

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

Easter - April 20, 2025

Become a Witness

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Become a Witness

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*I need some good news
Sittin' here, sippin' on cold truth
Nobody knows what I'm goin' through*

You may recognize this refrain from singer songwriter, Shaboozey. I love saying the name of this rap cross over country musician.

*I need some good news
Sittin' here, sippin' on cold truth
Nobody knows what I'm goin' through*

Shaboozey's songs touch the weariness in all those souls who also feel despair from a gauntlet of bad news.

Too many people today no longer even tune into the news. Fatigue builds from trying to keep up with the on- and off-again policies and disbelief wondering, "could that have really happened". We doubt the trustworthiness of the news.

Adding to the anxiety of this quest for *good* news is discovering that what one person perceives as bad news, tragic, unconstitutional, eroding security is from another person's point of view a step in their preferred direction.

The good news/bad news tumult we live in now makes the Easter story from 2,000 years ago all the more necessary. The times in which we live today make it all the more necessary to remember Jesus and embrace the reality of God's ability to resurrect him and each one of us to a new way of living.

Two centuries ago, Roman authorities put their boot on the throats of the Hebrew people. If that failed to silence them, they hung them on crosses that lined the roads to Jerusalem. Fear, intimidation, and death stood on full display as the prevailing tactics of Herod and Caesar.

The Easter story begins at Jesus' birth. His mother sang of God's promised mercy...from generation to generation. He would lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. Jesus' ministry testifies to all that by what he says and does to restore dignity to all humanity.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem in the last week of his life, his followers lined the parade route with exuberance shouts, thinking he is the answer to their prayers. Within a matter of days they too turn their back on this savior and allow him to be labeled a criminal. At a mock trial political leaders bat him back and forth like a soft toy from one jurisdiction to another before tossing him to a mob to crucify.

The executioners who carry out their whim think they silenced him. Soon no one would remember this nobody, an insignificant, illegitimate, Jew who wandered through Palestine and Galilee.

The Easter story tells us that in a world of bad news, God keeps God's promises. This is the witness to God's good news.

*Dear God, in a world full of grief and heartaches,
fear and loss, we long for your word.*

*Like those witnesses who found nothing but an empty tomb,
help us not despair but to remember your son.*

*Silence the noise around that we trust Easter's mysteries
and become witnesses to him in our lives. Amen.*

Luke 24:1-12

(O)n the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,³ but when they went in they did not find the body.

⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

⁵The 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.

⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,

⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.”

⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

¹² 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.

Every Gospel account of the resurrection tells us that the most important event in human history happened in total darkness. Sometime in the predawn hours two thousand years

ago, a great mystery transpired in secret. No sunlight illuminated the event. No human witnessed it.

The Gospel of Luke's speaks of women, nameless at first, who creep into a graveyard, weighed down with grief, to cleanse the lifeless body of a man they love.

Unlike Jesus' other followers who abandon him just after a meal in which when he pours out his love to them, these women remain. They witness his crucifixion, his agonizing death and hear his undeniable final words.

With his last breath, he offers mercy to a man dying next to him. History records that even the centurion who carries out Jesus' execution proclaims he "was an innocent man". Someone quickly stows his corpse in a tomb.

Three days later the women return. Although they are loaded down with spices, they are not likely fragrant enough to cover the stench. Consider the courage they muster to go to the equivalent of the city's trash heap.

I know we decorate this sanctuary with glorious flowers, lift transcendent music, and dress in our finest Sunday clothes to sing the "alleluias" for Easter. But we simply cannot begin to understand the way God changes human history without

naming the depth to which God enters the worst of human conflict and death on our behalf.

Whenever the vulnerable become fodder for the amusement of the more powerful, God enters. Easter takes place in the midst of human trauma because the resurrection makes not one bit of sense without remembering what they did to him.

In Luke's telling of this story, those men in dazzling clothes offer no words of assurance. There is no "be not afraid." Of course they are afraid. When the women cannot find his body, fear consumes them.

Terror gives way to utter vulnerability which is the only way for them to hear: "Don't look for the living among the dead." That makes no sense to the women. They saw him die. They saw his body placed in that tomb, sealed with a stone.

Something changes though when the messenger says "remember." Against all logic and the reality that human life will die, the women comprehend the meaning of this resurrection by *remembering*.

They remember how it felt to be loved. Through him, they felt God's love. They let Jesus love them. That was real.

And they remember being in a community with others, all beloved. They felt safe. They remember how he loved the lost and the lonely. Love took him into the gritty tasks to care for the frailty of another person.

Jesus loved by holding the religious authorities accountable for distorting God's desires. They remember how he did not back down from the truth of what the holy scriptures teaches to love justice, do kindness, and walk humbly.

The women remember the way his love created a backbone of courage. Because of love, he walked into the clutches of the empire to do what God has willed throughout faith history...protect and preserve life.

This Greek word for "remember" means more than just mere recollection. In this early dawn, the gospel word "to remember" is more like "to bring past reality to life, with new power and insight."

It starts as a flicker that burns into a fire of epiphany. They remember he promised that after death God would raise him. To remember is a tangible, consequential kind of recalling that brings them to act.¹

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/4/16/dawn-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-sunday>

They become witnesses.

Luke tells us that they “told all this” to the disciples. That translation misses their euphoria and relentless insistence. They didn’t just tell the disciples. They “kept on saying” this with the persistence of a two-year-old who will not be silenced. They kept on saying, kept on saying, and kept on saying what could not be true, until finally Peter decides to see for himself.

If their grasp of the resurrection seems elusive to you and your faith, you are in good company, even in this packed sanctuary. What’s clear from Luke’s story is that the resurrection pushes against everything that we know about death and life. Mere words, no matter how eloquent the testimony or translation ever explain this mystery.

No one is ever really 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. It is not about bunnies and new spring dresses. It is about more hope than we can handle when a diagnosis sends us reeling, or when we stand at the lip of a grave, or when we question the safety and security of our future.

It begins as we remember his love. It becomes the spark of a pink-hued dawn that takes over the darkness of night.

This is foundational to our Christian faith – God loves us first and God loves us throughout.

The women ran from that graveyard into a world that was exactly the same as the day before – rulers oppressed people without any care for the dignity of human life. They pit neighbor against neighbor and murdered those with the courage to stand up.

They ran from that graveyard though knowing the life Jesus embodied did not die. God raised him. And because God raised him, they trusted everything else about his ministry.

Believing his resurrection from death to life brought them from being stuck in the past, and to risk living for him, no longer fearful of the political terrors, or even their own deaths.

In a world that wanted them to forget and tried to actively erase his life, remembering becomes the very act of resurrection.

Luke names these brave women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary. They earn this honor by becoming the first witnesses in what they say – relentlessly taking about love winning over violence, by relentlessly not giving in to the empire, and doing what he taught them.

You came for good news. The resurrection is the good news that changes human history. Resurrection begins again every time you remember in the midst of trauma what it means to be loved by God and you actively love God's people.

In a world when we're looking for good news, my friends, God gives you this hopeful, ridiculously improbable resurrection to stand against our fear and put energy into our weary souls.

We shape the future by how we become witnesses.



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