**When We Feel Vindicated**

Easter Day

April 5, 2015

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Lent/Easter CrossRoads Series

Acts 10:34-43

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

Mark 16:1-8

February 18 – Ash Wednesday - When We Are Estranged from God

February 22 – Lent 1 – When We Feel Tempted

March 1 – Lent 2 – When We Feel Paralyzed

March 8 – Lent 3 – When the Drought Becomes Bad

March 15 – Lent 4 – When We Feel Lost

March 22 – Lent 5 – When We Are Struggling Spiritually

March 29 – Palm/Passion Sunday – When We Feel Unwanted

April 2 – Maundy Thursday - Communion

April 3 – Good Friday – When We Feel Judged and Abandoned

**April 5 - Easter – When We Feel Vindicated**

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he village of Pittsford lost power on Saturday morning around 3:15am. When the choir and brass arrived for rehearsal yesterday morning there were no lights. But the anthem you have just heard complete with organ and timpani are what greeted me when I walked into the sanctuary as they all were reviewing the music for this Easter service. Others had arranged the lilies in the dark and I opened the sanctuary door to check on them and was greeted with these glorious sounds and it struck me that this was not unlike what had happened on that first Easter. The sanctuary seemed to be dark like the tomb, but something wonderful and glorious collided with the sad expectations of those women, carrying their spices in the early morning hour. I had an Easter feeling moment.

The organ was not lost on all of this because this organ was hand crafted and patterned after one built in 1802 by David Tannenberg for the Moravian Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. There was no electricity in 1802 and the organ then had to be foot pumped. Members of the choir took turns pumping the organ so that Dr. Frank could play. By two o’clock in the afternoon when the memorial service for Martin Tiemann was to take place, the power still hadn’t returned, but some members of the choir did so that they could pump the organ for Dr. Frank as he played for that service.

But not everyone is probably as enthusiastic about this being Easter as most of us are. Remember, tomorrow is one of the biggest days of the year for some golfers. It is the start of The Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Georgia.

You think I’m kidding about this golf match’s relative importance? Several years ago, on a different Easter, I picked up a copy of the newspaper that had been tossed into our driveway. I brought it into the house and removed a section. I didn’t pay attention to what section, but thought that during the few minutes between the sunrise service and the opening service here, I’d have a cup of coffee and check on the headlines. But, I was surprised to discover that I had grabbed the Sports section, not normally my first section to read in the morning. It detailed how Frank Chirkinian, the head of CBS Sports, discovered that The Masters and Easter Sunday happened on the same day that year. Upset at this conflict, he demanded of his colleagues, “Who sets the date of Easter? Didn’t they realize that they scheduled it on The Masters weekend? Let’s get to that person and have him change it.”

I don’t know how they resolved that conflict. I’m pretty sure they didn’t change the date for Easter though if they could, they probably would. Sports are a powerful force in our society.

Kara was two‑years‑old and could hardly wait for Easter to come. She had a new dress to wear and new shoes to go with it, but her father wondered whether she knew the true meaning of Easter. “Kara,” he asked, “do you know what Easter means?”

“Yes, I do,” she smiled.

“What does it mean then?” her father asked.

With a smile on her face and her arms raised, she cried, “Surprise!”[[1]](#footnote-1)

There is no better word for Easter. “Surprise!” unless we might want to say, “Vindicated!” On Friday Jesus had been accused and found guilty at a pair of trumped up trials, marched through the city streets, nailed to a cross, declared dead and now the tomb was empty, the ultimate in reversals we might say. Today history knows the story behind the story and much of the world has declared that Jesus is free . . . even of death.

“Surprise” was surely the reaction of Christ’s disciples and closest friends that first Easter day. In Luke we read that Jesus’ disciples were distraught after his crucifixion. Early on Sunday morning, some of the women took spices to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the mouth of tomb. When they went inside Christ’s body was not there. Suddenly two men in gleaming white clothes stood beside them. The women bowed down their faces with fright, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!

Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” Then they remembered Christ’s words. When the women came back from the tomb, they told the disciples what had happened. But none of the men believe them. Their words seemed like nonsense. Surprise!

John, in his telling of the story, focuses on Christ’s appearance to Mary Magdalene. Mary comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been rolled away. So she runs to Simon Peter and John, and says, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” Evidently the thought had not occurred to Mary that Christ could be resurrected from the grave.

