

“When Jesus Saves You”

April 21, 2019

Shadow Savior series – Easter Sunday

You’ve seen the images this week along with the rest of the world - Notre Dame Cathedral burning, the spire falling down, masses of people in the street watching, praying, and singing. An iconic place - a sacred space - marred by the power of fire. But did you see this image? **(SHOW PIC)** The cross standing in the midst of the rubble, a reminder for so many of this week when death is so very real (maybe not just this week), but that death doesn’t have the final word. It’s a reminder of the power of faith and hope - of God’s saving love in Jesus.

There were other fires, too - sacred spaces, church buildings burned down by the hands of an arsonist. These church buildings were known to be where mostly African-Americans worship. **(SHOW PIC)** Here’s a picture of the cemetery outside one of those churches in St. Landry Parish in Louisiana. “They burned down a building,” said Rev. Harry J. Richard of Greater Union Baptist Church. “They didn’t burn down our spirit.”

Now I’ll confess that I’ve lived in the tension between the need for sacred spaces and the reality that “the church is not a building...the church is not a steeple...the church is not a resting place...the church is the PEOPLE.” And yet, sacred spaces are important. They mean something to us. Maybe you have a sacred space - a church building where you grew up, a camp setting where you came to know Jesus better, a place in nature where you feel close to God, or some other place where your faith is strengthened.

I wonder if the tomb was a sacred space for the women that morning because Jesus – at least his body - was there. Matthew says that they went to the tomb just to see it. There were guards standing by to make sure no one did anything to the body. But awesome things happened when the women arrived – an earthquake, an angel came and rolled the stone away – and sat on it!, the guards were overcome by fear and became like dead men. Oh, the irony - the ones meant to guard the dead body are unable to move!

The women receive the message from the angel - of course they’re told “don’t be afraid!” because that’s almost always what angels say at first. And then the good news - no, the Great News - *Jesus is not here. He is risen!* The angel tells them to see the proof they need in that empty tomb, and then to go and tell the others that Jesus is alive and on his way to Galilee. They will see him there.

So, these women leave this place of death and grief in fear and joy (have you ever felt those two together?), and Jesus meets them on the way. Some translations say that Jesus’ word to them is “Greetings!” That always makes me think of my dad because that’s how he answers the phone – “Greetings!”

But the root word is “Rejoice!” It’s not just a greeting, but a command he gives. “Rejoice because I’m here. I’m alive! God has done the unbelievable!” And we can only

imagine what a shock to the system it was after everything they had witnessed because the women were the last to leave the cross and the first to come to the tomb.

And what a reason to rejoice, right? The angel tells the women to tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead and wants to see them in Galilee. Even though every last disciple deserted, betrayed, denied, ran away – even though they had left Jesus for dead – he still wants to meet them.

Jesus wasn't just raised from the dead and returned to faithful followers who were waiting for him. He returned to the likes of Peter who had denied that he even knew Jesus and the rest who had run! Yet Jesus wants to see them! Their failures aren't enough to stop Jesus from loving them. This risen Christ comes to them. They don't have to work through the issues. They don't even have to beg for forgiveness! Rejoice!

And so we're here with a reason to rejoice. Our God, who created us and knows us, loves us. That same love that pursues the disciples after the ugliness of Jesus' trial and torture is here for us. God pursues us, too. God wants a relationship with you and me. Whatever you've done or not done, whatever it is you think keeps you cut off from God – well, it doesn't! The account of resurrection gives us reason to claim that truth.

The truth of this day – the Great Good News of Easter – is that there is a reason to rejoice. Resurrection is real. Jesus is alive and calls us to himself! Jesus saves us from sin and death by the grace of God and saves us for eternal life, joy, love, and peace.

Even so, we have to acknowledge the reality that hits us hard today: the personal stuff we carry, the news of violence and uncertainty, the horror of abuse, the pain of grief, the struggle of addiction, and other situations that make it hard to see resurrection. Easter comes in the midst of a world that isn't all bright and wonderful, and that's precisely why it matters. We celebrate Jesus' resurrection, but maybe we struggle to believe that new life is really possible in the midst of everything we see.

