

“He Lives!”
Psalm 16:5-11; Acts 10:34-43
1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021
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“Don’t be alarmed,” the young man says to the women as they entered the tomb. I doubt if most of us came in today feeling alarmed, feeling that something unusual was going to happen. The women going to the tomb simply expected that they might have a barrier, a stone to get rid of.

Sometimes we have our own barriers as we come to this morning. Sometimes it feels a little like this very idea that Jesus is risen, that he lives, is a barrier in a couple of ways. We don’t have any experience with someone rising from the dead, and so it’s unusual. Unexpected. Not something that makes sense. On the other hand, sometimes it feels like our movies today show us all kinds of special effects, so you could read this story and feel like this is just another special effect, and what’s the point?

And yet, it is this particular morning, this particular act, this message that Jesus lives that is central to our faith. As we come this morning, I would remind you that what happened was that Jesus was living as a faithful spokesperson, the very incarnate love of God come to be among us, and the story is one of rejection. The story is one of feeling the challenge he brings and saying, “No.” It is a story of humankind reacting to the love of God. Yet, the story begins this day with the statement that Jesus lives and in it, as the very incarnate love of God, the love of God persists.

As we think about that idea that Jesus lives and the love of God persists, it is in contrast to what Jesus experiences. Jesus came teaching. Peter describes it as, “Jesus came teaching the peace of God.” Teaching peace. Teaching us how to live together. Inviting us to love God and our neighbor. Inviting us to even love our enemies. So when we see this Holy Week, we see a contrast. We see a people who want to hold onto privilege and power and the purse strings. They see in Jesus one to fear, one who they are jealous of, who they condemn. They vilify him, and through vilification, become vicious and violent to get rid of him.

We see a contrast between what Jesus brings – a way of peace, a way of grace, a way of love – and what he encounters from human beings. Maybe we should expect that. If we look across our history, we see a lot of this. In Roman times the cross was THE symbol of how they tried to deal with those who challenged power and privilege and the purse strings. It was how they dealt with people that caused fear and jealousy, and engendered condemnation. It was the example of how they vilified some and used vicious means and violence to solve their problems.

We see this across history. Throughout the middle ages, torture was used to extract a confession. It didn’t matter whether somebody was guilty or not once they had been accused. We see it in heretics being burned at the stake. Those accused of witchcraft

being drowned. We see it in the Holocaust, where a group of people is vilified, and a vicious, violent approach is taken. And it's not just in Europe. We've done it ourselves in the way we treated the Native Americans and how we've used lynching in our world to keep some separated, put down, vilified, with viciousness and violence.

What seems to happen when we give in to our attempt to protect our privilege and power and purse strings, and get into being fearful and jealous and condemning is that we create distrust, division, and dystopia. It was a visit to Northern Ireland that made me recognize this again. How it started between people who were basically cousins, the Irish, the English and the Scottish, over the difference in religion – Catholicism vs Protestantism. And for over 300 years now they have struggled with that distrust and division and a certain sense of dystopia that has been engendered. The divisions continue today. They put up what are called peace fences between the Catholic and protestant neighborhoods. What we see is how that division persists.

When I look at the world as we live in it, I begin to wonder how do we ever overcome that distrust, the division, the dystopia that we create? How is it that we get out of the tomb that we create for ourselves, where we imprison ourselves in the fear and the jealousy and the condemnation. How do we break free of the way that we vilify and get vicious and violent, and how do we ever overcome that once we've started?

Jesus entered into the center of that. He entered in on the Holy Week. He walked into the center of privilege, of power, of people holding the purse strings for a nation, and was vilified. They treated him viciously. They crucified him. They used violence against him to get rid of him because he challenged them. He created fear and jealousy, and condemnation. So it looks like the one coming preaching peace, the one inviting us to love God and our neighbor, even our enemies, is killed, crucified, dead and buried. That intractable point which human evil creates.

How do we go forward? I don't always see a way. I don't see a way. But in this resurrection morning, when we say he is risen, when we say he lives, we are saying God has made a way. Where I see no way, God has made a way. When we say he lives, the very love of God incarnate lives. God's love persists. What it shows me is that God's love was before the crucifixion. God's love was obscured during the crucifixion, but God's love never went away. It persists. It makes a way where we can see no way. It invites us into that resurrection, into the persistent love of God. In saying Jesus lives, we are reminded that we can now go back to everything Jesus taught us. We can see where he's leading us. We can see those contrasts. We are given a way, even when we see no way.

There was no way for Jesus to change that moment. Instead, he simply stayed faithful to God, lived out the love of God, and out of that, where there seemed to be no human way, God made a way. And in making that way for us, in saying that Jesus lives, in saying God's love persists, we are invited to persist in God's love, to live into the resurrection, to show the very love of God.

There are times in my life where I come up to something and I don't know what is right. I don't know the way in terms of making the right decision or seeing the full extent of what is happening. But I am reminded that there is one thing I can do. I can simply try to act out the love of God as best I can. Because it's not always me that can make the way, but it is the love of God at work in us, the persistent love of God that is with us, the persistent love of God that will show up every time.

Sometimes it feels like we talk about resurrection, we say he lives, and recognize the persistence of the love of God, and they feel like overarching themes that are wonderful. And then we have to live our lives. Yet it is in the very living of our lives that I think God is inviting us to live this out. But think about what we end up doing. It's so easy for us as human beings to get fearful, jealous, and condemn. That can easily lead us to be those who vilify others. What's the easiest way to deal with criticism? Just vilify the other. Once we've vilified them, they are hardly human, which opens up the opportunity to be vicious. It feels like a slippery slope, a path we can too easily take. So it is in the very moments of my life when I'm in relationship with someone else, whether it's a friend, a family member, a spouse, a co-worker, a community member, a leader, it's so easy to vilify. So easy, then, to deny their humanity, which allows a viciousness to arise out of us.

This Sunday, however, invites us a different way. It suggests that ease with which we go down that slippery slope is to miss the wonder of what God is doing for us, the grace God has given us, the invitation to know that God came to us to help us with that, to lead us out.

It is in the beginning of this passage that the women are astounded, because it is astounding. Not just that Jesus rose, but that God would come and engage us and invite us and help us recognize that Jesus lives and God's love persists. We are invited to live into that love and to live it out. We may not always know how that will change the world. We may not always be able to change everything we want to change. But in Jesus, in his passion and crucifixion, he lays bare human sin and evil, and how, through our fear, jealousy, and condemnation of others, we turn to vilification, viciousness, and violence to solve our problems. In showing us that, in making it plain, he invites us a different way. He invites us to see that God's love persists. God is with us.

It is in the astounding turn of events where there seemed to be no way, that God makes a way. We are invited to that way – to live out the love of God, whether we see how it's going to work out or not. Because even when we cannot see a way, God makes a way, for where God's love is, there is a way. Jesus lives. God's love persists. He is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.