

Sermon for Zion, April 21, 2019 – Easter Sunday

Hymns: 243 – Jesus Christ is Risen Today; 248 – At the dawning of salvation;
In Christ Alone; 255 – Now Let the Vault of Heaven Resound

Scripture: John 11:21-27; Matthew 28:1-10; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8a

Sermon Title: “I Am the Resurrection and the Life”

John 11:21-27

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to

him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

1 Corinthians 15:1-8a

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also.

People around the globe were shocked to see one of the great churches of the world in flames. Paris’ Notre Dame Cathedral, which has testified to the Glory of God for over 800 years, has been irreparably damaged, gutted by fire, its roof collapsed, its timeless windows shattered, its great spire fallen to the ground. One of the most moving statements I heard was by an unnamed priest who serves at the Cathedral. He said, “The fire does not change our faith. Christ is risen; we are risen with him; perhaps Notre Dame will rise again as well. Nevertheless, Easter morning, we will gather as we have always gathered, if not here, then elsewhere, and we will say, ‘Christ is risen; He is risen indeed.’ That we proclaim.”

And that we proclaim, right here at Zion, in our beautiful sanctuary, in the glow of our glorious stained glass. But if were up to me, we wouldn’t be meeting here today; nor would we be meeting in the ruins of Notre Dame. Instead, I would bring you to another sanctuary, a far larger sanctuary, to a church called the Holy Sepulchre, or its better name, in Greek, the Anastasis – the Church of the Resurrection. If we are going to be talking about the Resurrection, that’s where I would like to do it – in that place, that very place, where it happened. I would bring you to where the Resurrection took place.

We would enter through the massive doors opened by Mr. Nuseibeh, whose family has been opening the doors for the past 800 years. We would turn to the

right, up the winding stairs to the Altar of the Crucifixion, to the very top of the rock called Golgotha. Here we would kneel, and pray, and consider just what it was Jesus has done for us, and for all the world. We would tear ourselves away, descend the marble staircase, turn to the left, and find ourselves among hundreds of other pilgrims, gathering around a small, strange building housed under the massive dome of the Anastasis. It is the Edicule, the structure in which is enclosed the remains of the Tomb, used on a Passover eve long ago, to contain not the body of Joseph, its original owner, but of Jesus, taken down from the cross just a short distance away.

It is crowded, so we line up, and eventually it is our turn to enter to tomb. The interior, clad now in marble, with icons and flowers and lanterns, doesn't perhaps look like we imagined. But it is there – under the marble panels, lies the bench upon which his body lay; under the marble floor upon which we kneel, is the Jerusalem bedrock, and the floor of the very tomb. Behind us, a window in the marble shows us the bedrock wall of the tomb of 2000 years ago. This is the place. That is where I would bring you. And I would say, “Right here. It happened right here. It is a place, a real place; the Resurrection of Jesus happened here.”

But the Resurrection is more than a place; it is a time. A time when Israel was under the boot of Rome, when Pontius Pilate ruled as Prefect, when Caiaphas ruled the Jewish Faith as High Priest. And so we can date the event of the Resurrection quite precisely; we know a great deal from Roman records about Pilate, a great deal from others about Caiaphas. I would take you to the seacoast of Israel, to Caesarea, and show you a cornerstone, a building dedication carved with Pilate's name. “See,” I would tell you, pointing to the stone. “Pilate isn't just a character in some story. He's a person, from a specific place, a specific time.” Upon our return to Jerusalem I show you the former location of the house of Caiaphas, just on the slopes of Mount Zion, right beside the steps Jesus and the disciples would have walked on their way to the Mount of Olives after what appeared would be their last supper together. Or we would ride the transit rail to the Israel Museum, and see Caiaphas' ossuary, where his bones were stored after his death. We know these things. We have these things. And just as Caiaphas and Pilate are real people, as real as the stones which bear their name, so the Resurrection which happened during their administration was real, too. It is rooted in time, a specific time, a specific place.

