

Easter Sermon 2025

Luke 24:1-12

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women [who had followed Jesus] took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, 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 his words.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Introduction:

Easter is a little different in the Moravian Church than other Protestant denominations. In fact, it is a little different for Moravians in North Carolina than other parts of the country. In most churches, the 10 a.m. or 11 a.m. worship service on Easter is the highlight of the church year, and pastors try to give their most rousing sermon. But you may have noticed that many people in our congregation, including members of the choir, and even the pastors, are unusually sleepy this morning. The bands began making their rounds about 2 a.m. to call people to worship. Folks were in the kitchens preparing a breakfast that was served at 4 a.m. for the bands and others. All kinds of volunteers spent the early morning preparing to receive thousands of worshipers in Salem Square and God’s Acre. And at 6 a.m., while the nearly full moon was shining overhead, the liturgist proclaimed that the Lord is Risen! Thousands of people professed their faith and watched the sun rising from its night-curtained slumber. It is such a wonderful experience, especially for those who were able to join in the Holy Week services leading up to Easter.

I grew up in a small Moravian congregation, Hope Moravian near Clemmons. We had our God's Acre service at 10 a.m. instead of sunrise because most of our band also played in the band in Salem. It was a little odd to have the sunrise service at 10:00, but since our service was later in the morning, there were always lots of children there. Many of them were in new Easter outfits and were happy to be outside walking around instead of sitting in a pew. Of course, most of them had already enjoyed their Easter baskets with chocolate eggs and gifts. One year my nephew got one of those talking children's books. It was Winnie the Pooh. And when the pastor shouted out "The Lord is Risen!" we heard the reply "That's what Tiggers do best." 30 years later, we still remind Billy of that humorous moment amid a solemn celebration. That story is a reminder that children are part of the kingdom of God even though they may not understand everything going on. Now each Easter, Billy and his wife come to Hope Church. They stand near the graves of Billy's mother and father and with tears in their eyes proclaim their faith in Christ. Because that's what Moravians do best.

This is what is beautiful and challenging about Easter Sunday. It is time of celebration and flowers and Hosannas and Hallelujahs, but also grief and tears and memory of those who are resting in Christ's presence. It is also a time of family reunions and fellowship. I've known people who are confused as to why we Moravians gather in the cemetery to celebrate Easter since Easter is about new life. When we gather on God's Acre on Easter we are worshipping with the whole church, not just those of us who still walk on earth. It is among the company the saints who from their labor rest, that we should proclaim the good news of Christ's victory. If we cannot profess our faith among the graves of those who have gone before us, then we probably should not confess our faith anywhere. A day will come when we will join those who have gone before and others will shout The Lord is Risen Indeed!

Joseph of Arimathea

In our gospel lesson for this morning, we hear Luke's version of the first Easter. Just prior to our assigned text, Luke gave a brief account of the burial of Jesus in the tomb of a Pharisee named Joseph of Arimathea. We heard that story on Friday evening in our lovefeast. Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin, but he believed in Jesus. He asked permission of Pilate to bury Jesus with dignity, but since the Sabbath was upon them, there was not time to prepare the body with spices. Nicodemus, we are told, provided spices, but the work of preparing the body had to wait. Normally the preparations would have been done by female members of the deceased's family,

but Jesus died a long way from home. Joseph of Arimathea was taking a great risk to take the body of a man who had been condemned as an insurrectionist by the Sanhedrin, the council that Joseph himself was a member of. He had Jesus laid in his tomb and sealed the entrance with a stone.

The women disciples of Jesus, who had remained faithful throughout the ordeal on Friday, followed Joseph and saw where he was buried. They observed the Sabbath rest in secret while grieving for the teacher they loved. Since it was the Sabbath, they could not prepare food or do anything to distract themselves. They sat in grief and tried to comfort one another. Before daybreak on Sunday after the crucifixion they took the spices they had, they went back to the garden to the tomb of Joseph.

The Women

The four gospels disagree over how many women went to anoint the body of Jesus. All say that Mary Magdalene was one of them, but each gospel lists different names of the companions. One of the reasons we can accept the gospels as trustworthy and authentic accounts is this kind of discrepancy. People rarely remember the details of an event in the same way. Luke wrote his gospel more than 40 years after Jesus' death, and it's not surprising that the story he heard was a little different from what the other Gospel writers had heard. All four of the gospels agree on the important point that the women who came to the tomb had traveled with Jesus from Galilee. They had left their families and supported Jesus on his journey. Now they were far from their homes and had just lost a friend they loved. They were numb with grief, but even in grief there was work to do. The final acts of love and care.

The women went early in the morning before dawn or the gloaming. Many of us rose before dawn today to play in the band or process quietly with the crowd in the gloaming to God's Acre. We do this each year in imitation of the women. But unlike us, Mary and the others were not going to proclaim faith in the resurrection. They were expecting to find Jesus' wounded body wrapped in white cloth lying forsaken and alone on the cold ground. They were expecting to do the final act of love that so many women in the world have done since before the dawn of civilization. They were going to treat the broken body of Jesus with dignity and tenderness, clean off the blood, anoint it with spices, and say their final good-byes.

