

“In the Presence of Jesus”
Reverends Bill & Mary Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
April 1, 2018

First Scripture Lesson: Philippians 2:5-11

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Second Scripture Lesson: Matthew 28

¹After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for He has been raised, as He said. Come, see the place where He lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell His disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell His disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to Him, took hold of His feet, and worshiped Him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see Me.”

¹¹While they were going, some of the guards went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹²After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³telling them, “You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”



Sermon: “In the Presence of Jesus”

**Note: The Reverends Bill & Mary Gause shared preaching duties this morning. Their names appear before the parts of the sermon that each delivered.*

Rev. Bill Gause:

He is risen!
He is risen indeed!

Happy Easter to you all! There is much to celebrate today. The women have gone down to the tomb and found it empty! The power and love of God have raised Jesus from the dead, breaking the power of sin and death, and securing for us our salvation! Hallelujah!

It is an interesting quirk of the calendar that Easter Sunday falls on the same date as April Fool's day. It is also unfortunate because you should rightly be skeptical of everything you hear today. If someone tells you your car is on fire in the parking lot, you should be dubious. If someone tells you you'll get better reception on your cell phone if you stand in a bucket of water, you should be cautious. If someone tells you that *today only* you can get a free meal at the Rusty Bucket across the street if you walk in the front door and start singing "Carmen Ohio" at the top of your lungs, you should be skeptical.

If someone tells you that a man who called Himself the Son of God, was executed for blasphemy and sedition but a couple of days later emerged from the grave alive and well... well, you'd have a right to be skeptical about that, too. And yet in churches all over the world, including this one, that is exactly the story that is being told over and over and over again. Why do people find it so hard to believe? Because it *is* hard to believe. All my preacher's gifts and experience cannot change that.

You see, to believe this story you have to trust the women who first went to the tomb that Easter morning long ago. You have to trust the disciples, the gospel writers, over two thousand years of Christian witness, and along the way countless men and women who have experienced the risen Christ. You have to trust God. Does all of that rise to our modern standard for irrefutable proof? Maybe. Maybe not. But whether you are skeptical or accept the story without question, you cannot deny that the life, death, and resurrection of this man Jesus of Nazareth has made a real difference in the lives of countless generations of men, women, and children, including many right here in this room.

Rev. Mary Gause:

That Jesus died is not remarkable. That He gave His life as a sacrifice for each one of us, is. For over two millennia, Christians have been inspired by Jesus' humble life and sacrificial death on a Roman cross. That He experienced the depth of what human sin is capable because of His great love for us, continues to inspire loyalty and faith, and deep, unwavering devotion.

Recently, students at a Mennonite high school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania were asked to write a senior paper in which they were to answer the question "Who is Jesus?" One young man named Paul wrote the following:

"This is a question that I always manage to tear-up about when I answer. I don't wanna' use all the traditional adjectives to describe Him. Jesus is the one man who can look at me with love and when I am covered in the most dirt, He is willing to take me by the hand even when I turn away from Him. Jesus is someone I cannot describe because there is nothing I know that I can compare Him to. He takes care of me when I am depressed, crushed, lonely, or broken. When I stand before Him all my shadows are seen. He is the one that never leaves my side. He is more than a friend, more than a father, He is my savior. I can't comprehend His infinitely beautiful and perfect love."¹

Bill:

All four gospels tell the story of the resurrection. All four gospels report that when the first women reached the tomb on the morning of the third day, they found it empty. None attempt to explain exactly how it came to be empty and by what process Jesus was raised. It is sufficient for them to say that the tomb was empty.

Did He really rise from the dead? Or did someone take His body and claim a resurrection, like Matthew says the Jewish authorities claimed? Of course, for that story to have been true, the disciples would had to have swooped in undetected, rolled away the heavy stone, and taken the body without the Roman soldiers standing guard noticing. That would require either disciples with advanced ninja skills or guards with Barney Fife level ineptitude. And a whole lot of luck and/or divine intervention either way.

Could it be that Jesus' body had been placed in the wrong tomb? Or was Jesus not dead, just unconscious and was never put in the tomb in the first place?

Or could it all have happened exactly the way the gospels say it did?

Mary:

In our culture of "fake news" and fact checking and multiple sources, unassailable proof is the gold standard. Reliable sources, unimpeachable witnesses, and video evidence provide confidence. While doubt is uncomfortable, certainty is power. And yet in spite of our desire to know more, God asks of us faith.

