

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, April 1, 2018 - Resurrection Sunday

Hymns: 243 – Jesus Christ is Risen Today; 252 – He Is Lord; In Christ Alone;
255 – Now Let the Vault of Heaven Resound

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

Sermon Title: Words Matter – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

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. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 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? He is not here; he has risen! 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.’” Then they remembered his words.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 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. (Luke 24:1-12)

Words matter. We live in a world where we are told that only things matter, or at least matter most of all, but I disagree. I think words matter more. True, there are a lot of words that don't matter – just turn on the TV and sit in front of it for a few hours, if you need convincing of that – but I think there are words that do matter, that matter more than anything else I know. Don't believe me? Try it out – turn to someone next to you and say, “I love you.” Say to them, “I'm glad you are here.” I bet that was pretty easy. After all, we're in church. Not so easy to do that with someone you don't know at Tim's. But try this: Turn to the person next to you, and say, “I hate you. I wish we'd never met.” Most of you probably couldn't bring yourself to say that, or if you said it, you said it with a smile and a laugh, to prove you weren't serious. Why? They're only words, aren't they? But we know, deep down inside, that words matter.

And this morning, we are here to celebrate the three most important words ever spoken. The three most important words in the world.

They make all the difference, these three little words, all the difference in the world. Without these three words, the last two thousand years of human history would have been substantially changed, and not for the better. Without these three words, the

Greatest Story Ever Told would be just another story of harsh cruelty winning the day against all the power of good. Without these three words, there would be no hope, no peace, no promise. Without these three words, we would not be here today, and the world would not be bathed in Easter light. They make all the difference. They make all the difference, these three little words, all the difference in this world. And in the next.

And they are: He. Is. Risen.

He Is Risen. Three little words, yet the story of the centuries. He Is Risen. Three little words, yet a world turned upside down. He Is Risen. Three little words, yet a light shining out of the darkness which pierces the night a fatal wound, from which it will never recover. He Is Risen.

These words stand out so brightly, for it was a deep blackness against which they were first uttered. He Is Dead were the three spoken just three days before, as the Roman government of the day ensured with ruthless efficiency and maximum impact that what they set out to do got done. To kill a man is an easy enough thing, as even a child watching Saturday morning cartoons can explain. But the Romans had a sense of high drama which first had a man beaten to within an inch of his life, and then had the last gasps nailed up high for all to see. And to make certain, a quick spear to the side just so no mistakes are made. He Is Dead were the words intoned by a Roman soldier who had seen enough of death to be sure beyond the shadow of a doubt, were the words choked out by a weeping mother and friend. He Is Dead were the words, words so dark and cold that even the sun hid its face for a while.

He Is Dead were the words ringing in the ears of Mary the Mother and Mary the Friend and Salome three days later, as they walked through the Sabbath dawn in a grief-stricken daze. He Is Dead were the words halting their steps as they went to see the tomb. He Is Dead were the words that threatened to choke even the last ounce of hope or joy from their aching throats as they turned the corner to the grave. But these words were lost as they suddenly saw the stone rolled away, and what could only be an angel casually seated upon it. At their startled and dazzled faces the angel smiled, and said "Don't be afraid, I know who you're looking for, but he's not here. He Is Risen."

He Is Risen. With these three words those other words were forever dashed from their minds, as they gasped and gaped and fell into each others arms, overcome with shock and delight. He Is Risen were the words which took hold of their feet and set them running to tell the others, for words so great and marvelous cannot be held inside. He Is Risen were the words which leapt up in front of their eyes as they met Him, yes Him, on the very road home, and as they fell at his feet and wept for the sheer joy and madness of

it all. He Is Risen.

He Is Risen. With these three words the Grim Reaper is set to flight, death is defeated, the grave made a mere resting place. He Is Risen. With these three words there is nothing to fear but fear itself, for even the end brings a beginning. He Is Risen - with these three words, we are risen with him, for death cannot hold us down, for we shall be like him, and we shall see him as he is. He Is Risen! With these words is the stone rolled away, is the tomb burst open wide, is the Saviour alive again! He Is Risen! With these words are our ice-encrusted hearts thawed and made to beat again, are our blind eyes opened to see the truth around us, are we made to live as we were meant to live again! He is Risen!