Peter and John start for the tomb. When they, too, find it empty, what do they do? They simply go back to the house where they were staying. There was no celebration, no cries of, “He’s alive. He’s alive.” You might expect those who knew Christ best to be bubbling over with excitement that first Easter Sunday morning, because he had been delivered from the tomb, just as he said. Instead, they were totally mystified that his body was gone.

Things didn’t sound so wonderful in the gospel of Mark, either. We read Mark’s account of the resurrection at the very opening of worship this morning and he told us that “they went out and fled from the tomb for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Mark's Gospel ends with this rather cryptic account of Easter. I have preferred the other gospels conclusions, I have become quite fond of Mark's way of treating the resurrection. It is dark when the women come to the tomb. There they are met by a figure who tells them that Jesus has risen and has left, moving out from the cemetery to elsewhere. The women are told to "go," to "tell," but they stand there in fear and amazement and tell no one. Thus the gospel ends.

There is good reason, says scholar N. T. Wright, to think that this may not have been the way that Mark's Gospel originally ended. It is perfectly all right to end a Greek sentence with that little Greek conjunction, *gar*, meaning "because," or "therefore," or even "but." However, scrolls were famous for losing their last panels and, even though I have come to like this rather abrupt ending of Mark, there could be a good argument that the story continued, perhaps telling of other post‑resurrection appearances, in much the same way as Luke or Matthew tell the story.

Actually, I think that something else is happening with Mark as he unfolds his history of Jesus. He is using Galilee as a literary tool. Mathew begins his gospel by describing the genealogy of Jesus and then telling about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the arrival of the wise men from the East. Luke is even a bit more obstetric detailing the angels’ announcements and he includes the story about the census trip and the shepherds. Mark says nothing about the birth or childhood of Jesus. He launches right into the mission and ministry of Jesus as it unfolds in the northern part of Israel, in Galilee.

Although I haven’t seen other biblical commentators make this connection, and I remind you that I am not the sharpest theological knife in the drawer, I sense that Mark is saying, “Now that you have read through this history of the life of Jesus, go back to Galilee, go back to the beginning of my story and reread it. Perhaps you are like the disciples who seem to be dolts, never quite understanding completely what Jesus was declaring. Now that you know where this account is headed, you will understand what I have been trying to say. Go back to Galilee, go back to the beginning.”

All this speculation aside, and following the long‑standing custom of dismissing the longer endings of Mark which later commentators supplied for gospel, it is probably wise from time to time to confront this text as it is, or more accurately, allow this text to confront us as we are!

The gospel writers see the resurrection as objective fact. Back in the 1950s when Rudolph Bultmann was making his presence felt on the theological scene, this fine scholar questioned the account of Mark and others, limiting resurrection to something of mainly spiritual significance, something which is real only as an announcement and then as an inward experience of the believer. Not all of the great minds agree with Bultmann. Theologian Richard Lischer writes that a gospeler like Mark says more than "I am certain." What Mark or Paul says is, "It is certain."[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is where I part ways with theologians like Willi Marxsen who, joining Bultmann deny the witness of the gospel writers and make their reports a great outburst of faith, or a helpful metaphor for the cause of Jesus.[[3]](#footnote-3) All Christian preaching, not just on this Sunday but always, begins with Easter, in that first astonished, breathless cry, "He is risen!" In a sense, this is as far as faithful preaching goes. “I remember reading about a conversation which took place between a beloved Bible professor and one of his students who had just returned after Easter break. She said to this professor, “Our pastor said that on Easter Jesus may not have really died, but that he may have just swooned on the cross and the disciples probably nursed him back to health. What do you think?”

This wise old professor, tongue in cheek replied, “I suspect that he was giving you a number of possible theories and you didn’t quite hear it the way that the pastor intended. But, if your pastor is confirmed that the approach you believe you heard is correct, the next time you are home, beat your pastor 39 times with a cat-o-nine-tails. After that, nail him to a cross and hang him out in the afternoon sun for three hours. While he is hanging there, seemingly breathing no more, run a spear through him. When he looks dead, embalm him, and leave him in a musty tomb for a few days and see what happens.”

Easter is not a human response to the problem of human finitude, but rather God's action in response to the issue of injustice as witnessed in the crucifixion of Jesus. It is God’s action of grace in response to human sinfulness.

