

Community Church of Issaquah
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From Darkness to Light

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The story we know at Easter is so much longer than can be covered in just a few sermons during Lent. We have simply covered Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem last Sunday as we observed Palm Sunday. And we honored Jesus's last supper with his disciples this past Maundy Thursday. Today we celebrate the resurrection of Christ from the dead on Easter Sunday. But there is so much more to the story, and I would be remiss if I skipped over some of the parts that mean so much to believers. This is just a few of those:

- ❖ After he entered into Jerusalem, Jesus went into the temple and drove out the money lenders to show those there what God's place of worship should be.
- ❖ There is the beautiful story of the woman who came with very expensive perfume and anointed Jesus during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.
- ❖ When we look deeper into the Scriptures, we would find an amazing parable that Jesus tells about a vineyard owner and his tenants who murder the owner's son in to hopes of inheriting the vineyard. This was a way for Jesus to talk about his own death and how it was suppose to prosper the religious leaders.
- ❖ We could learn about the agreement Judas made to betray Jesus and how that came to fruition as Jesus

was at the Mount of Olives praying while his disciples slept.

- ❖ The story of his arrest and trial would give the details of how cruel his enemies were and what they would resort to doing to be rid of this promised Messiah as he stood before Pilate and Herod.
- ❖ We would be saddened by the portion of the story where Peter, perhaps the most favored of all the disciples would not only deny that he knew Jesus but would do it three times.

On Easter Sunday, however, we focus our attention on the amazing and powerful story of how Jesus was raised from the dead. Having been beaten, nailed to a cross between two thieves, humiliated by the soldiers, and left there to die, we pick up the story of how death could not keep him in the tomb. When we repeat often, “Christ is risen!” That is what we are celebrating. Often in churches, a white cloth is draped over the cross indicating that Jesus was triumphant over his suffering and death. Can you think of a happier way to celebrate Easter Sunday?

Yes, I know that aside from our church observance of this amazing story, we also have a history of adding a great deal of social elements to the day. I recall as a kid and teenager how everyone would be dressed in some new clothes. Little girls would have new patent leather shoes, boys would have new bow ties and we would all parade into the church like it was some sort of beauty pageant. Our mothers clutching a new purse and wearing a festive hat. The idea of that makes you laugh, doesn't it?

But then of course there are the other parts that add to the festivities. The ham lunches, the colored eggs, the Easter baskets full of treats. That was my favorite part, by the way. Once I even remember that my dad had found some little chicks that had been dyed in pretty colors and those were presented to my siblings and me, which was not a very wise move on my parent's part. In all of this, however, the main focus was to make the day a very special one for everyone. It was my tradition for years as I tried to copy all of that festivity with my son and grandson.

As a minister, though, my attention always had to return to the Scriptures to honor the life, death and resurrection of Jesus so that my church would be respectful and gracious. I want that for CCI as well. And as I contemplated what message I could give to you that would help to make this a special time for you, I read and re-read the passages about Jesus's death and resurrection in the Gospels. On one of those mornings as I was reading from the Gospel of Luke, two very different things had a heavy impact on my thinking about this experience.

The first was something I could not explain. It is the portion of the story that tells who was at the cross when Jesus was crucified, and who was present when the stone was discovered rolled away and the tomb was found empty. One would imagine that it would be the disciples who had committed to following Jesus completely. You'd be wrong if you thought that was the case. The Bible records that it was the women followers who were there, not the men. It was the women who waited at the foot of the cross to care for the body when he was declared dead and to prepare

him for burial. Mark tells it this way in his Gospel: “Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.” The women were accompanied by a man named Joseph who requested the body of Jesus and took it to his property.

The women would have cleaned and prepared the body then, but it was the Sabbath and they were not allowed to work on that day. But when the Sabbath was over and a new day came at sunrise, it was the women who were at the tomb only to find it empty and confronted by an angel who told them Christ had risen, been resurrected from the dead. And it was the women who ran to the place where the disciples, the men, were hiding for fear they might be killed as well. These loyal women tried to convince the disciples of what the angel had told them, but the men could not believe it until Peter went to the tomb to see for himself. How amazing that it was the women who were present for Jesus when it mattered. I like that part of the story.

Now, I’m not criticizing the disciples. They were fearing for their lives and simply sought refuge, believing that the worst was done and hoping they would not be crucified as well. And the death of Jesus was done. There’s a second part of the Scriptures that caught my attention and gave me deep thoughts about what it might mean in this story and for our lives today. When I read the passage several times looking for something else, I was jolted by the simple

verse that, for me, has the entire story of Jesus's life summed up perfectly. Let me read it to you: Matthew 27: 45 and following. "From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit."

There's a message for us in that short passage. As Jesus hung there on that cross, calling out for His Father, the entire land was enveloped in darkness. There's an image in my mind of a total eclipse of the sun such that it appeared to be midnight even in the middle of the day when there should be a new dawn, a new day. The reality is that the darkness that happened that day when Jesus was taking his last breath represents what happened to the people who had chosen to follow Jesus, his believers.

I've tried to wrap my head around how dark life would seem for those who worshipped him. Imagine. All their hopes seemed to fade into that darkness. Everything they had chosen to believe now seemed to be gone, just as Jesus's life was gone for them. There were questions like, "Now what will we do?" and "Why did this have to happen?" and "How do we get past this loss?" They seemed to be covered in darkness with no hope for light to come. Then Jesus took his last breath and the darkness disappeared, the curtain in the temple was torn into two pieces and what had been limited only to the religious leaders was then opened to all.

The meaning of all this did not come immediately. Christ had not been resurrected yet, but instead was in a tomb with a stone covering the entrance. His followers had not yet heard the message that Jesus's death would have no victory in God's plan for His people. We don't know how long it took for the news about the empty tomb and the reappearance of Jesus to spread to his followers throughout the land. But when it did, it was verification of what Jesus had told them before. "The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned."

Jesus had risen from the dead and spread the light of his sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin and for the gift of eternal life for all who believe in him. So, what's the message for us today? Just as the people learned that there was a living God, that the resurrection of life was possible, and death would not have victory over life, we are reminded today that the message of Easter is that darkness will not last because there is light available to all of us. Just as Jesus was the living example of being the light of God's grace, we are called to be the light in our world. Matthew wrote in his Gospel, "You are the light of the world; let your light shine before all that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Easter teaches us a foundational truth. No matter what the darkness we experience, just as his followers on the day of his death did, there is light for us. So, let's celebrate the good news: Jesus lives. Christ arose. We are redeemed. Let me close with some wise words of a clergy friend: "Remember, Jesus wasn't crucified BECAUSE of

you. I believe that Jesus died FOR us, but that is very different than BECAUSE of us. It's for grace, not guilt.”

Happy Easter