

Rev. Dr. David Holyan  
“I Didn’t Know It Was Jesus”  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood  
Sunday, April 21, 2019

**Isaiah 65:17-25**

*For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.  
But be glad and rejoice for ever  
in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight.  
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,  
and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,  
or the cry of distress.  
No more shall there be in it  
an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.  
They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
They shall not labour in vain,  
or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—  
and their descendants as well.  
Before they call I will answer;  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together;  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
says the Lord.*

**John 20:1-18**

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture,*

*that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." 'Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that You would take the words that each of us carry within, the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from the prophet and the gospel, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Take all of these words, and by the power of your Spirit, transform them into the living word of Jesus Christ within us. And let that word minister to each of us. Where we have need, let that word provide. Where we're hurt, let that word be comfort. Where we are too comfortable, let that word challenge us. Let that word guide us into service and love of You and of our neighbors. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

On the celebration of Easter, we all come wanting a piece of the joy and happiness of the day. We're excited because we get to put on our nice clothes that are a little more colorful than normal. We're excited because the flowers are blooming, the trees are turning green. We're excited because the ham is about to be ready to eat. We're excited because we get to gather together and celebrate this most holy of Sundays. And we get to come and hear Mary Weber play her trumpet [laughter]. [applause] Mary Weber will never again come up to me during the week and say, "Last Easter, you mentioned my name. And it kind of jolted me awake [laughter]." But we do come. We come to hear the choir and the organ, the brass, the tympany. We get to celebrate today. We celebrate the gift that God gives us in Christ rising over death and being alive. The hope and the promise of God for each of us. And what I want to do today is to honor that gift, that joy, that celebration by widening the frame a little bit and looking at the full picture. Because what we do is we focus in on that shiny goodness, the promise of Jesus being alive. We kind of forget some of the details of the story. Details that I think make it good news for all of us.

On that Sunday that Mary went to the tomb to do her duty to her friend Jesus who had died earlier, she encounters the tomb where the stone has been rolled away. And what we need to realize is that no one alive saw Jesus Christ being resurrected from the dead. It happened in the darkness of the night or the early morning. We don't know when. We don't know how the stone was rolled away. No one saw Jesus walk out of the tomb Mary only encountered an emptiness that was there, with angels and wrappings. So when we focus on Jesus being alive, let us open that lens up, expand the frame of that, and remember that that mystery happened in the darkness with no one, no one watching. And how it happened, we don't know. And to me what's the good news about that is that when we find ourselves in dark places, when we are hurting or hungry, when we feel oppressed or we're not sure that there's a way in front of us, we can trust that even when we don't see anything happening, God might be at work because apparently God likes to work in the dark places.

The next thing about this story that we forget is that Mary goes and tells the disciples that she can't find Jesus. So they run to the tomb, and they see that it's empty. And then there's this narrative thing about them understanding or believing. And then they run away and lock themselves up because they think that whoever came and got Jesus is going to come and get them. Some of those people are up here on a window. Maybe. We celebrate people like that, but we forget that they run away and hide just like you and I would. That even as God is at work in their life making something new come out of nothing, they might be locked in a room in fear. So again, the good news for us on this Easter Sunday is that when we find ourselves afraid and wanting to shutter ourselves from all the noise and agony of the outside world, God is still at work and is at work in our lives.

And probably the most important thing for us to remember about this story that is often overlooked is that Mary, for whatever reason, had the courage and fortitude to stay in that place of death, even though she didn't have any idea what was happening. The courage of her conviction is so powerful that she stays at the tomb. She's weeping, and she's asking

people, "Where have they laid him?" First to the angels and then to this gardener. And before she recognizes Christ in the uttering of her name, before that happens, we need to remember that she did not recognize her beloved teacher. This Jesus that she loved, who died on a cross and was put in a tomb, who was dead and buried, and who came back to life was not recognized. And it was only later in the conversation that the lightbulb went on when she heard her name and she turned to him again and said, "Teacher, it's you." And to me, the gospel of this is that there are times when we will encounter the presence of the risen Christ, in our lives, through the words and actions of another and we will not recognize it. But maybe later, as we're in the car driving home, it'll finally click and dawn on us that that was not a word from our friend. That was a word from the Lord.

In the gospel of Luke, there's this story of these two men that were in Jerusalem at the time. They had gone for the celebration of the Passover. They had heard about Jesus. They wanted to sit at his feet to listen to him, to learn from him. They heard that he was the one. And then, they also heard that the one they had come to see was arrested and hauled away and crucified and that he died and was buried. So they continued their celebration of Passover, as was their custom, and then they walked back to Emmaus. But on the road, a stranger came up to them, started to talk to them, explained what you heard read from the prophet, that [Karen?] read, what it means that there's new life about to happen. He explained other things as well. They got near to their home and they decided, "We'd better stop talking and go eat." So they invited the stranger in. At first, he said no. But then he said yes. And at their table, he took bread. He blessed it. He broke it. He handed it to them. And they went, "It's him." And then he disappeared. They spent a long walk talking to the risen Lord and did not know it. But only later in [an act?] did they realize the sacredness of that encounter. And then they, like Mary, ran back to Jerusalem and told everybody what had happened. I have seen the Lord. The world in these days is hungry to see Christ's presence.

In this past Monday, the first day of holy week, I was horrified, like many of you and millions of people around the world, to watch the beautiful cathedral of Notre Dame on that island in the middle of the river in Paris go up in flames. From about 1:30 on, I just kept watching the news and the stories just kept getting worse. The fire got bigger. The spire caved in. It seemed to be getting dark, and you could see the fire in the glow. And I thought, "Oh, it's all over." And I asked out loud, "Why are you letting this happen on Holy Monday?" Without an answer, I went to bed. And I woke the next morning, and after having my coffee, the first thing I did was check the news. And I saw a picture that you will see if you go on the website if you go on the website of the cathedral of Notre Dame right now. You will see a picture of a golden cross against the dark background. The cross that's hanging over the altar untouched, if you will, by the fire.

That's the image that's given to us today. But the image that I saw on Tuesday morning was from a different perspective. The picture was taken from outside the church, with the doors open, two firemen right at the door, and the view was all the way through up to the front of the church and there was a beautiful gold cross hanging there against just a backdrop of dark sooty walls and columns. And in front of the cross and just underneath it was a huge pile of burning and smoldering timbers from the roof. And believe it or not, when I saw that image of a burned out cathedral with the cross hanging above, a pile of timber that was still smoldering, I said, "Thank you, Lord." Because in that one image, the golden cross just sitting above the pile of smoldering roof beams, is the message of Easter.

But like the cathedrals on a website, what we want to do is we want to crop the picture. We want to focus on only the good stuff. The joy. The happiness. And I think at times when we do that, we ignore the details to our own peril. The darkness of the night. The place of unknowing and death. The unrecognition of Mary, the other disciples and ourselves. And a cross that is above a pile of smoldering yuck. All of these details inform how we celebrate. And they tell us that no matter where we are or what we're doing, they're telling us that no matter what we recognize or what goes unseen, it tells us that when our greatest fears are realized, that a beloved cathedral was burning on Easter week, it tells us all that Christ is risen and alive and at work. In us, in our neighbors, and in this world. So brothers and sisters, let us truly celebrate. He is risen. Amen.