

April 4, 2010  
The National Presbyterian Church

## The Bright and Morning Star

John 20; Revelation 22:16

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Welcome to the National Presbyterian Church on this Easter Sunday morning. What a joy it is to worship together. During these last weeks we as a congregation have been exploring together the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. And today on this Easter Sunday we'll look at the final few sentences that are in that great book, the Book of Revelation. Three weeks from now, we'll begin a new series of sermons, my colleagues and I, on St. Paul's greatest book, the Book of Romans. And that series will continue until the end of June. And now today is Easter. Let me ask you a question, where are the people who followed Jesus on that first Easter morning? Where are they? By reading the four gospels, we know. The ten disciples are hiding in a room with the door locked. Thomas is not with them. He is off by himself and he doesn't really surface for about eight days and then he will appear with the disciples.

Two of the followers of Jesus according to the Luke's gospel have already left Jerusalem and are on their way back home thinking that everything is over. They're on their way to Emmaus. Only the women are out in the open; all four gospels make that clear. The women who had been with Jesus at the cross are the ones that are out in the open on Easter morning at the tomb trying to figure out how they can get the stone rolled away so they can properly arrange for the burial of Jesus. Because the Sabbath came immediately after the crucifixion of our Lord, they were unable to fulfill that role. All

four gospels tell that it is the women who first made the discovery that Jesus was not there.

When Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty she runs back to the disciples in their hidden room and says, "They have taken away the body of Christ. I don't know where he is" (John 20:2). And John and Peter run to the tomb, they look in. They see that the body is not there. The text says that when they saw it, they believed. That doesn't mean that they believed that Christ had risen. John immediately follows that sentence with, "They didn't yet know that he must conquer death by resurrection" (John 20:9). Mary then stays at that tomb and has an amazing encounter. She sees Jesus. She thinks he's the gardener. She says, "If you've taken his body? Tell me where." And then that most amazing of all human words is heard by Mary, her own name, "Mary." And she realizes that Jesus Christ is alive. She then says, "*Rabboni*" which means, "great Rabbi." She's the one who first sees the Lord. The women are the first to hear that he is not in the tomb. The angels according to one of the gospels say, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He has risen as he said he would. He's not here" (Luke 24:5-7).

It's interesting that on Easter morning the disciples do not find Jesus, nor do the women find Jesus. He finds them. After all, how can they find him? They don't know where to look for him, the tomb is empty. Where are you supposed to look? How should they look? How should they find him? The tomb is empty. And it seems to me it's right and proper that the first to hear about his victory and the first to see him would be the women who were with him when he died. The victory of Christ is proved to each one of them, one by one.

It's interesting how the resurrection of our Lord is different than Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday was a great parade. But the victory of Christ, his resurrection is not as a parade. Another great parade is not staged entering the city of Jerusalem. They had seen a huge crowd on that day and then another huge, angry crowd on this day of the spectacle of the cross. But the victory of Christ is experienced person by person, small group by small group. In fact, the Book of Revelation, in the final chapter, also preserves the same thing. Earlier in the Book of Revelation we saw great, huge crowds. In one place it says, "myriads of myriads" which means an uncountable crowd sang praises; sang the "Hallelujah" to Jesus. But in the final scene of Revelation, the final chapter, it's not huge crowds; it's the *ethne*, that means individual people. The people with their individuality, one by one, come to the center

of the garden of this great New Jerusalem where the Tree of Life is and the Tree for Healing of Nations is. They come one by one bringing their glory, bringing their gift; it's one by one. In the final scene, John meets Jesus Christ in a one-on-one encounter and it's our Lord who assures him of victory.

What happens is, on Easter morning, the disciples are assured, first of all, that Christ has won - so there is that sense that, one by one, they discovered the assurance to them of the Lordship of Christ vindicated. But don't miss the second assurance that happens on Easter. The second assurance of the resurrection of Christ is the assurance *for* them and not just *to* them. For in them and in their hearts and minds, one by one, they're assured of their worth. It is exactly what happened at the tomb when Mary hears her name, her human name. When Jesus says, "Why are you weeping?" And she said, "They've taken away my Lord," and he says, "Mary." When she hears her name, that wonderful sense of the assurance of who she is is affirmed to her. The disciples have that same experience in the upper room. The doors are locked. Jesus appears to them. He says, "Peace be unto you." And then he shows them his hands and his side and they are assured.

I think it's interesting that Jesus Christ assures us these two ways. The one assures us of his victory, but Jesus also assures us that the victory is for us. And that assurance comes one by one...the one by one meeting... the fact that we don't find him but that he finds us. He finds the two that are on the road to Emmaus. They've even given up and have decided to go home. He finds them. I think that finding is pure Gospel.