Sometime, sit down and take about an hour and read through the gospel of Mark from start to finish. It is the shortest of the gospels and a fast reader will take even less time. Perhaps then you will come to the same conclusion as others that the disciples never seemed to get the point.

In Mark's Gospel, the disciples do come across as about the dumbest followers any teacher ever had. You keep expecting, throughout Mark, that at last something is going to click for them, the eyes will light up and they will exclaim, "Now I see what you're getting at Jesus!"[[4]](#footnote-4)

But they don't. All the way to the last chapter, all the way to the end here at Easter, they seem as befuddled and dumbfounded by everything as at the first. They never seem to get it. Here, even at Easter, when you would think they would be joyous and happy, as joyous as the Easter hymns we have sung today! Their dominate emotions are fear and confusion, not joy and happiness. Or is it that they got it and we don’t?

On their way out to the cemetery, the women wondered. How in the world were they to roll away the huge stone from the door of the tomb? They sometimes sealed tombs with a large stone. But this was a very large stone; the Romans wanted to be sure that the body of Jesus would stay put, that none of his followers would attempt to take away the body to venerate it or to give it a more decent burial. Even though it was still dark, just before dawn, when they got to the tomb they could see that someone had already rolled back the stone. There was a man in a dazzling white robe. He tells them that Jesus is alive! He tells them to go back and tell the men who were disciples what has happened.

But that's not what the women did. Mark says, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Matthew, John, Luke all end the story of the resurrection by telling more stories of resurrection appearances, of warm reunions with the disciples and joy. Today, in our hymns, in the music of Easter you may hear joy, majesty, glory, praise, but I don't think you'll hear much fear. The women felt fear. When you think about it, being met by a once dead man is a fearful thing to contemplate. On one level, it's the stuff of horror movies.

Furthermore, these women were among the disciples of Jesus who, just a couple of days before had deserted Jesus in his great hour of need. If Jesus is back from the dead, what will be his attitude toward those who deserted him and fled into the night when the going got rough?

I believe their fear lay even deeper than this. If Jesus, the one who was crucified by colluding government and religious leaders, the one who had been crushed by the forces of evil, if this Jesus was now raised, now vindicated by a mighty act of God and raised to life, if God had stepped in and mightily reversed the whole march of time and history and raised Jesus, then the women knew enough to know that everything in the world had been turned upside down and that nothing would ever be the same again.

One of challenges to a contemporary society is that we consistently need proof for anything that is hard to believe. We want certainty for those things that are hard to understand. Let me suggest a fable to explain this.

A smart young college student, Fred announced to a group of friends one day that he would believe nothing that he could not understand.

Another student, Michael, who lived on a nearby farm, turned to Fred and said: “As I was driving into campus today, I passed a field in which some sheep were grazing. Do you believe it?”

“Sure,” replied Fred.

“Not far from the sheep,” said Mike, “some calves were browsing. Do you believe it?”

“Yes,” said Fred.

“And not too far down the road a gaggle of geese were feeding. Do you believe it, Fred?”

Growing weary by now of the questions, Fred confessed, “I guess so.” said the first student.

“Well,” said Michael, “the grass that the sheep ate will turn into wool; the grass that the calves ate will turn into hair; and the grass that the geese ate will turn into feathers. Do you believe this?”

“Ummm, ... yes, I do,” said Fred.

“But do you understand it?”

“Well, not really.”

“You know,” declared Mike, “if you live long enough, you will find that there are a great many things that you will believe without understanding.”

Who among us knows anything more inevitable than the inevitability of death, anything more triumphant than mortality? All that lives must die and all that dies is over and done with. If Jesus has been raised, if God has determinedly had the last word, then how does that strike you?

If Jesus has been defeated, crucified, dead, and buried, then what we suspected about the world is true. Evil is powerful. Though sometimes there are brief bursts of goodness, because it all ends in death, who cares? It all ends at the cemetery in dust, forgetfulness, finitude, and extinction.

But if Jesus is raised, if the stone is rolled away and life outlasts death and God has the last word then...there is some reason for the women to fear. The facts of life and death are turned on their head. Nothing is secure and fixed. Jesus is raised. God is loose and on the move. Jesus is vindicated.

