

## **“A WORLD TURNED RIGHTSIDE UP,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, April 17, 2022**

On a morning following the Jewish sabbath day, two millennia ago, three women made their way to a cave-like tomb in a Jerusalem cemetery. Only a couple of days before a man they had cherished as a son and as their *rabboni* or teacher had died on a cross at Calvary. This death on the cross had been shameful and scandalous. The Roman occupiers of Israel always reserved crucifixion for the worst of the worst—the basest of all criminals. In this case, they appear to have regarded the dead man as a dangerous revolutionary and threat to their own power.

Thanks to the intercession of a sympathetic and rich Jerusalem citizen, the dead man was given a decent burial, restoring some of the dignity denied him naked on a cross. Yet the sheer cruelty of the dead man’s fate shocked the minds and tore at the hearts of those who had known him best and loved him most.



Unfortunately, the dead man’s male disciples could not protest or openly mourn the injustice done to their teacher and leader. Cowed and terrorized by Roman authorities, they felt obliged to remain mostly in hiding, lest they be charged with being dangerous

revolutionaries too. Only Jesus’ female followers, who were regarded as too innocent and inconsequential to cause trouble, could travel the streets of Jerusalem without being harassed or impeded by Roman soldiers. Thus, it was a small group of women alone who ventured to their *rabboni’s* cave tomb. Their hope and goal were to wash and embalm the dead man’s body, assuming this had not been done or only carelessly so. Even though these women were unsure as to how they could ever open a sealed grave, they walked ahead in faith, confident that God would somehow grant them the wherewithal to accomplish their avowed mission.

I suspect we’ve all heard that phrase “the peace of the grave.” The women certainly anticipated an essentially peaceful and quiet scene at the cemetery when they arrived. However, to their own startlement and dismay they instead confronted what may have looked to them like chaos. Their rabboni’s grave was unsealed—its large sealing stone rolled back. The grave was now empty with the body they had come to embalm gone. And a strange, white-robed figure whom they had never seen before appeared to be presiding over the void. More remarkable still, this figure had a three-part message for

them. Namely, don't be alarmed. Jesus has been raised. You will soon see him in Galilee, just as he once told you that you would. (*Mark 16:1-7*)

Naturally, the women were frightened, even terrified. The Gospel of Mark informs us that they actually ran from the empty grave. Amid their considerable distress they were virtually struck dumb. For the longest time they could not even talk about what they have just encountered.

Of course, eventually they did talk. And we are the beneficiaries of their witness. In the meantime, others—men and women alike--made their own discoveries of Jesus' empty grave. Moreover, what everyone experiencing that empty grave initially regarded as some kind of awful desecration is ultimately revealed to their understanding as the signal of Jesus' victory over death itself, just as that white-robed figure in the open grave essentially proclaimed it to be. What first seemed so empty to the women and everyone else who visited Jesus' cave-tomb is not empty at all, but full of promise. Likewise, the larger circumstances of Jesus' death and burial which first strikes his followers as so overwhelmingly negative, tragic, and sad, now proves to be a positive, even ripe cause for joy. Offering evidence of resurrection and a corresponding eternal life, Jesus' empty tomb is a resounding declaration that in a turn of events never expected death has been put to death.

To those absorbing the revelation of Jesus' empty grave, the oppression of Rome and the corruption of the Jewish temple are no less terrible and no less wrong than they ever were. Yet neither matters as much as before because it's obvious now that God has something greater in mind for those who continue to trust in him and remain faithful to his call and purposes in this life. Indeed, for all who embrace Jesus' teachings and spiritual way, his empty grave and the resurrection are portents of a better future whereby a world turned upside down by human sin is turned right side up. Contrary to what we so often fear, especially today in light of present moment national and global events, greed and injustice are not to have the final word. We can go even further and say that the resurrection shows that they *will not* enjoy final sway.

Vladimir Putin, if you're listening, take note! So should every other would-be dictator, scam artist, corporate opportunist, or subway terrorist. Truly, Jesus' empty grave vindicates those who, in his footsteps, stay true to God in a sincere commitment to what is loving and just. Yet that same empty grave is also a tacit condemnation of those who, akin to Jesus' persecutors, very differently choose to selfishly advance themselves and exploit others for personal satisfaction and greedy gain.

In our own daily lives, it's important for us to recognize and embrace the message and meaning of Jesus' resurrection enshrined by our Easter observance. But the resurrection isn't something to be celebrated only for a holy day or even the six week Easter season. Instead, it is a deeper spiritual reality that should inform our faith and our time this side of heaven every day. Our confidence in the resurrection should help us persevere in leading a more loving and righteous life here and now as we prepare for an eternal life to come.

No one has spoken more eloquently about the nature of our resurrection faith that should abide in us as Christian disciples than the Apostle Paul who lends his name to our own church. As he writes in a letter to Thessalonians: "We would not have you ignorant, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep." (*1 Thessalonians 4:13-14*) In a separate letter to the Christians of Corinth, Paul adds: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ." (*1 Corinthians 15:54*) Our resurrection faith should make us a more hopeful and courageous people, freed to act in more loving and righteous ways without always being worried about the risks or the costs.

Perhaps one of the reasons why so many folks act so badly and selfishly today is that they have too little resurrection faith, if any at all. On the one hand they don't appreciate the consequences of their bad behavior when we have a God so powerful who can defeat death. On the other hand, they don't grasp the rewards of a life fully grounded in a trust for God and his promise of resurrection for those who honor his commandments and teachings revealed through Jesus Christ, the first raised from the dead.

Let's not be among those so deficient in faith, leading mean and miserly lives. As God made clear on that first Easter morning as an empty grave was revealed for all to see, God wants something more and better for us. He wants us to find more joy and happiness and experience less fear and anxiety, based on the assurance of his own abiding love and his commitment to ultimate justice for us all as shown through the life, death, and resurrection of his own son Jesus, the firstborn from the dead. It all starts or is renewed for us when we, trusting in the promise of the resurrection, make our own commitment to love God and to love one another, as Jesus in life, death, and resurrections shows us how best to do.

Easter is a beautiful day in every way. Aren't the array of Easter lilies, sight and fragrance, lovely? How wonderful too to hear once more our cherished Easter hymns.

And our choir anthems too. But more beautiful, lovely, and wonderful still is a new-born or renewed devotion to a God who makes resurrection for us possible, as disclosed by the empty grave of his own son. In that resurrection God turns an upside down world right side up again so that all who have faith might be refreshed and fortified in hope and courage, living with the assurance of a positive future no matter how dire and troubled our present times and our present lives seem to be. May we rejoice this day in all that God promises us through the empty grave and the risen Christ. **Amen.**