the scene as Easter morning broke around the tomb of Jesus.

The birds are singing tunes of joy in the trees surrounding the graves.

The flower buds are bursting in colors vibrant around each stone.

We've come to visit the grave of a friend, but "he is not here."

The Sun is rising in the East; the shadowed grays turn bright!

The Son is risen in our Hearts; darkness and death end in defeat.

Now we understand what Christ said, what God did.

Now we can proclaim,

CHRIST IS RISEN!

HE IS RISEN INDEED!¹

Psalm 118

²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Prayer of Approach

Merciful God:

We come together to worship longing for good company
because this world is lonely and hard right now.

We come longing for light
because our lives are crowded with shadows.

We come desperately needing hope
Because we hear so many messages of despair

Yet we ask that you would fill us with expectancy
That this day your word will minister to our anxious souls

In Jesus name
Amen

¹ United Methodist Church, Discipleship Ministries

Reading from Luke 24: 1-12 - Jesus Has Risen

24 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " ⁸ Then they remembered his words.

⁹ When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Sermon - What are you expecting?

Have you read Charles Dickens blockbuster novel, Great Expectations? It is about a young orphan who defies expectations to make something really significant about this life. Today's reading tells a story that completely defies expectations! But it starts with very low expectations.

1. Not So Great Expectations

In our reading today we see the woman coming to the tomb expecting to find a dead body. They came bearing 'Spices' (Greek *aromata*) and 'perfumes' (*myra*) a variety of fragrant vegetables extracts, either dry or liquid, including salves, oil, ointments, or perfumes. Having witnessed the placement of the body in the tomb 2 days earlier, the women had purchased spices in preparation for anointing Jesus body after Sabbath (showing their faithfulness to Torah). The purpose of anointing was not to embalm and prevent bodily decay, but to perfume the decaying corpse as an act of devotion. Their clear and reasonable expectation was that they were going to find a dead body.

This expectation that Jesus was dead and buried in the tomb goes right through the rest of Luke 24. This expectation of death is here in this passage with both the woman and then with the disbelieving disciples. It is true in the next story of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. They are despondently leaving Jerusalem, no doubt fearful they too would be rounded up like Jesus, despondent about his death and bewildered by the woman's story of the empty tomb. And it is apparent later in the chapter when Jesus' appearance to the disciples is met with an initial reaction of startled fear – this was the last thing they expected! And this despondent expectation of death was indeed clear and reasonable for a number of reasons.

- They had seen him arrested and dragged away for trial
- Members of their group saw him crucified, they had tended his dead body and witnessed it placed in the tomb
- And there was an understandable sense of the end of the dream that Jesus was the Messiah who would transform their world. Along with the rest of the people of Israel of their time, they were expecting a triumphant conquering Messiah, not a suffering and crucified servant! Biblical scholar James R. Edwards puts it this way

"The disciple's picture of Jesus does not correspond to the real Jesus because they fail to recognize the necessity of his crucifixion, his suffering. The thought

of a suffering Messiah was foreign to pre-Christian Judaism, including first century Judaism...."

Scholars have written a lot recently about Easter Saturday – it was a time when the disciples were trapped in expectations of death, failure, fear and anxiety about their future. It was a dark and despondent day. It strikes me that with this COVID 19 crisis right now, that much of the world is in Easter Saturday mode. The shadow of death is cast across our nations and our lives. The news is all doom and gloom about what is happening now and filled with dire predictions of the future. The expectation abounding in many news broadcasts is certainly one of death and disaster.

There are 2 things that I want to say about this. Firstly, Jesus has experienced Easter Saturday – he lay dead in the tomb. He therefore knows this part of our human condition. We do not walk this Easter Saturday sense of death and doom without a God who understands. Secondly, the message of Easter is not just identification with our suffering, but it is about light at the end of the tunnel. Easter yells out to us 'don't get stuck in the tomb!'

2. Expectations Defied

The woman came looking for a dead body, they found the stone rolled away, an empty tomb and angels asking them '*why are you looking for the living among the dead?*'

Their expectations were completely blown out of the water.