Have you swooned to the common public opinion heard in coffee shop conversations prompted by reasonable philosophic sounding explanations from our national media? It is an agreeable approach that declares with nearly academic insight that all of the world’s great religions are somehow alike and merely different paths to the same destination. Really?

Just compare the deaths of the founders or leaders. I don’t offer this idea as an attempt to denigrate anyone, but to give us a little perspective on this Eastertide that has us consider why we have come today. Moses, Buddha, Confucius, and Muhammad all died at a ripe, old age, successful despite many disappointments, in the midst of their disciples and supporters, their span of life completed. Moses died in sight of the Promised Land, 120 years old. Buddha died at the age of 80, peacefully, his disciples around him, after he had collected during his itinerant preaching a great community of monks, nuns and lay supporters. Confucius returned in old age to Lu after he had spent his last years in training a group of mainly noble disciples, to preserve and continue his work. Muhammad, after he had thoroughly enjoyed the last years of his life as the political ruler of Arabia, died in the midst of his harem of wives and concubine, but in the arms of his favorite wife.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Then we encounter Jesus. Only a bit over thirty years of age, expelled from society, betrayed, mocked and taunted, tortured and finally killed by the most atrocious method ever designed by humankind's ingenious cruelty. He was buried in a rock-hewn tomb which was sealed by a huge boulder and guarded by Roman legionnaires. But some 36 hours later, people started seeing Jesus alive again.

Easter takes an event where God vindicates dead Jesus by raising him to life and explodes it into cosmic triumph. It's not just about, “How can I and the ones dear to me live forever?” It's more about, “How can God's justice be vindicated? What does God do with all the sin, and all the suffering, and all the death that we encounter in this world?”

A while ago N. T. Wright[[6]](#footnote-6)[[7]](#footnote-7) wrote,

"Just prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union, the communist lecturer paused before summing up. His large audience of nearly 5,000 listened fearfully. 'Therefore,' he said, 'there is no God: Jesus Christ never existed; there is no such thing as a Holy Spirit. The Church is an oppressive institution, and anyway it's out of date. The future belongs to the State, and the State is in the hands of the Party.'

"He was about to sit down when an old Russian Orthodox priest near the front stood up.’May I say two words?' he asked. ‘Literally, just two words.’ (It's three in English, but he was of course speaking Russian.) The Lecturer, disdainfully, gave him permission. He turned, looked out over the crowd, and shouted: 'Christ is risen!' Back came the roar of the people. They shouted in a chorus of one the words they had been saying by heart at the end of the Easter service in their churches, 'He is risen indeed!' The priest then suggested privately in a whispered tone to the speaker, ‘God ahead, lecture some more.’"[[8]](#footnote-8)

Maybe it is time for us to move from analyzing Easter and join in the celebration of it. Instead of our proclivity to seek explanations for the empty tomb, let us gaze in amazement with the prompting of Mark at the mighty angel perched on top of the stone that has been rolled away. Let us recall the misting of breath of the women early in the morning who are amazed and hear the angel say, “He is not here, he has been raised, just as he said.” Let us walk boldly through the tomb’s doorway and consider the now uninhabited space. It is a scene that makes us reconsider our belief and our understanding. The news of this morning says to us even on those days when we are estranged from God, on those evenings when we feel tempted, those moments when we are paralyzed, times along our life journey when we feel lost, or spiritually struggling, or unwanted, or judged and abandoned are now vindicated by this new truth of hope.

Christ is Risen!

He is risen, indeed!

“He has been raised; he is not here...But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Well, if it's true, then you will not walk out of here in the same way that you came.

AMEN!"

1. Dr. Daniel Lioy, *International Bible Lesson Commentary* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*

(Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, Margaret Kohl, trans.

(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. William H. Willimon [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paul Kabo, via Ecunet, "Sermonshop Sermons," #1766, 4/20/00. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://ntwrightpage.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nicholas Thomas "Tom" Wright (born 1 December 1948) is a leading New Testament scholar and retired Anglican bishop. In academia, he is published as N. T. Wright, but otherwise tends to be known as Tom Wright. Between 2003 and his retirement in 2010, he was the Bishop of Durham. He is now Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St. Mary’s College in the University of St. Andrews Scotland and one of bgboak’s favorite academics. He proposes traditional views on theological matters including Christ’s resurrection [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. N.T. Wright, Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship, Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1994, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)