

Just One More Surprise!

Easter Sunday @ First Congregational Church

Oshkosh, WI - March 27, 2016

1 Corinthians 15:19-26 and John 20:1-18

Jesus Lives! Jesus is Lord! Those two statements summarize the meaning of Easter! They were, and still are, bold and challenging statements. These words were as outrageous in the first century as they are in the 21st. When fully absorbed by the believer, these declarations transform us in ways that are impossible to predict. Once convicted of the truth of these two statements, we are never, ever, the same persons!

All four gospels attest to the resurrection of Jesus with “appearance stories,” narratives in which the risen Lord suddenly appears to his followers. These stories are the product of the experience and reflection of Jesus’ followers after his crucifixion. None of the stories is found in more than one gospel. Each Gospel has its own version of Jesus’ resurrection. Perhaps this is how the story of Easter was told in the early church. Each community had its version of Easter. Mark’s Gospel has the briefest, of course. A

messenger tells the women who come to the tomb on the first day of the week that “Jesus who was crucified...has been raised.” His followers are promised “You will see him.” That’s it for Mark

Two different “appearance stories” are recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. The first is very brief - as the women are leaving the empty tomb Jesus greets them, tells them not to fear, and instructs them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where they will see him. Matthew’s second story fulfills that promise. It happens on a mountain. There Jesus tells his followers that, “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” He asks them to engage in an evangelical mission to all nations and assures them that he will be with them to the end of the age.

In Luke’s Gospel there are another two “appearance” stories. They are considerably longer and utterly different. The first is the story of two followers, walking back to their home in Emmaus following Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus meets them as they walk. The three converse about Hebrew

scriptures (our Old Testament) and the meanings found there that would help them deal with their grief. When they reach the couple's home, Jesus is invited to sup with them. While they are breaking bread together, they suddenly realize that the One in their presence is Jesus. They rush back to Jerusalem to tell the others.

Luke's second story is set later that same evening. As the couple explains their experience of the Risen Christ to the eleven disciples, Jesus is suddenly among them. He extends "Peace" to them as they stand terrified by his appearance. Jesus offers them the opportunity to touch him and to be assured of who he is. Then, as if to prove he is actually among them, Jesus eats some fish and promises them that they will receive the Holy Spirit. Finally, he leads them on to Bethany, where he blesses them and then ascends into heaven.

John's gospel, which was read earlier, actually has the most "appearance stories" - four. He begins with the empty tomb. Only one person is present, Mary Magdalene, who

sees the stone rolled away but does not enter the tomb. She fetches Peter and John. They race to the site, enter the tomb, and find it empty. Mary weeps. Then she looks into the tomb and sees two persons. One asks her why she is crying. She explains her grief and asks to be shown where they have laid Jesus' body. She turns away and sees a man she assumes to be the gardener. She asks him where Jesus' body is? Jesus looks at her and simply says her name, "Mary." The recognition is immediate. In this story she is told not to touch him for he is about to ascend to the father.

The second "appearance story" in John takes place on the same day, only later that evening. The disciples are locked in a room, filled with fear. Jesus appears and offers, "Peace." He shows them his hands and feet and then breathes on them as he says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Thomas, one of the disciples, was not present. He didn't believe what the others said about seeing Jesus. A week later, in John's third "appearance story," Thomas was with all the rest. Jesus suddenly appears and offers him the

proof he needed. His words when Jesus confronts him became those of the early church's affirmation of Easter: "My Lord and my God!"

At this point the gospel of John seems to end. But, then in the final chapter, a fourth "appearance story" is presented. This one is not set in Jerusalem, as were John's first three, but in Galilee on the shore of Lake Tiberius. I will preach on this appearance story next Sunday. It is really quite different, as you will hear.

That's it. The four gospels attest to resurrection. But each author wrote unique accounts. Yet, when taken together, two summary declarations can be and have been made by the Church for nearly 2000 years. Jesus Lives!
Jesus Is Lord!

The first declaration of faith by the Church points to the experience those early followers had after the death of Jesus of Nazareth. They continued to sense his presence, albeit in a radically new way. He was no longer a figure of

flesh and blood solely, confined to time and space. He entered locked rooms, walked with believers unrecognized, was recognized in Jerusalem and Galilee, vanished in the moment of recognition, and promised to abide with his followers “to the end of the age.”

Jesus is not among the dead, but the living. This is one of the central affirmations of Easter: **Jesus Lives**. As the liturgy of the ancient church proclaimed:

Christ has died... Christ has risen... Christ will come again!

As we grow to comprehend the meaning of this statement it is not simply about the nine “appearance stories” found in the four gospels. It is not about events real or imagined nearly two thousand years ago. Rather, as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have stated, “*the truth of the affirmation Jesus Lives is grounded in the experience of Christians throughout the centuries.*” Christians experience Jesus as a living reality. Although John wrote “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe,” we celebrate with those who have seen when we proclaim, **Jesus Lives**.

The second declaration of faith by the church regarding Easter is equally as bold and just as important in our time as it was in the first century for the Church. **Jesus Is Lord!** Easter represents God's "Yes" to Jesus against the powers who executed him. Make no mistake about this my friends. In Jesus' time there was only one power that held the authority to grant life or death. Pontius Pilate spoke of this to Jesus in the mock trial. Only the Roman Empire could execute anybody. Only the empire could deal out such judgment. Proclaiming **Jesus is Lord**, in the face of the claim that Caesar is God, is a bold statement! Jesus may bear the wounds of the empire that killed him, as he does in Luke and John's "appearance stories," but, he is risen! Hence, **Jesus is Lord!** Not Caesar. This proclamation would eventually cause mighty ones in Rome to squirm. Mark wrote one sentence in his gospel to clarify this stance, "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified (only Rome could do that and everyone knew it); he has been raised!"

The resurrection claim by the early church lifted the crucified man from Nazareth to the highest position in the known world: **Lord!** If **Jesus is Lord**, the rulers and powers of this world are really all pretenders. Easter affirms that the domination systems of this world are not of God and that they will never have the final word.

Perhaps this is why so many of the “appearance stories” have Jesus saying, “Fear not,” or “Do not be afraid.” Without personal centering in God that leads to radical trust in God, the same trust we witness in Jesus, there is not a one of us who could stand and say both personally and politically, “**Jesus Is Lord.**” The young pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer would not have had the courage to stand against Hitler and Nazism in Germany in his day without such trust. Desmond Tutu could not have opposed apartheid in South Africa with such courage, infectious joy, and reconciling spirit had he not deeply believed that **Jesus is Lord**. This is what Easter proclaims.

Last Sunday we took the time to commemorate that ancient parade into ancient Jerusalem known as Palm Sunday. It was an anti-imperial, non-violent demonstration. Such processions, coming from an alternative vision of the future of this world, always lead to capital cities - to places of power. Now, with Easter, the alternative journey is the path of personal transformation that leads to following the Risen Jesus. Easter presents us always with the same relevant question: which journey are we on? In which procession do we march? Are we in the Easter Parade? If we are, then for us **Jesus Lives** and **Jesus Is Lord**.

After each of his “appearances,” the followers of Jesus were frightened, amazed, and doubtful. When all the excitement ended, they tried to remember in words that reflect how astonished each of them was with the surprising reality of resurrection, how Jesus continued among them with just one more surprise. How will God surprise us this day, Easter, 2016? Hopefully, however you perceive the experience, you will concur with the witness of the ages that for you: **Jesus Lives! Jesus is Lord!** Amen.