Frederick Buechner writes that:

*"It hardly matters how the body of Jesus came to be missing... what convinced people that He had risen from the dead was not the absence of His corpse, but His living presence. And so it has been ever since."*²

Bill:

Something had to have happened for the story to persist as long as it has. Something had to have happened for the disciples, who scattered at the arrest of Jesus for fear of their own lives, to return to Galilee to pick up the ministry of Jesus right where they had left off. Something had to have happened for Peter, the one who denied knowing Jesus even while standing within sight of the man everyone knew he knew, to assume the mantle of leadership of the Christ movement. Something had to have happened for him to accept forgiveness and devote his life to growing the fledgling church, and to express the same courage and conviction Jesus did, even to the point of himself dying on a Roman cross.

Something had to have happened for men and women to accept the risk of proclaiming Jesus as Lord in a world where doing so could get you killed. Something had to have happened for that early church to grow and spread as it did; for the story to change lives as it did.

The apostle Paul was the earliest to write down his beliefs and teachings about Jesus. Most of his letters predate the writing of the four gospels. His letters compose 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament, giving form and shape to the church's belief about Jesus since the very beginning. Yet Paul's faith was not inspired by *stories* of the resurrection, but by *his experience of the resurrected Jesus*.

Mary:

The cruel way Jesus was treated speaks to the heart. He was an innocent man who fully embodied the love of God and He was unjustly arrested, tried and executed. That He was made to suffer and die evokes in the believer feelings of anger and righteous indignation. What was done to Jesus was unfair, but not without purpose.

Preacher and author Rob Bell reminds us why.

“Our tendency in the midst of suffering is to turn on God. To get angry and bitter and shake our fist at the sky and say, ‘God, you don’t know what it’s like! You don’t understand! You have no idea what I’m going through. You don’t have a clue how much this hurts.’

“The cross is God’s way of taking away all of our accusations, excuses, and arguments.

“The cross is God taking on flesh and blood and saying, ‘Me too.’”³

Bill:

So much of the resurrection experience speaks to the heart. We *feel* the deep sense of loss the disciples and Jesus’ friends and fellow travelers must have felt. We hoped right along with them that Jesus would be the promised one; the Messiah to reverse the sin and pain of the world and bring in the Kingdom of God, where God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. And on Good Friday, we mourn not just for Jesus death, but for all that appeared to die with Him.

And we also *feel* the sudden joy and exultation at the news that our Savior is not dead as we had been told; that our hope for the Kingdom is renewed.

But the story does not let us stay wrapped in our feelings, it calls us to follow Jesus and do something.

It is indeed an odd sort of thing for a day given over to pranksters and skeptics, a day when doubt is so highly valued, to also be a day when we celebrate the resurrection of the Son of God. If you find the story a little hard to swallow; if you’ve always been one who doubted, then you may take some comfort in knowing that you are not alone. And the ones with whom you share your doubts may surprise you.

As Matthew tells the story of what happened on that first Easter Sunday, he includes one detail that many people often miss. After Jesus has come out of the tomb; after He has revealed himself to the women and arranged to meet the disciples back in Galilee, Matthew tells us about their reunion on the top of a mountain. All eleven of the remaining disciples are present. Matthew writes that the gathered disciples bowed down to worship Jesus, *“but some doubted.”*

Even among the original disciples, the ones who knew Him best, the ones who had seen Him heal the blind and the lame, who had watched Him cure diseases and cast out demons; these men who were there when He quieted the storm, and walked on water, and fed thousands of people with only a few loaves of bread and some fish; these disciples of Jesus who should have known more than anyone else who He was and of what He was capable; even some of them while standing in His presence, doubted.

Why would we expect to feel any more certain than them?

And those disciples, the founders and perfecters of the faith, what does Jesus say to them? Does He try to quell their anxieties? Does He try to make a case for why He is there, with them, when He should have by rights, been behind a large rock in a tomb outside Jerusalem? No. He doesn't address their doubts at all. He addresses their responsibilities:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Mary:

Renowned Presbyterian pastor William Sloane Coffin was fond of saying that:

*"Easter has less to do with one person's escape from the grave than with the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power."*⁴

[Therefore], *"Easter is a demand, not for sympathy with the crucified Christ, but a demand for loyalty to the resurrected one. It is a travesty that so often Christians show sympathy for the crucified Christ and at the same time, continued loyalty to the institutions that crucified Him."*⁵

Bill:

You see, the biggest problem with Easter is not our questions about what actually happened, but our misunderstanding of what it means. We get so wrapped up in the joyous experience of resurrection; in our assurances that even though we don't know exactly what awaits us after death, we have confidence in *Who* awaits us after death - in the fact that in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we have come to see most perfectly revealed who God is and what God is like. By defeating the best efforts of the Jewish religious authorities and the Roman civil authorities, and by overcoming the power of death and therefore everything else that we fear most in the world, God has shown that nothing can come between us and God's perfect love and grace!

