

Sermon: Out Among 'Em
New North Church, Hingham
Rev. Steven M. Aucella
17 April 2022

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

We have a friend named Rick whom we met through Jody's mother. He's a quiet, private guy and we haven't seen him in a long while, but he is a skilled carpenter with a past. He's not on social media as far as I can tell, but his name popped up in a local facebook group recently. The topic was the hotrods that all the old guys had built in their youth. Big Detroit Iron kind of cars.

One guy commented, "Yeah but, Ricky's Sunbeam Tiger was badass." And someone else added, "And it got him into a lot of trouble."

Notice that it was the *car* that got *Rick* into trouble.

These forty days of Lent were a long walk with Jesus, and at the end, again, there was nothing we could do to help him, but we can safely say that Jesus not only walked the walk, but, like Rick's Sunbeam Tiger, he caused a lot of long-remembered trouble.

The Passion narratives take up a significant portion of all four Gospels, and each version is packed with details, details which sometimes conflict with each other. But mostly, it's 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, the stone was already rolled away but the tomb was empty, with no one waiting inside. And in Luke's version, not one but *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. It may have been their job to anoint his body for later burial, but the fact is, it was the women who witnessed the resurrection first. Then they told the men, who had to see for themselves.

Faith wants confirmation, just as it seeks understanding.

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 and is now out among 'em, as Rick would put it.

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 how Jesus had told them all these things would happen. *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 for them to comprehend.

After all, no one can really be sure what 'resurrection' looks like. How could we know? We can only wonder what it's like.

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees debated whether it meant coming back just as you were when you died, or as your younger, prettier, stronger self, or what. They wondered if you would be married to your current spouse in heaven, or to your first, second, or third spouse? Or to all of them at once? Could you choose? Since people presumed that they would be going to heaven, these were important questions to consider and debate.

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, despite the way it looks from here. 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 that worried about resurrection. They just want to know, 'Where is Jesus in my life right now?'

To many people around the world, especially now in places like Kyiv, what happened to Jesus on Good Friday wouldn't seem that unusual. Innocent people get killed all the time, sometimes by their own neighbors, as we saw in Rwanda back in the Nineties. Betrayal for money? Happens every day. Need to falsely accuse someone of a crime? Hold my beer. Have you just become a political liability in an autocratic nation run by a dictator? Watch your back.

Then along comes Isaiah with his oracle of a blissful future and then 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 your average day is all about just trying to get through the night, how do you rejoice in God's new creation?

Isaiah preached to a nation being reborn after the spiritual death experienced in exile. In the same way, resurrection is only found on the other side of physical death.

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, and then again when all the disciples shared a meal of broiled fish with Jesus back in Jerusalem.

Their experiences 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.'¹

This year's Passover festival began on Friday at sunset and ends next Saturday at nightfall. The festival celebrates freedom, specifically the Israelites' escape 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 but through Jesus.

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

Quinn Caldwell, a preacher and a farmer, wrote that Good Friday offers Christians 'the promise that somehow, some way, God is planning to turn the world upside down and pull life out of death.'²

On Good Friday, the world looked the way it had always looked. But, today, as it was for the women at the tomb, the world is now upside-down. For those who follow Jesus and his teachings, he truly is out among 'em, out among the living, out among *us*. This is a perplexing reality, which we remember every time we meet at the Lord's Table.

Amen and alleluia.



¹ Mauser, Ulrich W. 1982. "Isaiah 65:17-25." *Interpretation* 36 (2): 181–86.

² The Rev. Quinn Caldwell, http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_last_tuesday, accessed 19 April 2019.