

“Easter Pictures”

Luke 24:1-12

Easter Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville

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I’m going to begin this morning’s Easter sermon with what I hope is a very easy question.

Which part of Easter morning is your favorite part?

Would it be...

- Singing “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” with 700 other voices at the start of worship?
- Or listening to the choir sing the glorious “Hallelujah” chorus at the end of worship?
- Or would it be just sitting in a packed sanctuary, everyone in their Easter best, hearing the news that Christ is Risen?
- Or...how many children here vote for the donuts that are offered in between our services?

I ask because one of the parts that I’ve come to enjoy, especially since I came to Westminster, is the posting of Easter pictures on social media. Now, as you know, I’m not a big social media person. It’s kind of embarrassing to admit—I’m not sure I even know HOW to post a photo on Instagram.

What I do know is that it’s become a tradition for so many of you to take pictures out by the flowering cross after worship, or somewhere here at Westminster, and then you’ll post them later afternoon...I love looking at those pictures every Easter evening.

Why do I love those pictures?
 We'll get to that in a little bit.
 I think there's more to those Easter pictures than meets the eye.

But let me invite you right now to take a look at some other Easter pictures today...

The first pictures are not photos, but paintings.
 You'll find them in the bulletin insert this morning.
 Do you see the insert with the paintings?

Both paintings are of Easter.
 And yet they tell the story in remarkably different ways.

The one on top is by the German painter Hans Memling.
 It comes from the late 15th century.
 Notice the angel, removing the top of what looks like a coffin...
 as Jesus, quite literally, is stepping out of his tomb.

What this painting does is describe Easter as a particular event *within history*. Time is rolling along, and then—Easter happened! And then history continued to happen...

Not a poor description.

But take a look at the second painting, the one on the bottom.
 This one is by the Italian painter Tintoretto.

It was painted about 100 years later.
 And Tintoretto's image of Easter is—

I hope you can tell—
 different from Memling's.

Notice the light and the darkness in this painting.

The darkness that exists in the world below, and the light that surrounds the risen Christ, coming from God, breaking into the darkness.

Instead of Jesus climbing out of a tomb, Tintoretto gives the impression the heavens are being opened on Easter, and the risen Christ is breaking through at Easter, bringing light into a dark and death-determined world at Easter.

Perhaps you can see the women in Tintoretto's painting?

They're on the left side, literally at the border between the darkness and the light as they approach the tomb...and the light is already starting to grab them, and claim them....

If I can put it this way, Tintoretto paints on a LARGER scale. He doesn't just present Easter as a hopeful event that happened once, long ago, within history.

For Tintoretto, Easter is the hope of the living God that *breaks into history*—a hope that surrounds history, is more expansive than history, and is larger than time itself.¹

Now...I know that's a lot to swallow first thing out of the gates on Easter morning. So maybe a simpler way to put it is like this. Tintoretto's expansive view of Easter reminds me of something a colleague once said.

He described the hope of Easter this way:

¹ I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Tom Long for presenting this contrast between the two paintings during a discussion with my International Preaching Cohort from the Ministry Collaborative in Edinburgh, Scotland, in February, 2024.

Do not live in a smaller world than the one that God has given you.²

I think this is the message that the angels deliver to the women when they come to the tomb.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

If you’re looking for Jesus, you’re in the wrong place. You’re no longer living in a Good Friday world, a world in which might makes right and death gets the final word. You’re living in an Easter world, one in which the love of God cannot be contained.

In other words, do not live in a smaller world than the one that God has given you.

Then comes my favorite part of this text:

“Remember how he told you...that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

Then they remembered his words...

I love that part of Luke’s Easter story.
It means that Easter hope begins with memory.
With recognition.
So let me test your memory right now.

Bible pop quiz—I know how much these, especially on Easter:
How many women went to the tomb in Luke’s Gospel?

² I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for hearing this phrase in one of his Easter sermon’s long ago.

(Thursday morning Bible study participants, you are NOT allowed to answer this!)

If you remember one, that would be correct in John's Gospel.
 If you remember two, you would be right in Matthew's Gospel.
 If you remember three, that would be Mark's Gospel...

What does Luke say?

“Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them...”

Wait a minute.
 The other women with them?

According to Luke, it was much more than three women who went to the tomb. There were too many for Luke to name! All of whom were disciples of Jesus. All of whom became the first preachers, if you will, of the risen Jesus!

(By the way...if the first preachers of Easter were women, how did God's Church ever get the idea that women should not be ordained ministers of the gospel? That's a sermon for another day...)

Back in Luke's day, at a time when women were often treated as second-class citizens at best, or someone's property at worst, saying that a community of women were the first witnesses of Easter...that's not just a radical statement.

It is profoundly hopeful statement.

It's a way of saying that God chose people
 to hear about Easter, and spread the news of Easter,
 people whom no one would have EVER imagined
 God working through.

It's Luke, saying to the church of his day, **do not live in a smaller world than the one that God has given you...**

Has it ever happened to you?

Have you ever found yourself living in a smaller world than the one that God has given you?

I remember a number of years ago now, there was a death in our extended family. And that death was like a blanket, the sadness that I felt in the days after the funeral—it just kind of covered everything. And in the weeks that followed, with the congregation I was serving at that time, I preached a sermon in which I quoted C.S. Lewis.

