

**Sermon: Out Among the Living**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12**

**Introduction:** There are pastors all across the country breathing a sigh of relief today, and saying, ‘Alleluia!’ These forty days of Lent are a long walk with Jesus, and at the end, again, there was nothing we could do to help.

**Trouble in the text:** As we mentioned last week, the Passion narratives take up a significant portion of all four Gospels, and they are each packed with details, details which sometimes conflict with each other. But it’s mostly the endings that are different.

In Matthew’s version, an earthquake occurred when an angel of the Lord descended and rolled back the stone. In Mark’s version, the stone had already been moved and a young man dressed in white sat in the tomb, waiting. In John’s version, heard earlier, the stone was already rolled away but the tomb was empty, with no one waiting inside. And in Luke’s version, *two* men in dazzling clothes appeared, ‘suddenly.’

And yet, despite these differences, all four Gospels agree on two things.

First, it was the women who came to the tomb and found it empty. Maybe it was their job to anoint his body for later burial, culturally construed as ‘women’s work,’ but the fact is: the women knew about the resurrection first. They told the men, who needed to see for themselves. Faith wants confirmation.

Secondly, all four Gospels claim that Jesus lives and is out among us. It’s not for nothing that the cross on the pulpit is empty. It symbolizes the resurrection and the fact that Christ has risen indeed.

But there’s just a hint of a problem in the story. The women were both perplexed and terrified. The two men in dazzling clothes had to remind them, ‘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.’ *Then* they remembered his words. It hadn’t been that long ago since they heard Jesus himself say this, so why the perplexity? It’s my guess that the ‘rising again’ part was just too much to comprehend.

**Trouble in our world:** No one can really be sure what ‘resurrection’ looks like. How could we know? In Jesus’ time, the Pharisees debated whether it meant coming back just as you were before you died, or as your younger, prettier self, or what. They wondered if you would still be married to your current spouse, or to your first, second, or third spouse? Or to all of them at once? Could you choose? Since one presumed to be going to heaven, these were important considerations.

These days, we just want to know how we can escape, if not avoid altogether, the difficulties of life. There’s bad news out there everywhere. God knows, it’s not easy. One way or the other, we all become acquainted with sadness and grief, with suffering and death. Most people aren’t so much worried about resurrection as they are wondering, ‘Where is Jesus in my life right now?’

To many people around the world, what happened to Jesus on Good Friday wouldn’t seem that unusual. Innocent people get killed all the time, sometimes by their own neighbors. Betrayal for money? Happens every day. Falsely accused of a crime? Easy. Have you become a political liability in a third-world nation run by a dictator? Watch your back.

Then along comes Isaiah with his oracle of a blissful future. Add to that the four evangelists telling us the tomb is empty. None of them really tell a troubled soul how to live with joy in the midst of grief. What does Luke’s story about an empty tomb mean to a homeless person or to someone addicted to drugs or alcohol? If you need to keep your head down just to stay safe, how do you rejoice in God’s new creation?

**Grace in the text:** The empty tomb comes down to being a matter of faith. An empty tomb means the body wasn’t there; it’s not an argument for resurrection. When we proclaim, ‘he is risen,’ that proclamation is based on the experience of the disciples. It started the next day on the road to Emmaus when two disciples recognized Christ in the breaking of the bread. Then all the disciples shared a meal of broiled fish with Jesus back in Jerusalem. Their experience confirmed their faith and the resurrection.

A theologian named Ulrich Mauser wrote that the peace described in Isaiah is not the safety of the inner life, or mere peace of mind. For Isaiah, God’s new heavens and a new earth are ‘the fervent affirmation of the goodness of life and land.’ It is not enough, he wrote, ‘that the good things of mirth and children, security and fertility, are *restored*.

They are even wonderfully enhanced.’<sup>1</sup> Isaiah was preaching to a nation being reborn after exile. In the same way, resurrection is only found on the other side of death.

**Grace in our world:** In a happy accident of the calendar, this year’s Jewish Passover festival began on Friday and continues through next Saturday. And I say ‘happy’ because when the two holidays overlap, our Passion readings gain a little depth.

The Passover festival celebrates freedom, specifically the Israelites’ freedom from slavery in Egypt, brought about by God through Moses. In a similar way, the empty tomb symbolizes freedom from death, also brought about by God through Jesus.

At the beginning of the modern-day Passover Seder every year, Jews are commanded to remember and to imagine that they, too, had gone out from Egypt. The Seder meal means continuity with the past; remembrance gives it meaning.

Quinn Caldwell, preacher and farmer, writes that Good Friday offers us: ‘Easter. The end of the story. The promise that somehow, some way, God is planning to turn the world upside down and pull life out of death. A little hope.’<sup>2</sup>

On Good Friday, the world looked the way it had always looked. Today, we, like the women at the tomb and, after them, Peter and the disciples, see the world in a new way. In a very real sense, everything is upside-down. If we follow Jesus and his teachings and his example, we can truly say that Jesus is out among the living. This is what we remember when we come to the Lord’s Table, a remembrance that gives meaning to the sacrament.

Amen and alleluia.

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<sup>1</sup> Mauser, Ulrich W. 1982. “Isaiah 65:17-25.” *Interpretation* 36 (2): 181–86.

<sup>2</sup> The Rev. Quinn Caldwell, [http://www.ucc.org/daily\\_devotional\\_last\\_tuesday](http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_last_tuesday), accessed 19 April 2019.