And while all those things are absolutely true, when we focus on them, we miss the associated call to live our lives in response. Easter offers to us not just comfort, but challenge; not just a promise, but a demand.

The Romans didn't just decide to kill Jesus because some Jewish religious leaders told them they should. Jesus was arrested and executed by the Roman authorities because of what He *did*. He was preaching loyalty, not to the throne of Caesar, but to the Kingdom of God. There's a reason the earliest Christians called him "Lord." Because calling Jesus their "Lord" directly implied that Caesar was not. Rome, the power that stood astride the known world like a colossus, would not tolerate some loud-mouthed preacher, from a little backwater town in a forgotten corner of its own empire, challenging the might of the emperor. So, they killed Him as they did all seditionists.

And Jesus was not vilified and conspired against by the Jewish authorities because they blindly hated Him. They persecuted Him because of what He *did*. They stood against Him because He challenged the status quo, preaching a new way of being in relationship with God and teaching a new way of understanding an ancient religion. If you think people get upset when you change things in the local church like the carpet or the service times, imagine what happens when several thousand years of belief and tradition gets turned on its head.

And the crowds who gathered in Jerusalem did not turn away from Jesus and allow his crucifixion because they liked Barabbas more. They abandoned Him because of what He *did*. They turned away because they wouldn't stand up for a savior who expected them to share what they had with the poor, who demanded they stop hurting their enemies and begin loving them; who taught that the greatest way to love and serve God is to love and serve others; who taught that faith meant putting more trust in God than they put in money or power or influence or violence or fear. And Jesus refused to use His influence and position to re-establish Israel as a world power that would make the people feel good.

That is why Jesus was killed. Those are the powers and principalities that God overcame by raising Jesus from the dead.

Mary:

The late author Kurt Vonnegut was not a Christian, but he identified himself as a "Christ-loving agnostic." He admired Jesus and His Sermon on the Mount in particular. In his last book *A Man Without A Country*, Vonnegut emphasized the challenging nature of Christ's gospel.

"For some reason the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere.

"Blessed are the merciful" in a courtroom? "Blessed are the peacemakers" in the Pentagon? Give me a break!"⁶

Bill:

In Matthew's gospel, the great commission is Jesus' last words to the disciples before leaving them. All those friends and followers, some of whom still doubted what they were seeing and hearing, Jesus calls on them, and by extension us, to go out and live what we believe; to change the world by making disciples; by showing others who God is and what God is like. By working for justice and peace; by sharing love and mercy; by denying the powers and principalities that God defeated that first Easter and by giving our loyalty to God.

God calls us to not just celebrate the resurrection, but to live it, abiding each day in the presence of Jesus. That is the comfort and challenge of the gospel. That is the promise and the demand of Easter.

Mary:

Hear that comfort and challenge; that promise and demand in these closing words of Frederick Buechner:

"Turn around and believe that the good news that we are loved is gooder than we ever dared hope, and that to believe in that good news, to live out of it and toward it, to be in love with that good news, is of all glad things in this world the gladdest thing of all. Amen, and come Lord Jesus."⁷

Bill:

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ “Who Is Jesus to You?” *Third Way*, MennoMedia, thirdway.com/love-jesus/who-is-jesus-to-you-2/.

² Buechner, Frederick. *The Faces of Jesus: a Life Story*. Paraclete Press, 2005, p. 87.

³ Bell, Rob. *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections between Sexuality and Spirituality*. HarperOne, 2012, p. 98

⁴ “Like Him We Rise (April 3, 1983).” *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: the Riverside Years, Volume 2*, by William Sloane. Coffin, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 29.

⁵ “Our Resurrection, Too (March 26, 1978).” *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: the Riverside Years, Volume 1*, by William Sloane. Coffin, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 69.

⁶ Vonnegut, Kurt. *A Man without a Country*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007, p. 98.

⁷ “The Kingdom of God.” *Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons*, by Frederick Buechner, HarperOne, 2007, p. 161.