

John 20:1-18 “Come See Resurrection”

So many churches are in distress about not being able to gather in their regular places of worship to celebrate Easter. That’s understandable. Easter is the highest holy day of the year for Christians. Even more so than Christmas. Easter is when we celebrate Christ’s resurrection! That’s the reason why we even exist as the church. We celebrate and affirm the resurrection! And so some folks say, “How can we celebrate the resurrection when we’re stuck in front of a screen at home?” In response, some churches are just blatantly disregarding Shelter In Place orders and social distancing. The rationale? For small churches it’s, “There’s not going to be that many of us, and we can space ourselves out in the sanctuary. We kind of do that anyway, so what’s the harm?” The ones that I struggle with are the larger churches who say that people’s faith will protect them from the Coronavirus. God wouldn’t let a faithful person who comes to church on our highest Holy Day get sick! Right? So come to church anyway! If you get sick, then it will be because you didn’t have enough faith! Even if you do get the virus, surely God won’t let you die for celebrating the resurrection! As a bonus measure, one prominent televangelist this past week stood in the pulpit and “blew the wind of God” on his congregation to protect them.

Still other churches have decided to postpone Easter until the congregation can meet together again in person. Why? They say, “It just wouldn’t be Easter without all of our traditions.” You’ve *got* to have sunrise service! You’ve *got* to have the procession of the flower cross! You’ve *got* to have the choir sing the hallelujah chorus! You’ve *got* to have all the pageantry otherwise it just doesn’t feel like Easter! And you know what? I get it. I think what I miss most this year is the sunrise service around the campfire out in the courtyard by the prayer garden. It just doesn’t feel like Easter without it.

This past week I was thinking about the Israelites who were held in captivity in Babylon during the 8th Century BCE. The first two verses of Psalm 137 give us a glimpse of what they were feeling – “By the rivers

of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps.” I think a lot of Christians are feeling like that now. The Israelites were being held in a place against their will wondering how in the world they could worship outside their homeland away from their temple. But the message God kept sending the captives was, “You don’t need the temple. You can worship wherever you are. I am with you always. The temple is just a place. You are my people, and worship comes from your heart ... not from any ritual or sacrifice.”

Here’s a God thing I want to share with you. Some folks give preachers who follow the lectionary a hard time. “You should let the Spirit guide your choice instead of a list of scriptures that someone else came up with.” Yeah, but what happens when the Holy Spirit speaks loud and clear through the lectionary text that’s right in front of you? As you’ve probably figured out, this is a “Gospel of John year” in the New Common Lectionary. That’s where we’ve been for most of Lenten Season. That’s where we are in our Thursday night Bible study. And that’s where we are today on Easter. Let’s talk about what’s going on with the disciples here in John. First of all, when Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified, the disciples disappeared. Why? Because they were afraid. They were afraid that what happened to Jesus might happen to them. Where we find them today is “sheltered in place” in an undisclosed location ... huddled up and scared because they didn’t know what to do now that their leader had been crucified.

Meanwhile, Mary Magdalene went to visit the tomb and discovered that the stone was missing and the tomb was empty. Did Mary say, “Yes! Jesus has risen! Hallelujah!?” Did she sing, “Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o’er his foes?” No. She ran back to tell the disciples, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve laid him.” Did the disciples say, “Oh! This is what Jesus was talking about all along! Don’t worry Mary, nobody took him away, he rose from the grave just like he said he would!” Nope. Two of them ran to the tomb, saw what Mary had seen and believed. Believed

that Christ rose again? No. They believed that what Mary said about Jesus missing from the tomb was true. And as the gospel writer put it, “As yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” They had no clue what had happened. They bore witness to the empty tomb, and the only thing they thought was, “Huh ... I guess Mary was right. Somebody moved the body.” And where did they go? They went right back to the place where they were all sheltered in place because they were still scared.

Mary remained behind at the tomb though. Maybe she was a little miffed because the disciples hadn’t believed her and had to come see for themselves. More likely, though, she was distressed that Jesus died and that someone may have stolen his body. In fact, that’s what she told the two angels sitting where Jesus’ body had been when they asked why she was weeping. “They have taken my Lord and I do not know where they’ve laid him.” Even when Jesus revealed himself to Mary, she thought he was the gardener and that maybe *he* was the one who moved the body. She was so distressed that she didn’t even recognize Jesus! And why *would* it be Jesus? He’s dead! But once Jesus spoke to her, she knew who he was. That’s when Jesus told her that he had risen and was preparing to ascend to the Father. Then he gave her the honor of being the first evangelist ... the first one to bear the good news of his resurrection to the disciples. She returned to the place where they were sheltered in place and told them, “I have seen the Lord.”

On that first Easter morning, according to John, there were no flower crosses. There were no egg hunts. There was no sunrise service around the campfire (although that will come later). There were no Easter lilies or choirs singing the Hallelujah chorus. These are all traditions that *we’ve* created over the centuries to express our joy that Christ is risen. But on that day, 2,000 year ago, in or around the city of Jerusalem, there was a small group of disciples who, even after hearing Mary’s news that Christ had risen, were still huddled up ... sheltered in place. Like us. Today. And we are managing. We’re having worship together in a way that we wouldn’t have been able to even 10 or 15 years ago. We have an

Easter Lily. I managed to keep it alive for three days which is a small miracle itself. We put a flower cross together using flowers you provided, or at least picture of flowers you provided. We managed to have our favorite Easter songs included in this service. We got to say, “He is risen!” On one level we are apart, but on another we are together. All I can tell you is that this year’s Easter celebration is ...different. And I’m going to go out on a limb here and say it - This may be the most authentic Easter service we’ve experienced as a church in quite some time. We are experiencing the day that Christ arose from the dead in the way that Jesus’ disciples experienced it.

Here’s something else to think about – Why do we celebrate Easter like we typically do? Why do we have the flowers and festivities and the parades and the triumphant songs about Christ’s victory over death? Why do we dress up in our Sunday best and come to church on what’s usually one of the best attended services of the year? It’s because we know the end of the story. We know what comes next. We know the next chapter. We know the next book. We know that God wins and that Christ lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit forever and ever, amen. The disciples did *not* know this. They sheltered in place and remained fearful because they didn’t know what was coming next. Hearing the good news of Christ’s resurrection from Mary was only the first of many steps they had to take to get to the place where they could shout joyful hallelujahs and boldly proclaim, “He is risen” like we do in our churches today. The disciples still had some work to do even on the Day of Resurrection. Maybe that’s where we are this Easter. We’re exactly where we need to be in this time and place, because this is exactly where Jesus’ disciples were on the day of Christ’s resurrection.

What’s next? I don’t know. When will we be able to come back together again? I don’t know. When will we be able to get back to “normal.” Good grief, what does “normal” even mean now? We’re going to be living into this new “normal” for quite some time. We’re going to have more questions than answers. And like the captive Israelites in Babylon, we’re going to be tempted to sing sad songs by the

river and long for the way things used to be. But we do have a promise. It's the same promise that Jesus gave his disciples six chapters earlier in John's gospel – "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Let that be our assurance this morning. Our hearts may indeed be troubled, and we may feel afraid, but the Holy Spirit will be there to teach us and remind us of everything Jesus taught.

We may not be able to come out of our shelters yet, but when we do, we will have the opportunity to let the Holy Spirit pick us up and set us down in the places that desperately need the peace that surpasses the world's understanding. And you know what? We don't need to know everything this morning. We don't need to have all our questions answered. We simply need to wait and trust that God has something awesome waiting for us in these troubled times.