

Luke 24:1-12 “God, I Know I’m Not Perfect”

We ministers love preaching about the resurrection. There’s an old preacher joke about this guy who only comes to church once a year and tells the pastor, “Good sermon, but every time I come here, you’re preaching about the resurrection. You need to find some new material!” I hope this isn’t the case here at First Christian Church in Chico. I’d like to think that we’re a church where the theme of resurrection comes up *throughout* the year and not just at Easter. I mean, the resurrection is where we hang our hat, right? We are *people* of the resurrection. We confess that by Jesus’ resurrection, the power of sin and death in this world has been rendered ineffective. It’s been vanquished. And I recognize that there are dozens of different ways people understand Jesus’ resurrection, but no matter how you look at it, resurrection is what sets us apart from people who think Jesus was just another wise teacher in the history of wise teachers. When the church says, “Christ is risen” (Christ is risen indeed), we’re saying that we believe that God’s reign is at hand and that Christ is that reign’s Lord and Ruler and that there will be a day when a new heaven and earth will emerge, and that gap ... that separation between God and humans will be closed and we will live and reign with him forever and ever amen. So yeah! *Of course* we preachers like to preach about this. This is the Easter message! This is good news. And we’re all about the good news.

What we preachers often avoid is that last few days of Jesus’ life with all the pain and suffering and darkness surrounding his betrayal, his trial, and his death by crucifixion. Well let me back up a bit. *Some* preachers are morbidly *fascinated* by it and spend a disproportionate amount of time dwelling on it. In which case, the message ends up being either, “You did this to him” or “this should have happened to you.” And both of these examples fall somewhere between problematic and seriously flawed when you consider the sum total of the gospel story. The truth of the matter is that you cannot have resurrection without death. Something cannot rise again unless it has fallen. You cannot have Easter Sunday without Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. And since we didn’t have

Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services this year, let's walk in the valley a bit before we head to the mountain.

Let's talk about some of *our* valleys. Which valley do start with, right? How many months do we want to go back? So many milestones in the last 365 days to choose from on international, global, regional, and local levels. I guess the event that's still fresh on most people's minds here in Butte County is the November 8th Camp Fire. It's the deadliest US wildlands fire since the Cloquet fire in 1918. Definitely the deadliest in California history to date. It was also the world's costliest disaster in 2018 clocking in at \$16.5 B. It's hard to get an estimate on how many people were displaced by this disaster. The number seems to be in and around 50,000 people. This includes folks who lost their homes entirely and folks whose houses survived but are still unable to occupy them. Then there are others who *didn't* live in the burn zone who had only marginally stable housing in Chico and other surrounding areas. When their landlords who lived in the burn zone or their families who lived in the burn zone needed housing, some tenants were pushed out down here to make room. Others were pushed out because their landlords figured they could capitalize on the disaster by raising rent or selling their houses altogether. This all happened during an already existing county-wide and some would say state-wide housing crisis. And to add insult to injury, displaced people living in temporary shelter have been *continually* displaced because of flooding! The young woman who I helped move things from her flooding apartment a couple of weeks ago was talking about how her downstairs neighbor not only lost her house to the Camp Fire, but has had to move two other times because of floods. Can you imagine how that young woman and her family feels?

So how many of these people do you think really care about what "we" had to do with Jesus' death or whether it's "*our*" fault that Jesus was killed or that "*they*" are the ones who really deserved crucifixion? How do you suppose that message is going to be received by folks who have lost everything and can't even seem to find a place to live for more than a few weeks before they have to move again? What's the good news for

them? What do you think they're going to want to say to someone who comes along and says, "Listen, you need to get your act together, because it's your fault that Jesus had to die?" The Book of Job in the Old Testament has a few things to say about people who say ridiculous things like this to people who are experiencing suffering. I'd say, "That's a sermon for another day," but most of you have heard my thoughts on that subject and are probably sick of me preaching about Job anyway.

So. Good news. Last week I said, "The good news isn't always good for everyone." I said this in reference to what Jesus meant when he said, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." If you're last, this is good news. Not so much if you're first and are accustomed to being first. But here's the deal, anywhere you look in scripture, the good news always seems to be directed to those who are overloaded by suffering. Every section of the Bible is an example of this. "God is there during your lowest times. God is there when you feel abandoned. God is there when you are in captivity. God is there when it seems like you're wandering aimlessly. God is there when it seems like the whole world is working against you. God is there when you are being ridiculed and punished for your beliefs. God is there when you feel like your friends have turned against you and no one is on your side. And in Jesus' case, God is there even when you are breathing your last breath and asking, "Why, God, have you forsaken me?" This message runs consistently throughout the entire Bible. And it's not a minor theme either. It is arguably the most prominent message that scripture has to offer. It's strange, though, how when you ask folks who have a negative view of the church or the Christian faith or religion in general, they'll say the main theme in scripture seems to be, "Don't do x, y, and z because if you do you're going to hell!" And I will admit, there are certainly passages in the Bible that would lead one to come to this conclusion. But I'm also saying that it takes some cutting and pasting and ignoring the broader context of these passages to get to that place. When you look at the big picture, the good news is "God is there."

Oh really Rev. Smarty-pants? What's the big-picture message of the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt? God is there to set you free. God is there to lead you when you're wandering and looking for a home. Fine. How about Judges? God is there when you're trying to find and establish your identity. King David and Israel's golden age? God is with you during the best, worst, and most conflicted times. How about the exile and the prophets? God is there even when you're away from home, and God is there when you return. Job? Ecclesiastes? Proverbs? God is there always, even when we ask questions. Acts? Paul's letters? God is there for everyone, not just the Jews. Revelation? God is there and will be there when it seems like things come crashing down around us. "God ...is ... with ... us."

That's fine Jesse, but don't forget this is Easter. We started out talking about the resurrection. That's what we're supposed to do on Easter. You know ... "Alleluia Christ is risen?" You need to wrap this up and turn us back to Jesus, or you know ... you'll ruin Easter for us. Gotcha. Back to Jesus. Here's where the good news fits into the Easter story. Not just the resurrection story either. This takes into account everything. The betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the humiliation, and the crucifixion. The good news here is that Jesus faced the very worst of what human beings can face: Betrayal, injustice, torture, abandonment, rejection, and a humiliating death. Last week we talked about the "Christ Hymn" in Paul's letter to the Philippians. The song goes, "And thought he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." And you know what? God was with him the whole time. That's good news. For all of us.

And God knows we sure could use some good news now. Yes, we're facing some challenges here in Butte County. We're dealing with the aftermath of the fire as we continue to provide safe space for people who lost their homes and places of worship. We're dealing with the

aftermath of the rains two weeks ago and figuring out if and where we'll be able to come up with the funding to make up for what our insurance wouldn't cover for restoration. Then there's the even bigger-picture question: "Is this weather pattern that gave us fire and floods within weeks of each other the new normal? And if so, what do we do now?" So many questions. So many worries. And yet, Jesus said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." For now, just be in the present. Not the past ... not the future. Here. In the present. And remember that God is here *with us* in the present. Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed.)