And it's hard to believe - to believe that in the midst of so much death, despair, and suffering - that life and love have power to make a difference. But that's the Good News. The message that these women took away from that empty tomb was that love and light break through powerfully even when all seems lost. Even though it may seem like hate and death and despair are too powerful, they're not a match for what God can do and what God will do.

And I'm thankful for these courageous women who were stunned, but continue to move even in fear and joy to go and tell. They are the first witnesses the resurrection - and the first missionaries of the church! They are the first to worship the risen Jesus. Some might even say they're the first ones to preach the Good News of resurrection!

Jesus says, "Rejoice!" Rejoice because what you thought was true **isn't true**. Rejoice because all hope is **not lost**. Rejoice because **Jesus isn't in the tomb**. Rejoice because Jesus wants a relationship with you that offers you deep-down joy and hope. Rejoice because even as we pray, even as we struggle with the world or fight illness,

look for work, go through divorce or other life changes, there is a hope for a better day when we will live in the peace of God's Kingdom.

Rejoice because even the saddest, most difficult moments – even death – doesn't have the last word. It's difficult to set our hearts on things above, but consider what it might be like to try to make our way through life as if there was no above – nothing beyond this life. Jesus saves - and we accept God's power to overcome death.

Rejoice in resurrection! There's more to life than this life. Jesus saves - and we receive new life and the promise of eternal life. We celebrate the risen Christ. That's what this day is about – celebrating the risen Christ - but we live as though Jesus were still in the tomb.

And sometimes maybe we wish he had stayed there! If we claim to follow Jesus, a risen, living Lord and Savior, then that's what we have to do – follow. Life isn't on our terms anymore. He leads us. And sometimes he's a nuisance! He's demanding! Sometimes following him is inconvenient to my schedule! Rejoice?!?

Easter is more than one day on the calendar. Friends, even when Easter items go on clearance tomorrow or even later today, remember that Jesus tells us to rejoice because God has overcome sin and pain and grief. God pours out grace upon grace, and we are never the same again! Jesus saves - and we respond. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "The Christian faith is about death and resurrection. It's about how God continues to reach down into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small."

Will we be like these women who stayed with Jesus and kept following even unto death? Even unto the grave? Even to the tomb because that's where they thought he was? Will we keep going even when we're surprised by what God can do - to look death in the face and overcome it in a way we never expected? Will we go quickly and tell others this good news?

We rejoice in resurrection and remember that God is always working in us to bring us to faith and to grow us in faith. The salvation of God is a free gift. We don't earn it or deserve it. We receive it and live in it. We rejoice in God's grace that has loved us even when we didn't love God back, for grace that worked in us both gently and firmly, for grace that challenges us to love God and love our neighbor daily.

Rejoice in resurrection! If you can't rejoice or if you can't muster an "Alleluia!" then rest in the assurance that God is powerful, that God is real, that God is working, that God is healing, that God is loving you even now. Rest in the presence of God that is with you – and know that those stirrings of hope and peace in your soul are God working in you.

Just as Jesus greeted the women on the road and told them to rejoice, I pray we sense his presence with us. I hope it will strengthen us when we feel weak. I hope it will transform us and bring healing where we need it. I hope it will bring us back to faith if

you feel far away. And I hope that it will help us remember that there is more to life than this life.

Rejoice! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

Sing "Shadow Savior" as an invitation to prayer

In this season, we'll be invited to pray and reflect in worship, even writing some reflections if you feel led. As we seek to be honest with God, I ask us to consider these questions:

SHOW SLIDE: *How do you respond to the promise that nothing can separate us from God's love - not questions, doubts, fears, or even death?*

What prayers are on your heart today as you offer God the struggles of faith and stand in the hope of resurrection?

Let us pray...PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & the LORD'S PRAYER

Prayer:

When everything was dark
and it seemed that the sun would never shine again,
your love broke through.

Your love was too strong,
too wide,
too deep
for death to hold.

The sparks cast by your love
dance and spread
and burst forth
with resurrection light.

Gracious God,
We praise you for the light of new life
made possible through Jesus.
We praise you for the light of new life
that shone on the first witnesses of resurrection.
We praise you for the light of new life
that continues to shine in our hearts today.

We pray that the Easter light of life, hope and joy,
will live in us each day;
and that we will be bearers of that light

into the lives of others.
Amen.