As I read this question the angels put to the woman, it struck me it has powerful application for us.

Why are you looking for the living among the dead?

It struck me that we too need to be looking beyond the deadly devastation of COVID 19 to signs of life and hope. I don't mean that we blithely and naively ignore the terrible state of present affairs. But do think there is huge danger in getting lost in woe.

In last week's Sunday Times psychologist Tanya Byron says that, while it is important to keep on top of the news, it is also important to not overexpose yourself. I think she is warning us about being dragged down with continual bad news, some of it unduly pessimistic and at times even misleading in nature.

The thing about the Easter story is that is it balanced perspective – it digs into the terror of suffering on Good Friday, it lives with the despair and hopelessness of Easter Saturday but it also brings a message of hope and resurrection on Easter Sunday. We need to keep that balance in our approach to COVID 19. It is shocking. We are in a Saturday of despair right now. But let us hear the voice of the angels – *why are you looking for the living among the dead?*

And we need to lift our eyes to hopeful possibilities of the days ahead. I read an excellent article online in the Politico magazine this week which has 34 big thinkers predicting the ongoing impact of COVID 19. There is a lot of positive impact discussed. For example, Eric Klinenberg, professor of sociology at New York University says this:

'The Coronavirus is going to cause immense pain and suffering. But it forces us to reconsider who we are and what we value, and in the long run, it could help us to rediscover the better version of ourselves'

I believe that there is truth in this. Already we have made a huge moral choice in New Zealand but putting the health of our elderly and most vulnerable ahead of the economy. My question is – where are we looking at a time like this? There is lots of talk of death, what is the talk of life? All around us we see life and hope in the hunkering down of families and friends supporting each other, we have church services like this being beamed around the world by web and being accessed by many more than normally attend church on a Sunday, and we ask ourselves is this sign of a turning back to faith in the Western World. We see the way the nation is standing together, the rising up of good leadership and a pause on partisan politics. We see the potential for the building of resilience in our people. And it dawns on us that we have taken so many things for granted.

There is a key word in our scripture today that helps gain a future focused perspective on present events. It is the word 'remember';

*Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' "*⁷ *Then they remembered his words.*

How quickly we forget, how easy to go to the negative perspective. People around New Zealand say of Christchurch that we know how to get through a disaster. That we remember how to do this because disasters and recoveries are still fresh in our minds. This idea of remembering is a vital component in the resilience of faith and life. The people of Israel were constantly reminded in scripture that they were once slaves in Egypt and God led them to freedom in the promised land. That narrative sustained the black slaves of America as they worked in their fields emboldened with hope of better days coming as they sang their spiritual songs of exodus. And this idea of remembering is deeply imbedded in our Christian culture as we gather around the communion table with the invitation to remember what the Lord has done for us in his cross and resurrection.

And so we Christians are a people of memory. We remember the cycles of death, despair and resurrection that have gone before us. And when we find our selves in a tough place we develop an expectation of hope for better days ahead.

Our history demonstrates time and again that we will bounce back!

Finally,

3. New Expectations Explored

When Peter heard the testimony of the woman about the empty tomb he was, like the other disciples, sceptical. However, he was interested enough to investigate! The history of Christianity is littered with similar stories. Some great minds of the past have heard rumours of resurrection and been humble enough to explore. The classic example is that of the author of *Who Moved the Stone*, Frank Morrison. The strangeness of the Resurrection story had captured his attention, and, influenced by sceptic thinkers at the turn of the century, he set out to prove that the story of Christ's Resurrection was only a myth. His probing, however, led him to discover the validity of the biblical record in a moving, personal way. *Who Moved the Stone?* is considered by many to be a classic apologetic on the subject of the Resurrection. But this story does not stand alone – there are many who can tell a similar story of realisation and enlightenment. They are in good company. Luke 24 outlines this same journey in the disciples – Peter rushes off to investigate. He finds the empty tomb and begins to wonder. That wondering quickly changes to spiritual enlightenment. There is a sheer crescendo of realisation that follows. Firstly, we read about Jesus appearing to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. As he slowly reveals himself as

the risen Christ their 'hearts burn' and their 'eyes are opened'. And then as the risen Christ appears to the disciples behind closed doors and talks to them about the mission ahead, they join the dots together, 'their minds are opened'. They see what this is all about, how this Jesus is the Messiah long predicted in scripture and is calling them to be his disciples in the ongoing mission of God to save and transform the world. To bring life where there is death, light where there is darkness and hope where there is despair.

