

Easter Sunday

Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

A Sermon for Easter Sunday

In order to understand the resurrection, we need to think about the time people lived and what was happening. Their situation was similar to the Kurds in Iraq today, who are held under oppression. Or like the people in Burma (Myanmar) where the Buddhists are repressed and persecuted.

What did the Romans do? First of all, the Romans collected heavy taxes. But on top of that they had curfews, restricted the right of assembly, restricted the religious practices. It was like living in a prison camp.

Naturally the people tried to find a way to rebel. We know from the 5th chapter of Acts that there had been other uprisings and Messiahs. There had been a messiah named Theudas (Acts 5:36), and another messiah called Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37). Both of these uprisings they led had been put down brutally with military force.

According to Josephus, there had been a whole host of messiahs because people said: "We have to throw off this Roman oppression."

Along came this man Jesus. And they thought: "Ah ha, maybe this is the real one." And they came to him and said: "When are you going to start restoring the kingdom?" by which they meant the kingdom of David.

You remember the mother of the sons of Zebedee, James and John, came and asked Jesus: "Would you let my two sons be on your right and left hand in your new kingdom?" (Matthew 20:21). They expected that it would start right then. But it didn't, as we all know.

All their hopes were dashed. Their leader was crucified like a common criminal. Not only that, but the disciples all fled. Remember their leader, Peter, emphatically denied him three times: "I had nothing to do with him."

We have to see this setting. They were scattered, depressed, everything was lost.

Then came this news that the body had disappeared. That's in the story for today. They went to look but notice what John and Peter did. They went back to their homes.

Or in Luke where this same account is, in Luke 24:11, the women come and tell the disciples, and they say that it seems like an idle tale because they knew about ghosts and hallucinations.

Even more astonishing, even after Jesus had already appeared to them, Peter said: "Let's go fishing." Let's get back to our routines.

Then as it became clear to them, they said: "He has risen indeed!" And they went around talking to each other about it.

How can we describe this? We're a couple of thousand years later. It's like winning the lottery, or getting a hole in one, or a grand slam, or being told that you don't have cancer anymore. How can we describe this?

The way to see what it's about is to describe what happened in the next 280 years, because the crucifixion and resurrection were approximately 30 AD.

In 312 AD, the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. In those 280 years between, the Christians had gradually taken over. When Constantine did this, it was a smart political move because Christians were the majority party by then.

But the Christians didn't do it by force of arms. In fact, they did it by martyrdom.

In great contrast, in Islam in 10 years from 622-632, they took over Arabia and in 100 years from 632 to 732, they went all the way across Asia Minor and all the way across Africa and up to Paris. They did it by a force of arms; they conquered by force.

Not the Christians. They did it because they didn't fear anything anymore. Peter, also known to us as Rocky, was a pretty shaky character. He had denied Jesus, rebuked him, but he and the others, once they came to see that the resurrection is the key event of all time, they went out and conquered the universe, and not by force.

What does it mean? It means that everything is changed. God has done something that we can call the death of death.

We have a problem because we don't remember that sin and death are the same thing. They are. It says in Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death." In 1 Cor 15:56: "The sting of death is sin." The sting refers to the sting of the scorpion. The cause of death is sin.

What happened in the cross and resurrection is that death is conquered and also therefore sin. On the cross it is made right with God. God settles his own accounts with himself. He makes it right again. Therefore, we have life.

That's why the poet said: "We call this Friday Good."

What does it mean for you and me? That's really, of course, what we want to hear about.

Therefore, we have this lesson in Colossians 3 because everything has also changed for you and me. It says here: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory"

(Colossians 3:3-4). When did this happen? It happened for you and me when we were baptized. In Baptism everything is changed. You are given life, life forever.

Paul, in Romans 6:4-5, puts in a nutshell: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Now listen to this: "For if we have been united with him in a baptism like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

That's that remarkable fact. The cross and resurrection changes everything. Being baptized into his death and resurrection changes everything. It's the best business deal of all time, the sweet swop. He takes our sin and death, and we take his righteousness and life. What a deal, forever.

At Easter, we greet each other with the refrain: "He is risen. He is risen indeed."

Another way of saying what it is all about, comes from the words at the end of Jesus' life where on the cross he says: "It is finished" (John 19:30).

As we use the Gospel of John, we find that words there often have several layers of meaning. Obviously, "it is finished" means that's the end, the termination. Jesus talked about how he had had to go through certain things in his life. His hour had come. It's over. It's done. It's finished.

"It is finished" also has another meaning, obviously. It means: It's completed. It's accomplished. All has been taken care of. What we have therefore in his death and resurrection, is that it's all taken care of.

Whatever it is, whatever it is that means life, now and forever, is yours and mine. Amen