Darkness into light

The sun was not yet up when they found the garden. The dim light and morning mists must have made the scene quite eerie as they approached the tomb and saw that it had been opened. As the light grew, they peered into the darkness and saw nothing but the winding sheet lying there. To their horror and confusion, there was no body to anoint. Before they had a chance to voice their fear that someone, perhaps one of the Roman soldiers, had stolen Jesus' body, they were startled by a dazzling light that did not come from the sun.

Two men were standing with them. Two men they did not know. Two men dressed in white. Two men whose faces shone brighter than their clothes. It is when the darkness is strongest that the light shines most clearly. These two men were obviously not human. They were divine messengers who revealed themselves to the women to reassure them that no one had desecrated the tomb or stolen a body. As most humans do when they encounter angels, the women fell on the ground in fear. When our eyes are accustomed to the sepulchral gloom of grief, the light hurts, and we at first want to flee back to the darkness.

The Living among the Dead

The message the angels brought shocked the women even more than their blazing faces. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" We can only imagine the reaction of the women to that question. It must have felt like these strange men were mocking them in their grief. The reason we have graveyards, cemeteries, God's Acres, necropolises, catacombs, mausoleums, and other sacred places for burial is to remove the dead from the living. We want to remember the dead, but at a safe distance.

The women were confused by the question because they were not seeking the living among the dead; they were seeking the earthly remains of someone they loved. So the angels clarified their question by telling them that Jesus was not there because God had raised him from the dead. Do not seek for him in the tomb. His Sabbath rest in the grave had ended sometime in the night.

Jesus had awakened from the last sleep and rose from his final resting place. No one had seen him do it. No one had heard him. There were no special effects – no dramatic lightening or thunder or earthquakes. There were no loud screams as when a baby passes from the darkness of the womb into the light of the world. Silently, how silently the wondrous gift of resurrection, of rebirth was given. He is Risen!

Son of Man

Since they were still confused and confounded, the angels reminded them that Jesus had said that the Son of Man would rise on the third day. Before they started their walk to Jerusalem with Jesus, he had told them what would happen. Only then did the women remember his words. Suddenly, it dawned on them that Jesus was the Son of Man he had taught them about. He hadn't been talking in parables and metaphors when he said that the Son of Man who had to die and come back to life. The rabbi they had learned from, the Messiah they had followed, the Lord they had obeyed was the Son of Man whom God raised from the death.

And just when it was becoming clear to them who Jesus really was, the angels were gone. Only the women remained as witnesses. Why *are* we seeking the living among the dead, they asked each other. We need to step out of the gloom of the tomb into the light. Why seek the living among the dead, the angels asked the women – and us.

An Idle Tale?

The male disciples of Jesus also had a rough Sabbath. They had left everything they knew, even their careers and fishing boats, to follow Jesus to Jerusalem. They had walked beside his donkey as he rode into Jerusalem. They had seen him overturn the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple and oppose the malice of the priests and lawyers. They had shared the Last Supper and heard his final teachings, but without really understanding what he was saying.

They fled when he was arrested and hid while he was put on trial. They had cowered in fear as he had been flogged. Unlike the women, they had not followed Jesus on his last steps up to Golgotha or heard his words from the cross. They had not gone with Joseph to bury his body. The male disciples had spent the Sabbath in fear, confusion, grief, and shame. Especially Peter who had denied three times that he knew who Jesus was. Their hopes and dreams were shattered. They had trouble even looking each other in the face.

They did not go with the women to the tomb. Dealing with the dead was women's work. We don't know if the women had left breakfast on the table for the men when they went out, but the men did not leave the house when the sun rose. They sat wondering what to do. Should they go back to Galilee and see if they could go back to being fishermen?

And then Mary Magdalene and the other women came back from Joseph's garden telling an unbelievable tale about an empty tomb and angels. It was truly unbelievable.

The dead do not get up and leave their beds. Angels don't appear to ordinary people. The men assumed the women were dreaming and seeing things in the dark. They had gotten lost and went to the wrong tomb. This was just all wishful thinking. Grief had addled the women's brains, the disciples thought. This was an idle tale for children, not a story for grown ups. The disciples were thinking that the past months with Jesus had been a dream that had turned into a nightmare. Now it was time to wake up to the harsh reality that the world is a cold and lonely place, and there ain't no Messiahs or Saviors.

Us

I have a feeling that some of you know what it was like for the both the women and the men that morning. I've had many people tell me that they have had wonderful, life-changing spiritual experiences that their friends and family dismissed as idle tales. Be we also know what it is like to grow old and lose our sense of wonder and our belief in the miraculous. Like the words of an old Supertramp sang, we were taught how to be sensible, logical, dependable, clinical, intellectual, cynical. We think that is what it means to be grown up. We lose our sense of wonder and the hope for better days. A danger with coming to church on Easter year after year is that we can forget how amazing this story is. We shout out the Lord is Risen indeed, but too often our hearts remain dead and our backs bowed by the weight of our cares.

Conclusion

The Lord is Risen! The Lord is Risen, indeed! My prayer for all of us this Easter is that this is not an idle tale for us, but that is the story that gives meaning to life. I pray that this story that the women brought to the disciples renews our sense of hope and joy and purpose. Rather than seeking the living among the dead, let us go forth into the world with our faces blazing with light so that all may know the good news. Our redeemer lives and life is beautiful and there is hope even during dark times.