

Easter Message

Bishop Connie Shelton, Mason Worrell

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Our Lenten journey is finally over! Hear the good news from Matthew 28. I'll be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*. And I'll have joining me Mason Worrell, who is a part of the confirmation class from St. Luke UMC in Sanford, NC. In fact, the confirmands are on the other side of the camera, a part of this worship now. So hear the good news from Matthew 28, and Mason will be joining me in the reading.

"After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God's angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn't move. The angel spoke to the women: 'There is nothing to fear here. I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed. 'Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, 'He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' That's the message.'" The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. "Good morning!" he said. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Jesus said, "You're holding on to me for dear life! Don't be frightened like that. Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I'll meet them there." (Matthew 28:1-10 MSG)

The pervasive darkness following Jesus' crucifixion revealed the character of all his followers. Darkness does that. Darkness amplifies the fearful voices in our heads. Darkness clarifies the worst possible scenarios. Then comes 'first light.'

The Marys came to keep vigil at the tomb at "first light". The earth rocked and reeled as the divine messenger with blazed lightning rolled away the stone! And the messenger said, "There's nothing to fear. Jesus is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there!" Deep in wonder and full of joy, the women ran to tell the disciples. I love Peterson's translation that says, "but were stopped in their tracks by Jesus!" Do you know that feels like? Stopped in their tracks by Jesus, and they fell to their knees and they held onto him. But Jesus told them to go tell the disciples and he would meet them in Galilee.

Jesus was bodily resurrected! Jesus appearance is not a figment of the two Mary's imagination. God raised Jesus from the dead! The power of death is destroyed by resurrection power. At first light, darkness is overcome.

Why do we retell this Easter story year after year? Does it really matter? Yes, it matters! It matters, because we hear God's "YES" to humanity! It matters because the Easter story changes everything. Our lives need reorienting over and over again with this profound message.

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Are you ready? Here is the message of Easter: God loves you! While we were still sinners, Jesus died for us.

Grace does not make sense. The reality of the song “What Wondrous Love is This Oh my Soul” seeps deeply into our bones. God demonstrated God’s love through the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus is completely God and completely human. Jesus was crucified and really died - and was really raised from the dead to life! That’s what we believe as United Methodists - this is one of our non-negotiables of our doctrine - the bodily resurrection of Jesus! God did the impossible by conquering death! But you have to know WHY... because of God’s love for you and me. Jesus died and was raised for all of humanity! No one is outside of that resurrection love! That includes you! No one is outside of that resurrection love - no one. You are God’s beloved! And the person you’ve grown accustomed to looking down on, that person is God’s beloved. And the group that you’ve written off, they are God’s beloved. And a race or culture you don’t understand - they are God’s beloved. Friends, this is the story of Easter!

The resurrection of Jesus destroys notions of who is “in” and who is “out.” The pervasive love of Jesus looks us squarely in the eye and will not let us off the hook! Even when we religious people, like the religious scholars of old, want to add parenthesis or exceptions or asterisks by questioning which command in God’s Law is the most important. And we hear in Matthew, five or six chapters earlier, Jesus says, “Most important: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. (Eugene Petersen says “passion and prayer and intelligence.”) This is the most important... But there is a second to set alongside it: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ Everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from these two nails.”

And then Jesus proved his love... his life thrusts by nails... his love and passion reflected in his divinity and humanity crying out to God “why have you forsaken me.” Here in Matthew’s telling of the Easter story, let’s not skip over Jesus’ words of heartbreak of feeling abandoned. That may be the very part you need to hear today. You’ve prayed and begged God for a path, a way, an answer - and you feel forsaken, abandoned, devalued, unheard, totally disregarded. Don’t run too quickly from those feelings and thoughts.

I’ve felt feelings of abandonment. I celebrated my 59th birthday this week. (All of you 1964 babies, unite!) I’m always surprised by people being surprised that I announce my age with gusto and joy! I’m 59! Next year, I will be 60 (by God’s grace)! I announce my very real age each year because interwoven in my every breath is the one who brought me into the world. And yet only nine years after my birth, my mother died. She was only 37 years old. I cannot imagine her thoughts as she faced death. But I do know my thoughts and feelings through the years. “God... do you see? Do you know? Are you there?” Those questions uncover our need to know we have not been abandoned, or forgotten, or left alone. If you are living a nightmare, if you are in disbelief that you are facing the unimaginable, hear the good news: you are not alone.

Jesus - fully God and fully human - felt the same way: abandoned, forgotten, and left alone. Jesus, at the brink of death, faced the unimaginable. But the story doesn’t end there! Three

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days after his death, God did the unimaginable! God brought him back to life! And the earth rocked and reeled and lightning flashed and Jesus showed up to the two Marys.

When we come to the end of ourselves, we see our dependence on God. Easter matters because you and I cannot be perfect, we will never measure up, we will fail, we will break promises, our love will fail, we will feel forgotten. And the witnesses of the Easter story shout, "Jesus is alive! You are remembered! God sees! God knows! You are loved!" All the messes we've made of our lives are redeemed by the One who loves even when we betray, thrust stakes in his hands, and pierce his side.

Jesus' mission to love becomes our mission to love as Jesus loves. Jesus breaks the chains of death and breaks the chains of darkness in our lives. The resurrection power that raised Jesus body to life, is the same resurrection power closer than your breath, to bring "first light" to illumine our darkness. Resurrection love is extended to you today! You are God's beloved!

I must at least point us to the remainder of Matthew 28. Those of you in rhythms of attending worship will hear the remainder preached in your congregations in upcoming weeks. Those of you who have been hurt by the church or feel unwelcome by the church, I am so sorry. We religious people often get it wrong and give Jesus a bad name. We have a very long history of such. But it's super important that as we hear this incredible news that Jesus is alive, the story continues on that first Easter with Jesus showing up to not only the two Marys, but also meeting the disciples. And on this very first Easter, after ALL the followers have been through watching their Savior die, and then betraying and denying him, Jesus' finale in Matthew's gospel: Jesus, undeterred, gives his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go make disciples. Train and model my love with everyone you meet... in this way of life, marking them by baptism - you belong to God and to each other - mark them as my beloved - mark them in the name of relational love - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then guide them in the practice of all I have commanded you (remember what that command was, to love God and love your neighbor as yourself)."

Friends, I see the ways you model Jesus' love by loving God and loving your neighbors. You're doing it in every single community we have United Methodist churches. When you do that, you are witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

We also do that as the United Methodist connection! The disasters so many are experiencing from tornadoes - facing the unimaginable and feeling abandoned - we become witnesses to the resurrection when we join Jesus with our responses. Your gifts toward disaster relief deploy folks to relieve the suffering. This very week, we sent a team from North Carolina to Mississippi - we sent my people to my people - who are living in the wake of destruction. And our North Carolina team transported portable showers and portable washing machines, and showed up as witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus to help assess the needs so other teams can come in and bring healing and wholeness. That's what we do. Some give money, some give time and

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skills, and we do it together through our United Methodist connection because we are Easter people.

And we do not do it alone. We join Jesus who promises, “I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day, right up to the end of the age.”

Easter is not a day. Easter is a way of life. Jesus is alive. Love is alive. Gracious, grateful, extravagant hospitality is fruit of resurrection life! Amen.