There is a call for response here. For some it might be to rise above scepticism and have a look at this resurrection story – to follow the lead of Peter and Frank Morrison. Last year I had the privilege meeting Josh McDowell. It was so great to meet him and talk. His book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* has helped me so much to get my head around things like the validity of the resurrection. Or you might like to find interviews on YouTube with people like John Lennox, seen by many to be world's most credentialed and likable apologist for the Christian faith.

Or it might be that you need to respond by giving more of yourself to this amazing message. The disciples felt their hearts burning, their eyes and minds being opened to the full impact of the resurrection. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism talks of the many years that he sought to break through into a transforming experience of God's work in his life until one night at a meeting in London, on May 24 1738. He recorded it in his journal:

'In the Evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before 9, while the speaker was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation: and an assurance was given me that he had taken my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'

So it might be the incentive to investigate, or the opening of heart and mind to the spiritual power of the resurrected Christ, or thirdly, having done that, to listen as the disciples did, to Jesus explain the mission that lies ahead and his invitation to join. For many of you at Cashmere Presbyterian, you know this invitation and have accepted it willingly for many years. And the mission is not ended – not at all. This message says to all of us that God is one who defies a narrative of death and despair. It calls us to embrace a message of life and hope and continue to dedicate our lives and gifts to bringing that message to our broken world.

In conclusion, as I was preparing for this message I came across a story from the early days of communist Russia.

Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin was a high ranking and powerful Russian Communist leader.

There is a story told about a journey he took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity hurling insults, argument, and proof against it. An hour later he was finished. He looked out at what seemed to be the smouldering ashes of men's faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded. Deafening silence filled the auditorium but then one man approached the platform and mounted the lectern standing near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left then to the right. Finally he shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: "CHRIST IS RISEN!"

On masse the crowd arose as one man and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder:

"HE IS RISEN INDEED!"

The outcome of the speech was not what the communist hardliner expected.

May our pessimism and despair be overtaken by hope this Easter and a desire to respond to God's call to be bearers of ultimate hope to a despairing world.

Jesus Christ is risen!

HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Prayer of Intercession and Benediction

God of Resurrection,
we come on this most hope filled of mornings,
thankful and awed by your power to raise our expectations.
Thank you for the gift of your son Jesus Christ
whose resurrection brings us life.

You know us, Lord, in our humanness.

You lived and breathed and walked among us,
you know us inside and out, every word and action;

You know our pain at this time of pandemic.

You know the areas in our lives that are quietly dying;
you are familiar with our tombs.

We have minds that turn quickly to fear, uncertainty and anxiety,
We have dreams that are fading, some that seem to have died,
We have hopes that are shrivelled and lie abandoned.

You know our present reality;
the bustling activity that has given way to lockdown,
the good health that has come under serious threat.
The thriving economy that turned to recession
The complacency that has been upended

But we thank you Lord that you are a God of resurrection,
you can bring new life where there is lifelessness,
you can resurrect hope where we feel only despair,
you can fill us with energy when we are at our lowest ebb,
you can create new and positive ways of being human.

Bring Easter hope to those who are filled with grief.
We think especially of those who have lost loved ones.
Bring Easter hope to those who face a health crisis.
We think especially of those with COVID 19, but all who suffer at this time.
Bring Easter hope to all who are locked in prisons,
prisons with walls and bars and prisons of addiction.
Bring Easter hope to places like Syria,
which has been chained by the forces of death
these many years.

And bring Easter hope to each of us;
we want to have hearts warmed, eyes and minds opened.
We pray these things in the name of Christ
whose life and love death could not destroy,
whose resurrection is our hope, now and forever.
Amen.