

This morning people around the world gathered when the sun began to rise. At the break of dawn they prayed and sang, read the scriptures and remembered Jesus’ Resurrection. I know. I was there. At least I was there when the sun rose at Fairhaven Park here in Kennedy Twp. when it was 33 degrees! Dawn is the perfect time to remember Jesus’ rising because it’s when we wait for the sun to burst forth with the force of hundreds of nuclear explosions.

The question we need to answer is, “Who do you say he is?” if we want to experience the power of Jesus’ Resurrection, this morning. So let’s put ourselves in the shoes of the women who come to Jesus’ tomb that first Easter.

At the time of Jesus, 1<sup>st</sup> century culture had a nearly opposite view of women from 21<sup>st</sup> century America. They thought of women as irreligious and they thought of women as sexual predators. Most western cultures today have the direct opposite view of women. Take the #MeToo movement for instance. It’s being called the greatest cultural upheaval in decades. Or perhaps, more to the point, the greatest cultural reckoning.

James Emery White recently said, “Over the last five months, more than 100 prominent men in news, entertainment, government and education have been publicly accused of sexual harassment or assault. But these aren’t isolated cases. It seems to be systemic. Around 60% of all American women say they’ve been harassed on the job. Back in October when Alyssa Milano sent out a tweet that said, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet,” she woke up the next day to find that more than 30,000 people had used the hashtag #MeToo. Milano burst into tears. Within 24 hours, the number had risen to 12 million. #MeToo has now been used millions of times in at least 85 countries.”

TIME Magazine named “*The Silence Breakers*” their 2017 Person of the Year, referring to the voices that launched the #MeToo movement. They say it unleashed a tremendous cultural shift. “Women have had it with bosses and co-workers who not only cross boundaries but don’t even seem to know that boundaries exist... They’ve had it with men who use their power to take what they want from women. [So they have] started a revolution...”

At the time of Jesus a woman was thought to be so untrustworthy that she could not be a witness in court, unless of course, her husband would back her up. One of the reasons the story of Jesus’ Resurrection was so often criticized in the second century was because it was told by women. In the final chapter of his gospel Mark says, “*Very early on the first day of the week (that’s Sunday) just after sunrise, [the women] were on their way to the tomb and they had asked each other, ‘Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?’*” They waited until the Sabbath was over, which means sundown Saturday night. The shops would open up again and they would buy spices to apply to the body. After a restless night’s sleep, here they come wandering into an Easter sunrise service, but they don’t even know it.

They don’t realize the power that awaits them. They’re moaning to one another about who’s going to heft the stone from the opening of the burial place. They’re discussing all the impossibilities connected with Jesus’ death, just as each of us comes trudging to worship usually more preoccupied with what we think God can’t do than with what God can do; just as the church frets and wrings its hands saying what it can’t, or won’t, do for God.

When Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome arrive at the tomb, they face the utter impossibility and finality of death. They think the tomb holds Jesus forever, trapped in the prison that

waited at the end of his life as a brick wall awaits someone throwing a raw egg against it. They see the tomb as though it's a jail that will imprison Jesus forever. They think the grave possesses Jesus. Granted, the stone outside the tomb entrance in Jerusalem made an attempt to imprison Jesus. But nothing can hold Jesus, not even the religious people. Although as one man has observed: "Jesus has been interred in the church and its creeds. Christianity in its official presentation has often been a smothered religion. The face of the Master has been so frequently wrapped with the winding sheets of philosophy and metaphysics that it has been hard for the plain people to recognize him...Jesus has been imprisoned in stained-glass windows, a figure rich in color and remote from life. He has been buried in books, venerated at a distance. Though people have tried to bury him...Jesus Christ has broken out of jail." (*Interpreter's Bible* 7:913ff).

The women come and find the prison door bent on its hinges, the bars "torn away," as Robert Lowry describes Christ's "mighty triumph" in the hymn we sang earlier in the service. That's not exactly how it happened, but I think it is a good way to picture it. In the shadows of that dawning morn, the first day of the week which they expected to be a day of sorrow and grief, that day was transformed into the first day of God's new creation. The same way that God pulled us out of the dust into life, so in the Resurrection of Jesus, God has taken death and wrapped it in pure love and transformed it into eternal life. The result is that what we thought was over, what we had no reason to believe would ever happen, has burst into new life.