So where is the joy? So where is the sun? So where is the brightness and the radiance shining from our very faces? Come back with me to the Gospel of Luke, to the two Mary's and the others as they run laughing and crying and mindless with joy, as they burst shouting and near delirious through the door, to be greeted by the astonished faces of the apostles. He Is Risen, cries Mary Magdalene through her tears, tears of joy which moments before were bitter with sorrow. He Is Risen, laughs Mary the mother of Jesus, for whom moments before laughter seemed never to come again. And as they look around they are greeted with the cold eyes of those who had seen him die, who had heard the awful words, who had known their hope smashed with every blow of the hammer. *"And,"* wrote Luke, *"it seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."*

I can sympathize with the disciples, here. And I can sympathize with those of us for whom this is a bit much to believe. There is a stunning and convincing finality to death. I have been with too many people as they died to think otherwise. I have been with too many people for whom the reality of death has sunk in, as the loved one simply did not return, despite all the dreams and wishes. In the face of all we know and all we have experienced, resurrection is a hard thing to believe.

But the stunning thing is precisely that He Is Risen, that He Is Alive, and that the same God who brought Jesus back to life is the same God who with the same power will raise us up, to be with him, to be with those we love.

It is a truth hard to believe. For you see, you cannot grasp it with your mind. You cannot hold it in your hands. You cannot see it with your eyes. Oh, no. This is a truth far too great for that. This is a truth so terrible, so profound, these are words so marvelous and free, that they must be held in the heart. In the heart. In the heart that has ached for a loved one gone. In the heart that has jumped at the birth of a child. In the heart which in loneliness has withered and grown silent and still, here is where the truth must come.

Here is where the truth must live.

Oh, yes, be assured, He Is Risen, yet some have entombed him in the cold stone of their hearts. He Is Risen, yet some have fearfully turned from the love which seeks to burst in, have grudgingly imprisoned the love which seeks to burst free. He Is Risen, yet some bury him anew, refusing to be risen with him, insanely clinging with all of their strength to this world which heaves like a sinking ship, to these bodies which decay like leaves fallen from the tree. He Is Risen, yet for so many he is as dead as the Romans made sure he was, for when he does not live in us, it is for us as though he does not live at all. He Is Risen, yet He Is Dead, for, with so many, deep down inside the stone stays tightly shut, the tomb firmly sealed. For, as Luke had written, "it seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe."

Why? Because "He Is Risen," are, after all, just words. Three little words. And how can three little words change the life of someone today? For someone beaten down by the disappointments and harsh realities of life, for someone hollowed out by tragedy, by heartbreak, by day after remorseful day bringing only more setbacks, more fatigue, more bad news; for someone bearing the fresh scars of grief, how can three little words possibly make a difference? Yet they can – I know they can – but only if they're true.

Friends, I bring you good news. These are not only words, these are not empty words, this is not an idle tale. These words, of all the words ever spoken, are true. These words, of all the words ever heard, are words whereby everything is changed. He Is Risen! Believe and have life! Believe and have love! Believe and have hope! Believe and know in your heart that not only does he live, but he lives in you! Believe and be assured that the same power which took a broken, battered man three days dead and turned him into one who would never die, might course through your very veins, as the Spirit breathes life into your souls!

Because of these three words, believe and know, that the day is not far off, when we shall be reunited with those whom we have loved, and lost, and shall still love, and shall never lose again.

He. Is. Risen. Words matter. And these words, of all words, matter most of all. They make all the difference, these words, all the difference in the world. And in the next. And in you. Today. Right now. They matter.

Thanks be to the Living God; may the hope, peace and promise of his resurrection-life live within our hearts. He Is Risen! Amen.