

“With Him We Rise”

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Texts: Isaiah 65: 17-25 and Luke 24: 1-12

Look at all the people! The last time I was at a live, in-person, Easter Service was 2019. It seems a lifetime ago. Different church, different state, and even my youngest had not yet graduated high school back then. Remember March 2020 when we thought we'd have to close down and isolate from one another for a few weeks? There was this virus going around called “Corona,” which is a better name for a Mexican beer than for a virus! The Coronavirus, or Covid-19 would last a whole lot longer than just a few weeks, and the impacts of Covid on all of us have been extensive.

At last count, 6.1 million people worldwide have died of Covid, including almost 36000 in Michigan alone. And that is just from the virus itself. I don't have reliable data on how many more died by suicide, homicide, or other such things than would have without Covid. Marriages have suffered. Children, teachers, the elderly, the poor, business, and every other area of society have been affected. It is true that some of the effects have been positive, but many more have been

negative. I heard in a podcast the other morning that over the past two-to-three-years of the pandemic “we’ve been enculturated that people are dangerous.

What will I catch from being close to other people?” (Scott Sonenshein on Brene’ Brown’s podcast *Dare to Lead*, Monday, April 11, 2022). Even as we rejoice about returning, we must admit that we still aren’t quite comfortable being in groups of people, especially larger ones. The more people we don’t know well in a group, the more reluctant we are. Some of us have not returned to restaurants, sporting events, and other large group activities. Some may yet stay home from family celebrations this Easter, whether or not they fear getting Covid. It may just be discomfort about being around other people.

To put it bluntly: it’s like we’ve lived in a tomb for the last two-plus years.

We need resurrection, but we’re afraid of it. Or we simply don’t believe it.

Let’s go back about two thousand years and consider what happened then to see if we might learn a thing or two.

Perhaps you know the story, but it’s no longer the case that everyone does, so bear with me if you know already. Around the year 30 AD there was a man named Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a middle eastern Jew living in present day Palestine/Israel. He had been travelling about for about three years preaching a

quite different kind of message and hanging out with people not usually associated with religion. He reportedly healed the sick, cured the lame, gave hope to the hopeless, challenged religious authorities, and taught with the authority of a rabbi. Meanwhile, a parade was held for him recently, and a few short days later he was tried and convicted of crimes against the state. He was crucified, died, and was buried. At the crucifixion, only a very few people, almost all of them women, were with him. Others, called his disciples, had all fled and were in hiding for fear of being found by the authorities. The disciples, and the women at the crucifixion, are the focus of where we are now in the narrative of this man, Jesus.

It was early on the first day of the week, the Gospel of Luke tells us, and some women went out to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body with spices. They were terribly sad and at least a little frightened. Everything they knew for the last three years was upended in the last week. There was no returning to normal. Everyone they knew, including them, were afraid of both the church and the state. They were doing an important duty because they loved Jesus, but that only made this task even more difficult. There is nothing worse than losing someone you love to something out of your control. They knew there was nothing they could do so save Jesus, and yet, they just hoped he'd pull another miracle, surprising them yet again with his power. But that was not the case. The last words they heard from

him were, "It is finished." And for them, much joy was finished along with his last breath. There was only sadness now, except maybe fear. But hope. It was gone. It died with him. Hope was buried with him. What they saw ahead of them was not good – to say the least.

When they arrived at the tomb, he was not there. The Gospel of Luke tells us that the women were perplexed. That is in understatement. Where was he? What had happened? Suddenly, two men appeared, and they didn't look normal. The women had many thoughts race through their heads about who these men were and what they meant to say and/or do to them, so they simply bowed their faces to the ground and hoped it wasn't terrible. The men began to speak, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?" Indeed, they did remember, and they ran to tell the others. "He wasn't there. He has risen, just like he said."

The tomb was empty.

Later, Jesus would appear to them and offer to them the ability to touch his wounds and watch him eat. It was him. He was alive. Jesus was no longer dead.

He had risen. What joy the women felt...for the first time in days...the greatest joy of their lifetime!

We've been in a "tomb-like" place for three years. It's been three years since we celebrated Easter together, in person. What does it feel like? Is our tomb emptying? I know you're thinking, yeah, but Covid isn't gone. We may have to wear masks again, or even the possibility of lockdown again. We could have to...

Do you suppose that those women didn't have anything to fear when Jesus rose from the dead? Had their life suddenly turned from a troubled existence to one that was now only joy, happiness, peace, and flowers that grew from rocks? Of course not. Jesus' followers had not had their last day of persecution. They hadn't had their last day of feeling down, hopeless, scared, or where death hung over them like Peter, or Stephen, or many others. It wasn't all rosy now and forever just because Jesus rose. So, what changed?

What does change as the result of an empty tomb?

What does it mean that death has lost its sting?

What does it mean when we say Jesus "conquered" death?

It means that the resurrection gives us hope amid the worst that the world can offer. The world can set out to kill us – literally or figuratively, or both – but

death does not have the final word. Our hope is in something greater than ourselves. Easter reminds us that even tombs with big rocks rolled in front of them do not have the final word. Our choice is what we do with the promise that Jesus rose from the dead – and with him we rise. Many Christians think that's about heaven after we've spent decades suffering through the hell of Earth. I firmly disagree. We rise with him amid the fears, amid the bad news, amid the war-torn world, amid the high prices, amid the sadness and despair, amid all the things that are wrong with this world. We rise with Christ who shows us a way to live that if the world caught on, it would literally become heaven on earth. He showed us how to love and how to live, even when pursued by an aggressor with all the power of the world at his beck and call. We live by love. We live by hope. We live by believing in the possibility – no, the reality – that God will not leave us forsaken. Death will not have the final word. Even Covid-19 is not the greatest power in the world.

Our pathway is not clear, and journey will be rough, but our ancestors have taught us that the kin-dom of love shall endure. It is time for us to rise again – re-entering slowly and cautiously – like the disciples before us. Full of questions and doubt but believing that there is something more than what we can see. Someone greater than what we know. Somewhere exists that is more peaceful than we

know. For our knowledge is imperfect, and our sight limited. Our hope rests on a God who simply cannot stop loving us...a God who makes a way when we can see no way. The God of Isaac, Abraham, Jacob, Ruth, Mary, and Jesus. The God of Moses and the God of David. The God who continues to surprise and amaze with what love can do.

Love wins. The tomb is empty. Christ has risen! With him we rise!

Let us live as if we believe this is really true. The women have announced it, hope arises. Be strong in hope. Be ardent in love. Be strident in peace.

Amen and amen.