The angel tells the women to tell the disciples and Peter, "*He is going ahead of you into Galilee.*" Now!! Jesus isn't only alive but he's *active*. The news that he's "*going ahead of you*" says that he's not a character in a book, or someone we only recall through reminiscing about him. He isn't someone to discuss and study. He's a living presence to be encountered *in real life* and met here and now. He goes ahead of you, preparing the miraculous, calling you to go on to his kind of life, promising that you will see him, if you simply seek him.

No wonder the women skitter away, like actors fleeing the stage, frightened by too great a role to play—a role conceived by genius, written for talent, but given to amateurs. They feel a *shuddering awe*, and why shouldn't they? As they peer into the empty tomb, it's like seeing the craters of a battlefield where good has defeated and destroyed evil. It's more than a bit overwhelming to see in person where the battle was won; then, to be sent to tell about it, and who to tell but those who were supposed to know in the first place?

Those without status or training or credentials of any kind, those who are without the basic respect of their fellow human beings, they're to go and instruct their religious leaders. Who could ever imagine women having a place as leaders in the church back on that first Easter? The women don't expect any such thing to happen. They merely *come*, out of loyalty, to honor their dead friend. In their love for Jesus, and their aching grief, they haven't even thought through how they would remove the stone. Yet they are seeking Jesus.

Listen carefully to whom the women are to report: "*But go, tell his disciples and Peter*"...and Peter...Peter, with such confidence in his devotion to Jesus, even Peter, the disciple with a surplus of bluster. "Boy, Jesus, don't worry, all these other followers might slip away from responsibility, they might hide when people come after your disciples. But me? I'll be with you. Just you and me, Lord." How doubly sad, how triply sad, when three times Peter denies any connection to the man he had loved and accompanied for three years. Through the young man dressed in a white robe, Jesus seems to say, "*But*

*go, tell my disciples...even Peter. Tell the one who promised to serve me, but who denied me, tell him especially.”*

Right after the young man names Peter, it's our privilege to hear our own names, yours and mine. God forgives you and calls you to new life, no matter what vows to God you've broken, no matter how your sin has disrupted your faithfulness. Maybe you didn't expect that the Risen Jesus would send you such a personal message on Easter, but he does. Easter is about a totally new life: God penetrating our world, moving the limits of life beyond anything we could imagine or feel or hear or see.

Easter sermons are sometimes a handful of advice, telling us what we should believe and do. I'll try to spare the advice and stick to the proclamation, because the power of Easter is the power of God's gift of life—free and eternal life given to a sinful people everywhere. The only advice I have to give on this Easter Sunday is eternal advice. Like the women who come to the tomb, COME to Jesus, even if you think he's dead. COME to Jesus for whatever reason: For an example of virtue, or courage, or compassion, or revolution. COME to the gospel story to pity his death or to prove humans are stupid and life is absurd. But, whatever you do, COME to Jesus and find out what he is still doing.

Mark's Resurrection story ends in verse 8, saying, "*Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*" Are you kidding me? The gospel can't end in silence! The so-called 'Greatest Story Ever Told' can't become the greatest story NEVER TOLD!" No, no, no. The gospel cannot end this way!

But, let's be honest. Doesn't it often end that way in our lives? Do we keep the greatest news ever told to ourselves because like the women we're afraid or indifferent or we worry what other people will think? That may be precisely what we do with the story of Easter morning and Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

So I'll ask you one last time, with the season of Lent behind us, "Who is Jesus Christ?" In Mark's story the young man dressed in a white robe tells us that Jesus is the Risen One. Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*

Come to church and see if a dead religious institution can be raised to life by the Risen One. It only takes a little bit of faith to lead us to God's surprises—surprises like an empty tomb and eternal life. That's what the women find after they fussed over the impossibilities of Jesus' death. They come seeking Jesus, yet the obstacle is removed and the boundaries of this world evaporate like the early mist at sunrise. Life is suddenly larger than they'd hoped. And they're far more important to God than they ever dreamed.

Who is Jesus Christ? Who do you say he is?

We Christians believe that we know the answer to that important question or we wouldn't be here this morning. And our answer to that question is not something for any of us to keep quiet about. Let us pray...

*Lord, a little bit of help is not enough. Only your Resurrection can save us. We need you this Sunday. Jesus, we need you and your eternal quality of life. Come to each of us this Sunday, Risen Lord, as you did that first Sunday morning of your new creation, and raise us with you to a new life that is renewed by faith, hope and love. This we pray in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*