

You Are Looking for Jesus

Easter Sunday, Year B
March 31, 2024

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24
Acts 10:34-43
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Mark 16:1-8
John 20:1-18

Color: White, Gold

PLANNING NOTES:

Easter Sunday is here. Easter Sunday comes with a lot of pressure—the pressure to bring our very best, to adorn the sanctuary in flowers and signs of new life, to preach an amazing sermon declaring the good news of the Resurrection, to sing our hearts out with songs of joy and new life. Each congregation also has traditions surrounding Easter Sunday that reflect the diverse contexts and communities that gather in our local churches. And praise God for those traditions! They are markers of the years the congregation has gathered and celebrated the Risen Christ and the commitment we make to one another to live as Resurrection people.

So, live into your traditions. Sing the “Hallelujah Chorus!” Let the organist take it away with the resounding chorus of “He Lives!” Sing those extra choruses, as the praise band gives it their all. Let the children return the Alleluia to worship after its Lenten hiatus! Shout and declare with the Church gathered around the world, “He is risen! He is risen, indeed!” Let the exclamation marks go wild today because it is a day of excitement, joy, and abundance!

And, in the midst of the celebration, remember that the Resurrection is a surprise. Create space for awe at the rolled-away stone. Quiet the energy in the room long enough to share with the women in their shock and uncertainty and amazement at finding an angel where they expected to find Jesus. Make room for confession and repentance as we grapple with whether we’re ready to look for and follow the Risen Christ out of the tomb and into the world. This is the challenge of Easter when we let it be about the resurrection of God Incarnate and not God-as-I’d-like-God-to-be. It is easy to celebrate the salvation made possible in Christ when I can pretend that salvation doesn’t require me to do the things that got him crucified. It is harder to celebrate the Resurrection when it means I’ve been raised with Christ to be like Christ in a world that has proven it will marginalize, erase, and kill people who love as God loves.

So, what must we do so that our Easter Sunday worship is not a noisy gong or clanging symbol, but an expression of the Love that saves us? Look for Jesus. *Really* look for Jesus. Look for Jesus in the faces we welcome through our doors. Look for Jesus in our prayers for our neighbors across the street and around the world. Look for Jesus in the voices that join in singing the good news and in the creation that offers up flowers to remind us of the beauty of new life. Look for Jesus as we point ourselves toward the exit, ready to enter the world as Easter people. Look for Jesus and know that Jesus is already there, loving and teaching us how to love as followers of the Risen Christ.

PREACHING NOTES:

Easter stands alone. That is always the case, even when we fold this Sunday into a series of some sort. Sometimes we put it as the culmination of our Lenten journey, the final alleluia to our symphony of repentance and self-examination. Other times, we put it as the beginning of a new experience of living, freed from the fear of emptiness and meaninglessness, and we walk the Eastertide journey with joy and hope. But even then, Easter stands alone. It is a line in the sand that redefines our existence in ways we barely comprehend. It is a sign and symbol of a profound reorganization of life itself, sacramental in earth-shattering ways.

The first decision is how to tell this story as you gather for worship on this standalone day. The lectionary gives us plenty of scripture to contemplate, and all of them – or any of them – could give powerful insight into this monumental event of a day. Yet, it is hard to resist the simple telling of the story. Not because it isn't known, but because it has become too familiar. And what is too familiar gets dismissed. So, let's come back to the story. This year, we have a choice, John's retelling or Mark's. We all have our favorites, but coming back to Mark – what most assume to be the earliest of the gospel accounts – seems warranted. We can sit back and listen as the story once again weaves us into the tapestry of Resurrection and hope.

There is a question that isn't really a question at the heart of Mark's story that seems an appropriate hook upon which to hang our reflections for this day. It comes from the mouth of the angelic messenger sitting comfortably in the empty tomb. "You are looking for Jesus." It's a statement that feels like a question. On one level it seems obvious, well duh. But on the other hand, there is something more profound here. We often approach this glorious festival of faith with the assumption that we come looking for Jesus. But do we? Do we really? Or are we looking at all kinds of other things that distract us from our real search? Or as implied in the rest of the statement, are we looking for the wrong Jesus? Do we want our Jesus comfortably contained in a tomb, defined, ordered, and dissected in minute detail? Or are we ready for the Resurrected one? Are we ready for the Jesus who defies our attempts to nail him down, to claim him as our own. What, indeed, are we looking for as we gather on this Easter Sunday morning?

It is hard to comprehend the mindset of those women who made their way to the tomb that morning. They went to serve; they went because it was what people did when there was a death. The rituals of death were certain, known, automatic, unthinking. That was good, because on that morning, they weren't capable of thinking, just moving, going through the motions. They were moving like automatons, like robots assigned a specific task—gathering the spices, the oils, the cloth, wrapping it all together, preparing for the early morning journey. Then they slept. Or they didn't sleep. They may have stared at the walls, at the dark night, eyes burning with used up tears. They waited, numb in the night. They all rose together, without a word, driven by a common need to serve, to do something that made sense in a senseless time. And they set out, huddled together, but alone in their own pain and silence. They walked on legs they couldn't feel, burdened by the weight they couldn't have described if they had to. Then out of the silence was a sudden intake of breath; "the stone," someone whispered. They stopped their march, stopped dead in their tracks. Their way was blocked. The tears that were barely held in check began to flow again, etching tracks in their dust-covered faces, splashing to the ground like great drops of blood from an open wound. "The stone." It blocked their way, their duty, their hope. They couldn't perform this last service for him; they couldn't take their last look at him, at the lifeless body that once had been more alive than any person they had ever known, would ever know. The stone. It blocked them, cut them off, stymied them. They almost turned back. But they started to move again—

toward the place of death. Uncertain, bowed, and almost broken, but they walked on, wondering. Who would roll away the stone?

