

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 16, 2017

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10

He is Not Here!

The day the world changed!

What happened that morning is like nothing human kind had ever seen or known! To many, I'm sure it sounded like fake news: A man was raised from the dead! He is not here! He is risen! The tomb is empty!

I wonder....what if we think of the resurrection not so much in the way we typically imagine when something — or someone — rises (going **up** that is), but rather as the moment when Heaven comes to Earth. The power of God comes to the earthly realm and joins the two in a real way in a real moment — and everything is changed.

When you think about it, the whole story of our faith — the Judeo-Christian faith — is this repeated story of God and His Kingdom coming to Earth.

Sometimes this occurs on a cosmic scale: Like in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth — however you believe that to have occurred.

Or in a practical way, like when the chosen people of God — the Israelites — experience God's great power and presence – Heaven coming to Earth — as they wander in the wilderness; and through Moses receive instructions to build a tabernacle so that God has a place — an actual, physical, portable place — to reside with His chosen people.

That first tabernacle was actually a tent that the Israelites could pack up and take with them every time they moved. This ensured that God would have a real place, among the people, so that He could be with them and they with Him.

Or God comes in a sustaining way, in a real and tangible way — providing food for them in the wilderness – manna, literally bread from heaven.

God would come to the people over and over and over....

But then when they had fallen into chaos, having been conquered and exiled and without an earthly king or prophet, God came again, and provided a new kind of king — which they not just wanted but needed. But they didn't get what they expected, they got JESUS — God's very son, who spoke of forgiveness and being accepted in ways they'd never heard before. And he didn't just SPEAK of these things, he LIVED them.

The kingdom of God had come in this man, and the very foundations of the Earth were being shaken.

Now God was walking around, making friends with the locals, showing them a new way of life, that would change not just these individuals who happened to be hanging around him, or the community in which they lived, but the whole world would be changed!

Because THIS God has the power to raise a man from the dead. But the resurrection of Jesus wasn't just about the might of the Almighty One showing off His prowess — no, this moment, this event was first and foremost an act of LOVE — which would give those first followers the proof they needed to proclaim, the courage they would need to endure, and the love they would need to flourish.

But to get there, they first had to go somewhere they did NOT want to go. The women who had watched Jesus die a torturous death — who had watched from a distance — couldn't stay away, and so they went from one hard place to another: from the cross to the tomb.

You know about this... heading toward or into a hard place:

A conversation you have to have, but don't want to,
A diagnosis you can't imagine,
A class you don't want to take,
A move you don't want to make.

But then, God comes to us — sends a messenger of some sort — and says, “Come on in — you can, in fact, enter the tomb of grief, of pain, the dark place of disappointment, or of challenge.”

Because... and this is where things get weird — and wonderful....
Because... guess what? The tomb is empty!

You see, the stone wasn't rolled away to let Jesus OUT; he was already raised / gone BEFORE the stone was moved. No — the stone was rolled away to let the women IN!

The hard places in life — we're not just **called** to go into them; but we are **able** to...because the tomb no longer has a stronghold on death — it's power is gone. It's no longer a place to be afraid of. But usually we don't discover this until we get there — until we actually enter the hard place, and face the hard times, or have the difficult conversation.

But we CAN do this hard thing, because the power of God is on the loose and in the world — not just swirling around in the heavens.

The tomb is empty — He is not here! He is not here...
So where is he? Jesus, where are you?

His friends — and hundreds of others — saw him in the resurrected flesh. But you know — we don't get what they got — the flesh and blood risen Lord. Jesus is with us but he might not look like you'd expect him to look.

A colleague of mine (Matt Fitzgerald) explains it like this:

I knew a woman who had a baby. She was addicted to heroin. She cleaned up, relapsed, had another baby, quit cold turkey and relapsed again. She lost custody of both children. Then she got serious. She went to meetings. She got clean.

Eventually she got supervised visits. Twice a month her living room would burst to life. Her toddler and her infant, crying, babbling, shouting, filling up the room with diapers, laughing in her arms.

At the end of their visit the babies were taken again. And she would stay in her empty living room for hours. She would sit in her daughter's' glow, letting it linger, stretching her sense of their presence as long as she could. She stared at the indentation on the couch where her three-year-old sat, watching it slowly disappear. She kept vigil, smelling the air as their scent faded.

I wonder if it's like that with Jesus. I don't often feel his presence, even though I believe he is ALIVE - risen from the dead and all. Christ is real, to be sure, but he is gone. So what if we leaned into our longing for him to be right here?

Because I have felt as if I've stepped into a room that God just left. That first Easter, the women felt it in a tomb — but you can feel it on the train, in the hospital, at school, in your garden, at your office. You can feel it anywhere. Christ is not here, but he just left.

The next time you step into this feeling, pause, and take it in. The next time you enter into the hard place you don't want to go, breathe in Christ's absence. Perhaps you'll catch a lingering sense of him.

Maybe you'll see an indent on a couch cushion, or hear the echo of babbling laughter. Maybe you'll feel the air moving in His wake. Maybe you'll see the light of God at the end of the tunnel. Maybe you'll be left with the taste of grape juice in your mouth.

And, maybe that will be enough. Enough to sustain your longing and enough to see the truth:
He is not here, but has risen.

Amen.