

“Christ the Victor”

Date: April 20, 2014

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Mark 16:1-7; Matthew 28:1-10

Occasion: Easter, hope

Theme: Easter, victory over sin and death

Lent is behind us and now we celebrate Christ’s victory over sin and death. The Apostle’s Creed says that “on the third day he rose again.” Friday was the first day, the day of the crucifixion, his death and his burial.

Saturday his body lay in the tomb. Some say that Jesus’ spirit went to hell to preach to the dead that they might experience the resurrection. What actually happened will remain a mystery that theologians and scholars will talk about for ages.

The third day began at sunset on Saturday night, but it was not until morning that Mary Magdalene discovered the stone had been rolled away, and the tomb was empty.

All four Gospels agree, she was first on the scene. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us she was accompanied by other women. They had come to anoint Jesus’ body with scented oils. The women were thunderstruck by what they saw:

The stone had been rolled away from the mouth of the tomb. They ran to the tomb, afraid that someone had taken Jesus’ body to desecrate it, and humiliate him yet again. At this point, the Gospels differ in what happened next.

In one gospel it was a young man who spoke to them. Another refers to the person as an angel. In another gospel it says two men in dazzling clothes appeared before them. In the fourth it says, “two

angels in white” spoke to them. With that, the women ran off to find the disciples and tell them what they had seen.

The chronology of Easter varies slightly in the four Gospel accounts. But one thing is clear: the idea that Jesus had been raised from the dead was considered by many to be unbelievable. The disciples doubted the women, calling their testimony “an idle tale.” The early disciples found it hard to believe the testimony that Christ was risen.

Frankly, I am grateful to the Gospel writers, for their willingness to record that even the disciples struggled with doubt when it came to the Resurrection. If it was hard for the people who were with Jesus to believe, how much more so for people who live 20 centuries later and have not seen the empty tomb or the living Christ with their own eyes.

Some have tried to explain it in other ways. Perhaps it was mob hysteria, merely wishing to see Jesus alive again. Perhaps he wasn’t really dead and was simply revived. Perhaps the early church simply made up the story, so that the teachings of Jesus could continue.

But the early church boldly asserted that the tomb *was* empty, that Jesus *was* bodily risen, and that *he appeared* to the apostles and to hundreds of others over a period of 40 days.

They saw him and talked with him. They touched his hands and he assured them he really was alive. He was not a ghost. He was there with them. He even ate a meal with them. He taught and encouraged them. Oh yes, the disciples saw the risen Jesus.

And there is no doubt the disciples were transformed after the Resurrection. These men who had deserted Jesus because they were afraid were *now* out in the streets of Jerusalem telling everyone:

“Kill us if you must, but we have to tell you: The one you crucified we have seen raised from the dead. He is in fact the Son of God. He is the King of glory, the Savior of the world.” And they went from there to the ends of the world proclaiming the good news.

They faced difficult times. They were arrested, again and again, because of their beliefs. They were beaten, abused, thrown into prison. Tradition has it that all, but one of them, were put to death for their faith. But they would never again dwell in those dark places of the spirit.

No more would they feel the doubt and despair they felt before they had seen their risen Lord. They faced life and death with hope and confidence.

My friends, when we hear, trust and celebrate this Easter story, we reclaim the same faith, and we discover the same joy and hope the first disciples had. Easter has the power to change us.

The Resurrection is not simply about a dead man being restored to life. Its power lies in its meaning. This leads us to the last of the Atonement theories we have been discussing during Lent.

This view was popularized by Swedish theologian and Bishop, Gustaf Aulen. Aulen was simply restating one of the dominant views of the early church. Essentially he says, the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ must be taken together as a powerful word of God, announcing God’s victory over the powers of evil, sin and death.

Resurrection is God’s triumph over death, which we, by faith,

share. Jesus rose from the dead, and in his resurrection he dealt a finishing blow to the forces of evil, sin and death. Christ became the victor.

With his victory, all humankind is offered the opportunity to join forces with him; to be set free from the power of sin and death, and to live lives of hope, freedom and love.

Now, human beings still must choose to side with him. They are not forced to leave their enslavement to sin and death. The battle between good and evil will continue until Christ's return. But, his death and resurrection dealt a decisive blow to the forces of evil. His resurrection demonstrated the ultimate victory of God over it.

That is good news. Alleluia! Blow the trumpet again! Let the balloons lift up their joyous colors. Let God's people shout Amen! Christ is victorious. The victory belongs to God! Though the battle rages on, we know to whom the victory belongs! Thanks be to God, for the victory in Jesus Christ.

The power of Easter, and with it the Christus Victor theory of Atonement, can be summed up in one word: Hope. Hope is the sense that things will work out, in spite of the difficult circumstances and painful situations that might lead to despair. Hope says, "Something good is just around the bend."

Words attributed to Frederick Buechner capture it well: "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing." Let me repeat that: "**Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.**" Would you repeat that with me? (say it again)

Knowing that Jesus will have the final word gives us courage when we face the problems of our time. Global warming; the threat of

terrorism; the global economic crisis; crime in our streets; the dreaded word, cancer: they all threaten us. But, I don't care what problem you name, it will not negate the fact that Christ is victor.

Knowing that Jesus will have the final word gives us courage when we face the problems of our time. That knowledge does not call us to hide in a room. It does not lead us to bury our heads in the sand, or to say we don't care about the problems we face.

Of course we care about what's happening in our world. But because of the Resurrection, we are able to face those things with hope and great courage. "Resurrection means the worst thing is not the last thing."

Knowing that Christ was victorious over sin and death, gives us the courage to live boldly, to take chances, to dare to do great things for God. Because - even when we fail, the worst thing is never the last thing.

Do you know what that means? Christians do not have to be afraid of death. Of course, when we lose someone we love we hurt, we mourn, we grieve. But death does not have the last word. Christ is the victor. Christ has conquered death. Take hope. Be of good courage.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Go and live the Gospel, knowing that Christ is victorious. Amen!

This sermon taken from Adam Hamilton's book *24 Hours That Changed the World*, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2009, pages 115-133.