But the Resurrection is more than about stones, about history - it is about people – the people who witnessed the one who was dead, but now shone with the power of everlasting life. Let's go next to where the Upper Room once stood in what was the Essene Quarter of the Old City, on what was and is Mount Zion. I would stand with you in the 1000 year old building which now occupies this spot, and imagine with you the incredulity of the disciples as suddenly among them stood Jesus, stood Jesus, alive, alive. Or I would travel north with you to the shores of the Sea Galilee, where the astonished fishermen dragged ashore their miraculous catch, to breakfast with the Risen Lord. We would walk along the beach where Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, after all. Because the Resurrection is about people.

Over 500 people at one time, says Paul, saw Jesus after he'd been raised. And Paul saw him too, saw the Risen Lord in a blinding, transformative revelation. And Paul brought the message of Jesus, the saving news of the Gospel, the power of the Resurrection, throughout Asia Minor, to churches like Ephesus, where for 2-1/2 years Paul laboured and taught and preached. I would bring you there, to magnificent Ephesus, from which Paul wrote to the Christians of Corinth, with its crowning glory, the great Corinthians Chapter 15, the Chapter of the Resurrection.

Or perhaps we would travel along the Turkish shore of the Aegean sea to Troas, where Paul and Silas and Luke boarded ship and sailed to Neapolis, to Macedonia, to bring the news of the Saviour risen from death, to bring the Gospel of Salvation to the cities of Greece – Thessalonica, Berea, Philippi, Athens - from where it would spread throughout the countries and lands of Europe. Wherever it travelled, the news of the Resurrection brought, hope, life, transformation, often testified to in glorious structures of wood and stone and glass, like Notre Dame.

Eventually the Gospel would cross the ocean and find a home among us, here in Prince Edward Island, where we would build our own glorious structure of wood and stone and glass, and proclaim our faith through our stained glass windows – have you ever noticed the majestic South Wall windows are Resurrection windows? The women at the tomb encountering the Risen Jesus? Jesus rising in triumph from the grave? The Risen Lord breaking bread with the disciples in Emmaus? And even, behind the flags, the Angel proclaiming the news? Why these windows? Because we are people of the Resurrection. And the Resurrection is about people. About a people changed, from despair to hope, from

grief to rejoicing, from death to life. And it all began in that Jerusalem tomb. I would bring you there.

But perhaps, I've got it wrong. Maybe it isn't about bringing you to Jerusalem, Galilee, Ephesus, Corinth. Maybe it isn't about showing you cities, churches, stones. Maybe it isn't about stained glass. For Jesus would tell us something different. Jesus would tell us this:

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

Ultimately, to show you the Resurrection, I must point you to Jesus. I must bring you to the one in whom the Resurrection itself is embodied, through whom the Resurrection takes hold, in whom the Resurrection is made real, alive. For it is with Christ, in Christ, and through Christ that we shall be raised to new life, it is with Christ, in Christ, and through Christ that we and those whom we love shall be brought to life, eternal life, never to taste death again.

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

The Holy Sepulchre? The shores of Galilee? Just places. The age of Pilate and Caiaphas? Just a time. The people like Mary, like Peter, whose jaws dropped and eyes grew wide as they beheld the one once dead and now living? Just people. Notre Dame? Zion Presbyterian? Just buildings. But they are places, times, people transformed by the power of Jesus and the glory of his Resurrection. From the shores of Galilee to the harbour of Charlottetown, the Resurrection is about us, now. You, me. Because – and listen to this miraculous truth - the same Spirit which raised Christ from the dead now dwells in you, and moves through you, and fills you with the certain hope of everlasting life. And so now you, too, are changed. You, too, are transformed. You have become the people of the Resurrection. You have become the people of the Risen Lord.

Back two thousand years, back to another tomb. Jesus is speaking with Martha, sister of Lazarus, who is grieving her brother's death. Jesus said to her, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

“I am the Resurrection and the Life.” This is where I must bring you. This is the one in whom you must believe. For He, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, Messiah, Son of the Living God, is the very Resurrection and the life, is the only Resurrection, is the only life worth living at all.

Do you? Can you? Will you believe? I pray you do. I pray you can. I pray you will.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour be to God, now and forevermore.

For Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Amen.