Who indeed? Those stones are everywhere it seems. Across every path, choking every road, cutting off our way home. Maybe your stone is physical: an illness that has changed your life, redefined you in ways you never foresaw. Or a circle of friends, a relationship that manages to tear you down more than build you up, that wears away the surface of your self-identity until you don't know who you are anymore. A job that's killing you, a lifestyle that keeps you from achieving what your heart really needs and wants. Maybe your stone is social: a contempt for leaders who seem like schoolchildren locked in playground taunts and narcissistic braggadocio, the continual rape of a planet of living creatures driven to extinction and destroyed beyond usefulness and beauty, a community defined more by our antagonisms than our commonality. Maybe your stone is emotional: a grief you can't transform into hope, a sadness that engulfs you, a numbness that shrouds you in a darkness not of this world. Maybe your stone is spiritual: the questions that nag at your attempts to pray, the emptiness of the rituals of worship, the inanity of praise when your world is careening off course at an alarming rate.

Who will roll away the stone? They started to move again. Their question was huge, their need greater than their own strength, but they started to move again. They put one foot in front of another, headed straight for the stone as if it wasn't there; as if it wasn't going to stop them from performing their service; as if it wasn't going to keep them from the worship of their hands and hearts. They went on to the place of death and impenetrable stones, as if. And when they got there, Mark says, the stone was rolled back. And in the place of death was a being of light and life, who told them that this wasn't the place to find Jesus. He wasn't in a grave. He wasn't hanging around a cemetery. He wasn't behind a stone too great for anyone to roll away. He's not here. He's there. There, where you live. There, where you work, where you love and serve. He's there beyond the stones, all of which will roll away by his power, the power of love and life.

Then Mark says an odd thing. He says they ran. In terror and amazement, they ran. And they said nothing. To anyone. The end. Most scholars agree this is Mark's original ending. Silence, fear, and awe. And running away. The early church didn't like that ending, so it gave us a more comfortable certainty in the verses that follow. But why would Mark do such a thing? Leave the story so unfinished? Because yours is unfinished too. Think about it. Mark is telling the story to people who knew that Jesus was alive, yet he says they told no one. How did the word get out? How did the word get past the stone of their fear? He rolled away the stone. Even the stone of our inadequacy. Their silence wasn't the final word. God's hope was the final word.

We believe we have come looking for Jesus, but many of us are fixated on the stones that get in the way. Sometimes those stones are an inadequate image of Jesus himself. Sometimes our fears or limitations keep us from the true search for the living Christ. But the message of Easter is that none of these stones, none of the distractions, none of these inadequacies are ultimate barriers to a Resurrection encounter. We can trust that the stone will be rolled away. And when it is, the Risen Christ will be there to welcome us.

I don't know how your stone will be rolled away. I don't know what effort it will require, what struggle is before you. I don't know if it will roll away as if by magic by another hand in the twinkling of an eye, or if it will take a lifelong exertion on your part, chipping away at the impenetrable rock until the hope shines through. I don't know if it will happen today or tomorrow or when you draw your last breath in this life. But I know, I know, that the stone will roll away. He is Risen. Thanks be to God.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES:

Call to Worship

The tomb is dark, but empty

The one you are looking for has overcome the darkness

The stone has been rolled away

The one you are looking for has overcome death

The burial clothes are put aside

The one you are looking for is alive!

Christ is Risen!

Christ is Risen Indeed!

Let us worship our Risen Savior!

Written by Rev. Mindi on her **Rev-o-lution** blog, <http://rev-o-lution.org/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2014/04/easter-call-to-worship.html>.

Prayer for the Day

"Christ is risen!"

"He is risen indeed!"

We repeat our Easter shouts of
surprise and joy
again and again,
for news of your victory
over powers of death and evil
is news so startling
so amazing
so different from the news that bombards us day by day.

Beyond our comprehension
You startle us again and again
with resurrection Life,
bringing grace and hope and joy.

You, in your risen power,
are shaping all our days,
and so we praise you,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen**

Written by Christine Jerrett, and posted on **Christine Jerrett: Reflections on being the Church in God's new creation**, <http://christinejerrett.wordpress.com/tag/prayer/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2014/04/a-prayer-for-easter-sunday.html>.

Prayer of Confession

(Unison 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, to identify those many ways in which we have forsaken you. But faith is never easy. It requires our very 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. In silence, we wait. We long for your presence and your healing touch. AMEN.

Words of Assurance

God is merciful. God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Feel the healing, loving power of God in your lives, for it is given to you through Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Written by Nancy C. Townley, posted on the Ministry Matters website at <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/2507/worship-connection-easter-2021>.

Benediction

Because the tomb is empty, your life can be full, so go into every place and every day as people brimming with the love of God.

Be graceful in spirit, hopeful in word, faithful in deed.

Live for the risen Christ as Christ lives in you.

Alleluia and Amen!

Written by Glen E. Rainsley, in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 91.

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