

“A Bad Day for Grave Robbers”

Date: March 27, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18

Theme: Easter, resurrection; hope

Occasion: Easter Sunday

They called him “Resurrection Man.” He was a 36-year old slave, purchased for \$700 – quite a considerable sum of money in those days. His buyer was the Medical College of Georgia. His mission was simple, but morbid – to provide the medical school with fresh cadavers.

Everyone knew his real name was Grandison Harris. But doctors playfully nicknamed him “Resurrection Man,” once he became good at robbing the local black-cemetery, and bringing the bodies back to the medical school.

Grandison was good at what he did. According to eyewitnesses he would go to the cemetery late at night, with only the moon watching. Quickly he would dig down to the upper end of the box, smash it with an ax, reach into the casket with his long and powerful arms and draw the body out. He would then put the cadaver in a big sack and place it in a cart. Then, he’d carry the body back to school.

Grandison Harris was really a glorified grave robber, not a true Resurrection Man. He didn’t bring the dead back to life. Instead he desecrated a cemetery and stole bodies from their graves. I wonder how his own community felt, if they knew what he had been doing?

One night, Resurrection Man took a break after completing one of his jobs. He parked his loaded wagon in an alley and went inside the saloon for a few beers. Two medical students had been watching

Harris, and when he went inside, they removed the body from its sack and proceeded to hide the body. Then, one of the students climbed into the sack. When Grandison came back to the wagon, the medical student groaned, “Grandison...Grandison...I’m cold. Buy me a drink!”

Well, you can guess the results. Grandison was scared witless. About the same way the soldiers and disciples must have felt when they found an empty tomb on the first Easter Sunday. They were confused, dumbfounded, and scared witless.

Jesus’ body was not in the tomb anymore; it was gone. The religious authorities had an explanation: Grave robbers! “The disciples dun it,” they said. In fact, the chief priests and the elders of Jerusalem gave a large sum of money to the guards who had witnessed the resurrection to spread this lie: “The disciples came by night and stole him away while we slept.” (Matthew 28:13)

Easter is always a bad day for the tomb-raiders of the world, because nothing bothers grave robbers more... than an empty tomb. Mary and the other women arrive at the tomb to find it empty. They race to tell the other disciples. Peter runs to the tomb.

The only treasure he finds inside is a pile of linen cloths, hardly a valuable find in itself. But the great treasure of this tomb is already gone. It takes a little while for this shocking new reality to sink in.

Peter goes home. Mary stands weeping, outside the grave, still convinced the tomb has been robbed. Only when Jesus appears to her and calls her by name does she discover the risen Jesus. She runs to tell the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” (John 20:18)

There's no treasure in this tomb. No, the grave is empty, because Christ has been raised. The most valuable of bodies is not wrapped in a shroud; it is out and about, appearing to the disciples and to others, and now to people throughout the world.

Jesus Christ is not going to be found in a grave. Indiana Jones is not going to discover Him in some lost ruins. You're not going to find that body. "He is not here," proclaim the men in white, that first Easter morning. "He is not here, but he is risen." (Luke 24:5)

The point is that on Easter morning we win it all. We are presented with a treasure more valuable than anything that's been recovered from the Titanic, or stolen from the tomb of King Tut. Today we are given the gift of life, a gift of power, and the presence of our risen Lord. Can the preacher get an Amen?

Rev. Brian Bauknight, a retired United Methodist pastor from our own Western Pennsylvania Conference, tells this story in a blog:

"Some years ago, I was making a pastoral visit to a member with cancer. He had undergone several experimental forms of chemo. Obviously he was losing the battle. We tried to talk, but he refused to acknowledge or talk about the fact he was dying. As I left his home, I told his wife, "If he wants to talk, call me."

A few days later, early one morning, she called. I visited him once again. He gave me a strange and apprehensive glance. Then he said, "Don't think I'm crazy. But I need to tell you what happened last night. The door to my room opened, and a 'presence' was in the room. He took my hand. No words were spoken. Somehow I no longer have a fear of dying."

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” said Rev. Bauknight. I think you have personally experienced the power of resurrection faith.”

My friends, the Easter message is the message of hope – because he lives, we live. If we feel as though we are living a graveyard existence, like we are the walking dead, know that Christ will raise us to new life. If we are decomposing through sinful actions, mindless work, dead-end relationships and stone-cold spirituality, Jesus rises before us with new life.

He offers us forgiveness, guidance, inspiration and salvation. He invites us to join him in a new kind of life, a resurrection life, a life that no longer fears sickness or death, sin or judgment, failure or broken dreams. The Risen Christ offers us new and abundant life.

Resurrection is not simply about life after death, but focuses on the abundant life that begins now. Easter is about the re-awakening of dreams. It’s about overcoming defeat with a new chance. It’s about hope overcoming despair, and life triumphing over death.

That’s a message this world in general needs to hear, and the Erie community in particular, needs to hear. People today are living in fear – of the stranger who might hurt them, of the terrorist who might strike, of the enemy who might take their job away.

People are giving up hope, and they turn to drugs and to crime and to violence. They’re frustrated. When the human spirit loses hope it gets angry, and anger leads to violence. You see it with an increase in domestic violence, street violence and violence among nations.

Hope that is frustrated can lead to anger, or it can lead to depression. You see it in the eyes of children who drag themselves

to school wondering, “Why bother? What’s the use?” You see it in adults who drown their sorrow in a bottle or with a needle. People’s dreams have been crushed. You hear it in the political discussion of our time. People are frustrated; they’re depressed; they’re angry. Sadly, instead of uniting around our common cause, we’re turning against each other.

Easter is God’s answer to the ones who would steal our dreams. Sin and death thought they had beaten God. Taken his son to the cross and put him to shame; put him in a grave and shut him up. No more talk about this imaginary kingdom of light. Satan thought he had defeated God. But that was on Friday.

On Easter Sunday we celebrate the most perfect event in the history of the world – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today, “death is dead.” Those are the words spoken by a character in a play written by Eugene O’Neil called, “Lazarus Laughed.”

Lazarus, the man who Jesus raised from the dead, is facing Caligula, the feared Roman emperor. But instead of begging for mercy, Lazarus laughs. And the chorus shouts, “Laugh! Laugh! Fear is no more! Death is dead!”

Did you hear it? “Death is dead.” Whatever is killing you right now, whatever grave clothes have wrapped themselves around you like a python, whatever straight-jacket you find yourself in, you can escape.

You can walk into the light and experience the miracle of life. “Death is dead.” And because “death is dead,” there is a whole new world of possibilities for all of humanity. God has conquered sin. Hope triumphs over despair.

My friends, do not give up on hope. It's a bad day for grave robbers. They cannot steal our treasure. The victory is ours!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.