

If Christ Be Not Raised
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton, NC.
Easter
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John 20: 1-18

It was early that morning. It was a Sunday, but that was just the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath. People in Jerusalem would be back to work that morning. And the women go to the tomb, to be sure Jesus was properly cared for, with spices and things; they had to be sure his body was properly wrapped up.

Of course, when they get there, the tomb is empty! He is not there. What? Where is he? They begin to ask those around, where did you put his body? Did you move him?

John says Mary ran to get Peter and John, telling them the tomb is empty. They run there — John gets there first, just saying — and they go in. Sure enough, he is gone. That much they believe, but they don't know yet that he is risen from the dead!

Slowly, they find out. Mary hangs around the tomb, and sees two angels. They ask her why she is so sad; why are you weeping? Then she sees the gardener, and she asks him where he has put Jesus' body. But he speaks her name, and she realizes that it is he: he is risen, he is alive, and nothing will ever be the same again! And by the way — it is Mary who is the first to tell the disciples that he is raised. A woman. Just saying....

You can piece together details from all four of the gospel accounts, and get a pretty full picture of what happened that morning. What you begin to see is a lot of confusion, until Jesus appears to them, one or two at a time, later to the twelve. What you see is the dawning wonder that he is risen! He is alive!

None of this matters if Jesus didn't rise from the dead. In fact, none of what we do matters if the resurrection isn't true. If he didn't rise then we don't need to do any of this. We remember him, but unless he is alive, unless he really rose from the dead, it doesn't matter.

That was all a long time ago. Much has changed in the world; even in the last hundred years, much has changed. The world we grew up in is gone; that much is different. Not everyone sees this world as going in the right direction; many are sure that the end is near. For many people, and perhaps for some of you, this is a time of darkness.

In a dark time, what does the empty tomb mean? It is like a candle, lit in the dark. It is a like a faintly flickering light in the middle of a dark and fearful night. There is no joy, no happiness, no reason for living. We continue but we don't have much hope.

In a time of turmoil, what does the empty tomb mean? It gives us joy, hope, and meaning. It brings life!

We find ourselves with no joy when life takes a left turn and leaves us bereft. Some big change happens to us; someone dies; we lose an opportunity — and we find that joy is gone. I am here to tell you that Jesus will offer your joy back.

Or hope. We look at the future and we can see no hope, find no hope. We can't see the path forward; it is all darkness. We become hopeless; we despair. But Jesus is alive, and just like those first disciples saw no hope, until they saw that he is alive, so it is with us.

Maybe for you life just doesn't seem to have any meaning; no matter what you see to do, it doesn't matter. It's all sand. But Jesus comes to bring us meaning and purpose. You might have to find something new to do, learn a new skill, start a different kind of life — it might not be easy. But Jesus brings us meaning.

St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 and says, "if it is for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people the most to be pitied." In short, we are wasting our time, if he didn't rise from the dead.

But if he DID rise....and he did! Then everything is changed, all is made new. Suddenly we have a new way of seeing everything. It's all different. It's all new.

Jesus tells Mary, "don't hold on to me." Some translations say, "don't cling to me." Don't hold onto the past, to the way I was. Things are not the same, will never be the same again.

But we want to hold on to stuff. We cling to stuff. Some of you are wishing I was not retiring. You want me to stay until after your funeral. You are clinging to me. (And some of you are kind of wishing I would leave already...) But you know, I will leave and you will be fine! Cathy will leave, and we will survive! People come and go, but the Church marches on. The thing is, we don't like change.

But life is full of change; that's the one constant you can count on.

If you are in a place with no joy, it is still EASTER!
 If you are scared, it is still EASTER!
 If you don't find any hope, it is still EASTER!
 If you are clinging to the past, it is EASTER!

The Lord is risen! Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen.