

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

April 17, 2022

Remember His Words

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2022 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: April 21, 2022

Hallelujah, he is risen. We greet the good news of resurrection with trumpets blaring, full choir, and Easter finery. After a long Lent that began with COVID still hanging over us, it feels good to say “Hallelujah” from the sense of freedom we’ve not felt in years.

Hallelujah comes from the Hebrew and means “God be praised!” It is sometimes a chorus of celebration. Sometimes, as Leonard Cohen reminded us, when parts of our world remain bleak, we sing a broken Hallelujah in desperate hope.

That first Easter began in the dusky dawn, when the clear night sky turns from black to a steely blue. Movement might catch the corner of your eye but still elude your understanding. Is something creating that shadow or just light playing on a stationary object?

That break between night and morning remains a time of mystery. At daybreak, we thank God for a new beginning while we bear the memory of the prior days.

Our four gospel accounts of that first Easter vary. It should be no surprise. Any family with four children will record four differing experiences of an event – a graduation or grandma’s visit. Everyone’s lens interprets reality differently. And so, each gospel invites us to approach Christ’s resurrection for ourselves, for this moment in our lives.

Common among all the gospels: grief, fear, an empty tomb, and disbelief. Mark's version sends the women to Galilee to see Christ. Matthew reports an earthquake. John tells a footrace between competing men while Mary musters the courage to speak with the risen Christ. Luke's gospel is brief with two men in dazzling white, reminiscent of Jesus' transfiguration and God's command that we listen to Jesus.

Before we hear their instructions, please pray with me.

God, we come to you on this holiest of days. Fearful we might not understand and hungry for assurances. Silence in us any voice but yours. Startle us with the truth spoken long ago that we remember. May we remember Jesus' life in our lives. Amen.

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.

While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them,

"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."

Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.

But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Imagine a lovely community, nestled between a forest of fir trees and a river, with shopping malls and new residential apartments rising beside old-fashioned cottages. The community attracts residents with an easy commute to its city. What I describe sounds a bit like the south hills. We need to hear this description to know that until recently Bucha was a desirable suburb to Kyiv. Desirable until the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹

¹ Carlotta Gall, "Bucha's Month of Terror," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/04/11/world/europe/bucha-terror.html>.

One of the first acts by the Russian troops on February 27th at 10 am was to shoot Tetiana Pomazanko. They shot her as the shot everyone they saw, dismissing life as a nuisance in their mission to capture and control. Her 76-year-old mother, Antonina Pomazanko covered her body with plastic sheeting and wooden boards. She said, “I buried her a bit in the night...There was so much shelling, I did not know what to do.”

After the Russian troops retreated, a photo was taken as visiting officials temporarily lifted these boards to examine her body before they made their way to other makeshift graves and mass burials.

Tetiana’s half-buried body exposes her feet, in woolen socks and galoshes, poking out beneath the boards. Her mother grieves next to her.² This is probably what those women at Jesus’ tomb expected to find.



² Carlotta Gall and Andrew Kramer, “In a Kyiv Suburb, ‘They Shot Everyone They Saw’,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/03/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-civilian-deaths.html>

We who love Jesus as the savior of the world must rationalize the horror and mystery that violent death still invades so much of our world. Theologian Shirley Guthrie wrote “there is no place – not even hell itself – where God is not present and at work with loving justice and just love.” We believe that Jesus lived as one of us and died as one of us. Authorities executed him as casually as Tetiana.

And so, today, we come with our misgivings and our hopes for ourselves and our world, to peek into a tomb with wonder if all the sorrows of today can be gathered up in his ancient story. If so, how do we live?

For those who came looking for an Easter bunny story along with sugary marshmallow peeps, do not be disappointed with the gritty substance of that Easter. The reality of Christ’s resurrection strengthens the ground we walk upon and emboldens the way we walk.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus drew followers and aroused controversy. In his three years of ministry, he preached of God’s love. Most troubling of all, he backed up his words with actions. Rather than merely condemn greed, he showed that we live with enough food and shelter for everyone. They found abundance by sharing.

He reconciled people across divides, eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jews and Gentiles. People kept this newly found community. He healed those long damaged by physical

ailments or social stigmas, and hope spread. He offered forgiveness to those long denied any chance of grace, for themselves or others, and life began again.

Each time his ministry provokes the authorities, he tells his followers in clearest words, he will not cower to their threats. Three times in this gospel he tells them what will happen. Let me paraphrase and combine his statements. Jesus said: “My ministry will bring me to suffer and die for what I know to be true about God and God’s desires for you. And, you will know my way of life is true because on the third day God will raise me to new life. Trust this and it will be yours also.”

As he predicts, the authorities finally could no longer tolerate him disturbing the politics, economics, and religious structures of the day.

They capture, try, and convict him. Along with other subversives, nail him to a tree. Pierce his side. Let him bleed. Yet, even on the cross of suffering he offers forgiveness, still trying to heal our broken world before he dies.

Unlike most who are crucified, his corpse is not dumped in a mass grave. Someone for a reason beyond his understanding at the time, places it in a clean tomb just before nightfall.

Then Luke writes “the first day of the week,” a poetic turn suggesting a new beginning. Having rested on the sabbath, the women arrive at daybreak to tend Jesus’ body.

They were scared. They came for a funeral and to grieve. Along with all their tasks, they would lay to rest their dead vision of a way things might have been, the future he had helped them imagine. Jesus wasn't the only one who died on Friday. Their dreams died with him.³

At the tomb, the large stone has been rolled aside and his corpse is missing. Instead, the women find two men in “dazzling clothes” who ask: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

The last thing they expect, on that early morning is to find anything living in a graveyard. The women must have looked incredulous. So, the divine messengers continue: “remember how he told you.” Unique to Luke, the angels instruct the women to remember in a way that goes far beyond an intellectual trip down memory lane.

The Greek word to remember is to re-experience in your being and restore that awareness as if you hear, see, and feel it all over again. Their willingness to remember turns their horror to belief. Luke highlights the women announce the resurrection to the men *twice*, noting “[the women] told all of this to the eleven and all the rest.” Yet, Rome was still in power. They dismissed these women and their “idle” tale.

³ Inspired by Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always a Guest*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2020), p 176.

Resurrection begins in the pit of the grave. The other side of the last breath. That holy place that stuns us into the reality that life cannot be held in this flesh or extinguished in the grave. Jesus' resurrection proves the value God places on human life. Jesus died from the weight of a sinful world that was so entrenched to preserve systems for smaller gods to hold power. Jesus did not die because we are unlovable, just the opposite: Jesus laid down his life to reveal how desperately God loves us, to suffer with us and for us, to ask the world to remember God will never abandon what God created.

Overtime, Christ's followers came to remember his words and let them shape their work:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh. (Lk 6:20-21)

“Love your enemies...Be merciful, just as God is merciful.”
(Lk 6:35-36)

“Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” (Lk 10:16)

“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”
(Lk 18:16)

Confident of his resurrection, the first Christians changed the way they thought about their responsibilities. What had happened to Jesus, they slowly began to grasp, was not just about their former teacher and friend; it was about all of them. His destiny was their destiny. So not only could they face opposition, scorn and even death with confidence, they could face the corrupt rulers and know that God’s love will always have the final answer.⁴

No one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark places where hope cannot be seen. Easter is the last thing we expect. That is why it terrifies us. Easter about holding on to hope in the face of death. It is about deciding to live in a new way. The remarkable thing about the resurrection is that it grows in us. The more often we remember his words and his resurrection it becomes part of us. Often, it’s only in retrospect, only as we look back at the “gravesides” of our lives, that we notice, and find the miracle those women told.

As bodies are unearthed in Bucha, we need to remember Herod and Pilate fell. The Ku Klux Klan is on a death rattle.

⁴ George Weigel, “The Easter Effect,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-easter-effect-and-how-it-changed-the-world-1522418701>.

Hitler's plan failed. Any desire to convert communities into killing fields will be met by those who know that such terror does not have the final word.

When we've rooted such confidence into our being, celebrate this Easter with joy, with jellybeans and chocolate bunnies. Bring out the peeps.

We shout Hallelujah remembering Christ came to meet us in life, remained with us into the depth of sorrow, and will lift us to the promise of a new day.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org