Lewis wrote a marvelous book after the death of his wife called *A Grief Observed*.

In one passage, Lewis says:

“...all that stuff about family reunions ‘on the further shore,’ ...it rings false...The exact same thing is never taken away and given back.”³

Well, my point in quoting Lewis was to say that Resurrection is NEW—not something we've ever seen before. But I missed something in that sermon, and I'll never forget the gift one of my church members gave me by coming to me in my office after worship to tell me what I missed.

³ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, New York: Bantam Books, 1976.

“Ben,” she said, “there’s more hope in the gospel story than what you preached today.”

I asked her what she meant.

She replied, “There’s plenty in the Bible about a heavenly banquet, about how we will be in community with each other after we die—we call it the communion of the saints,” she said.

“The communion of the saints means we will be reunited with those we love, but in a way that’s different from the union and love we have right now.”

“We will all be together,” this wise parishioner said to me, “but I believe the Bible tells us it will be in a NEW way. The love will be there. The depth of the love we have for each other and for God—it will be even greater than it is right now.”

Then she made her point.

“The love will be real...but the POSSESSIVENESS will be gone.”⁴

You know what happened there, right?
I was living in a smaller world than the one that God had given me.

And the risen Christ sent someone to me,
REMINDING me about the hope of God,
MOVING me out of my narrow world,
and putting me back where God wanted me to be.

⁴ I am indebted to Ann Schechter for this conversation years ago.

This is, I think, what Luke's Easter story is all about.

The risen Christ, showing up not just in our future, holding you and your loved ones together in God's Promised Day, but Christ showing up in our lives today!

Will Willimon, the former Methodist Bishop, who has preached here a couple of times, says that he is "still haunted" by a long conversation he had with someone in one of his earlier congregations.

This parishioner told Dr. Willimon that one evening, returning from a night of poker with his pals, he had a stunning vision of the presence of the risen Christ. Christ appeared to him undeniably and vividly.

Yet even though this event shook him and stirred him deeply, in ten years he had never told anyone about it before.

Dr. Willimon pressed him on his silence.

Was he embarrassed?

Was he fearful that others might mock him or fail to believe that this really happened to him?

"No," he said, "the reason why I didn't tell anyone was I was too scared that it was true. And if it's true that Jesus...had come personally to me, what then? I'd have to change...I'd have to be somebody else."⁵

Maybe THAT'S the reason we choose to live in smaller worlds than the one that God has given us.

⁵ William H. Willimon, *Undone by Easter: Keeping Preaching Fresh*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009.

Because the status quo is much simpler.
When the risen Christ enters our lives, he demands action.
He requires change.
We can't just sit still.
We can't sing Alleluia, and then go take a nap...well, let me take that back.

I just might be taking a nap on the couch this afternoon.

But AFTER the nap, later today, what then?

Well, that brings me back to those Easter pictures.
Why do I love those Easter pictures you'll take later today?
Because those pictures remind me of where I can find the risen Christ.

Right here.
With each of you.

The good news at Easter is that Jesus promises to reveal himself in you...and in you...and in YOU.

I hope you know this.
You see, the risen Christ promises to show up, no matter what world you're living in right now.

If you're caring for an aging parent, and you have siblings, but they don't seem to help, you're the one doing the day to day, you're the one handling the bills, and you're tempted to feel bitter about it...remember:

Do not live in a smaller world than the one God has given you.

If you're staring an illness in the face, and the rug has been pulled out from under you, and you don't know what the next year is going to look like, remember:

Do not live in a smaller world than the one that God has given you.

On any given day, the risen Christ may do something with you...something that you never could have done or imagined on your own.

For example...

Last month, our church hosted a group of college students, from another part of the country, students who were on a mission trip, serving our greater Greenville community for a week.

I didn't see much of them that week.

They slept up on the third floor.

They came to worship at the 9a service the morning after they arrived.

I met them, shook hands with them after worship...and that was about it.

Or so I thought.

But a couple weeks after their visit, we received a thank you note from their leader.

Part of it went like this:

"We all made it back safe and sound. I also wanted to share with you a little more about the trip with the hope that you will pass this along to the rest of your church..."

“...we work mostly with what we call ‘pre-belief’ students. Most of our students have either little or no history with the church (many have never read a Bible story before joining our ministry)...some [have] deep church hurt from their past.

“Each night during the trip we would take some time to debrief our day and what we learned, what we are questioning...On Sunday, after we had been to worship [at Westminster], one of the students with a history of church hurt and distrust said that the worship was a good reminder of what hospitality is. She said that everyone was so welcoming and it reminded her that not all churches are bad.

“...At the end of the week, this same student said that for the first time in her life she feels like there has to be a God.

“When I say this is a huge step for her, I mean it...

“We've talked for the last year about her desire for there to be a God, but she has always held back. This week helped to change that for her.

“Thank you for helping to make this story a reality.”

Now when I came to church that morning, I thought it was just another Sunday here...

But it wasn't just another Sunday for that student.
And it wasn't just another Sunday for Jesus.

The risen Christ, whether you knew it or not, was at work in you!
Bringing someone closer to God...because of you.

I began with an easy question.
Let me end with one too.
Do you remember the good news this morning?

Christ is risen!
Which means we have a job to do.

**Do not live in a smaller world than the one that God has given
you.**

Amen.