

A New Beginning

Easter A 2008 | Matthew 28

A pastor was giving the children's sermon one Easter morning in her congregation. Sitting with the children, she asked them:

"If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?"

"No!" the children all answered.

"If I cleaned the church everyday, mowed the yard and kept everything neat and tidy, would *that* get me into heaven?"
Again, the answer was "No!"

"Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my husband, would *that* get me into heaven?"
Again, they all answered "No!"

"Well," the pastor continued, "then how can I get into heaven?"
A five year old theologian in the group shouted out, "You gotta be dead."

As we ended our worship service Friday night, there was no doubt about it: Jesus was dead. He'd been betrayed by one of his closest disciples; he'd been abandoned by the other 11 disciples he'd chosen; he'd been humiliated and abused by the Roman authorities; he'd been nailed to a cross and scoffed at
by the crowds and by one thief hanging next to him. The crowds and authorities saw him breathe his last and die. Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus' cold body in his own tomb and sealed it with a large rock. The Romans even went so far as to post a guard and secure the tomb with an additional seal –
think yellow crime scene tape that secures a crime scene. Nope, as we ended the story Friday night, Jesus was well and truly dead.

In our human relationships, death is usually the end. For those of us still living, life goes on; but with a loved one's death comes a permanent change in our relationship with them. We may be able to claim by faith that we will see them again. But our relationship with them in this life is over.

But on this Easter Sunday,

we gather to make the incredible claim that Jesus' death is really the beginning of the story and not the end.

Jesus' passion and resurrection is the story of a contest between human power and God's power. Human power revealed in Jesus' passion, death and burial.

Roman authority and power over Jesus through his trial.

Human power drove nails into Jesus' flesh

Human power sealed the tomb and posted the guard.

God's power revealed in the cosmic signs.

Temple curtain torn in two

Earthquake at Jesus' death; tombs emptied and saints raised (Mt 27)

Earthquake when the angel moves the stone away

Why does God do all this?

Jesus' passion and resurrection is also one part of God's ongoing story across both Old and New Testaments of doing whatever is necessary to restore our relationship with God and with one another.

Philip Yancy makes the following observation in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*. He writes that

Jesus reveals a God who comes in search for us;

Jesus reveals a God who makes room for our freedom even when it costs the son's life;

Jesus reveals a God who is vulnerable.

Above all, Jesus reveals a God who is love. (p.267)

Those of us who were raised within the Christian tradition, or those of us who have been around church for while may miss the shock behind Jesus' revelation that God is love.

Amongst the world's religions throughout history outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition

love has never been the usual way of describing the relationship between humans and the gods.

Not once does the Qur'an apply the word 'love' to God.

Aristotle stated bluntly:

It would be eccentric to anyone to claim that he loved Zeus or that Zeus loved a human being, for that matter.

In dazzling contrast, the God of the Old and New Testaments affirms that God is love, and it cites love as the main reason Jesus came to earth.

John lays this out for us when he writes,

God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him.

This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

1 John 4:9-10

The Bible, from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22 tells the story of a God who is reckless with desire to get his family back; to do whatever it takes to bring you and me back into God's love relationship with us.

We'll see this enacted beautifully in the four baptisms happening at late service this morning. At the font, God will claim Andrew, William, Caitlyn, and Jacob and bring them into God's extended family.

There is power of this new beginning in our lives, if we are willing to believe. It may seem like this resurrection story is just an idle tale. It seemed that way to the first disciples in Luke's gospel (24.11). Or it may seem like the power of death is very strong in your life right now. Many of you are experiencing personal and spiritual challenges. As a congregation, we have experienced a death with the ending of our relationship with our previous Senior Pastor.

Jesus' resurrection power in the world means that death is just the beginning of the story, not the end. The disciples are changed and empowered by this new beginning. For Jesus promised to meet his followers in Galilee. For the disciples, this was a particular place. It was the place of much of their mission with Jesus. For us, in this time and place, Jesus' promise to meet us in Galilee is not about our going to Israel. It's about Jesus' promise to meet us in our place of ministry. To empower us to see Jesus in our relationships, and to share the story of what God has done for us in Christ. Jesus has given us a ministry to extend hope in his name; to baptize and teach and share Christ's compassion with those not yet part of God's extended family.

Jesus' resurrection means a new beginning for us – personally, in our relationship with God, and as a congregation, in our ministry together with Pastor Jan and the future God has in store for us. As we are touched by God's love and resurrection power, our lives are changed forever. We dare not remain the same. We must not leave this place and simply return to our status quo. Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!!
Let us live as though this were true.

Amen