Let me give you an example. Suppose you were flying to Washington, D.C. and you're going to see some friends in Washington, D.C. and just before you leave your city of departure, with your cell phone still on, you get this text. The text message says: When you arrive at Reagan Airport, go through the security and go find your baggage on the conveyer belt, and then head upstairs and take the moving walkway over the airport road. It will take you over to Metro. There's a Metro station there, it's very nice. Now be sure you go north in the Metro station. Get on the Blue Line train and it'll go into the Metro Center and when you get to Metro Center switch trains from the Blue Line to the Red Line. Now you do have to go to a different level there so it's a little tricky. Find your way. Be sure you take the right Metro and you want to head toward Tenley and when you get to Tenleytown/American University Station, then get off and then you'll be on Wisconsin Avenue. Walk about three or four blocks south on Wisconsin. Don't go north. And



then turn right on Van Ness and you'll find us, and we'll be very happy to see you.

Is that the way you first came to Washington, D.C.? That's nice and very thoughtful that they texted you with all that careful and accurate information and then you get to find your host.

Or how do you like this? Would this be better? If you got this on your text: I know you're arriving at Ronald Reagan Airport and when you get through security I'll be there and I'll be watching for you. And I know what you look like. I won't be carrying a sign; I know who you are. And when you come through security, I'll be right there and there's a Dunkin' Donuts shop right by that exit, so I'm going to have a donut and coffee for you the moment you get through exit. Which is the better way? Which is the better way to arrive? Which is the better way to make a discovery?

Our Lord does it right. They make the discovery when Jesus Christ finds them. They don't find him. He finds us. You know, they need that assurance because on Friday they had experienced a heavy blow.

We just heard our choir sing magnificently a chorale from the J.S. Bach *St. John Mass in B-Minor*. There's the great "Hallelujah" from that, but another one of his great works is the *Passion According to St. Matthew*. Some people feel it's his finest work. And in *Passion According to St. Matthew*, as Christ has died on the cross a chorale is sung in Bach's masterwork. The chorale goes like this, "Ah, Golgotha. Unhappy Golgotha, the Lord of Glory hangs upon the accursed tree. Now who shall the world's Redeemer be? With stricken soul, this sight I see." That's why the disciples are hiding ... that's why the women are weeping at the tomb. All of this great hope that they'd had, that had become so vivid on Palm Sunday, was destroyed on Good Friday.

You've got to realize that in the first century world in the Greek world of thought, they thought philosophically in dual terms. They thought of good power and bad power; but good and bad were more or less equal and you were never really sure what was stronger.

The Book of Revelation decides to weigh in on this issue. Remember the very beginning of the study of the exposition of the Book of Revelation. I made this comment that the Book of Revelation is a book about power. Good power and bad power. And the people who receive this letter in the midpoint of the first century knew a lot about bad power after the fire of

Rome of 64 A.D. and given that this book was written probably between 64 A.D. and 70 A.D. After that fire they were persecuted by Nero because he had tried to shift the blame away from himself during the fire of Rome. And so they were persecuted and they knew about bad power. The Book of Revelation was written to comfort them during that struggle between good and bad. And now we know on Easter morning that good is stronger than bad, in fact much stronger. The first to discover it are the women. A woman named Mary Magdalene is the first to hear and see Jesus himself. And then the disciples are assured and they're given a task to do, "Peace I leave with you" (John 20:21), and then our Lord sends them forth to share the Good News.

Garry Wills is one of my favorite historical authors. He wrote the book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* for which he won the Pulitzer Prize; and he's also written other books as well. Garry Wills wrote a more recent book, sharing his own Christian faith; that book is called *What Jesus Meant*. In that book he asked the question, "What are the proofs of Christ's resurrection?"<sup>1</sup> How do we prove Christ's resurrection? And he comes up with three answers that mean the most to him as a historian. The first is the empty tomb. The empty tomb, the fact that the early church showed no interest at all in a shrine to the tomb of Jesus. Do you realize that's unprecedented in ancient times? All ancient peoples primarily focused on their heroes at their tombs. King David's tomb is Mt. Zion, the most holy place in Israel. David's tomb. And yet the early Christians had no interest in the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. After all if you've seen one empty tomb you've seen them all. It's the tourist industry later that became interested in locating the empty tomb of Jesus. Not the early Christians, they did not create a shrine. This impressed Garry Wills, the fact that they were simply not interested in enshrining the memory of the tomb of Jesus because he wasn't there. He was alive.

Secondly, he is impressed by the appearances of Jesus Christ to the disciples and the fact that they were private and small scale appearances. No great second Palm Sunday entrance into the city. No powerful show of victory and force, but rather the quiet word of witness from Jesus Christ himself and also the early disciples who wrote that witness which became our New Testament documents. And he finds all this to be proof of the resurrection of Christ, given the very quality of the writing. The very way they're written. The fact that they're written in a startled fashion, no one expected the victory of Christ. This very narrative that John gives us of Mary Magdalene is so persuasive because it's so realistic, even understated.

And then the third reason I found very intriguing. What he calls the "seis-

mic change in the followers of Jesus.” They began sharing with the world by words and by deeds. They shared the Good News of the love of Christ, of his salvation in our behalf, the forgiveness he offers. And they lived it and shared it across racial barriers. They were no longer tribal; they shared it worldwide. That seismic change was very impressive to Wills.

And best of all, they felt safe. They felt safe. Safe enough that they could carry on. Let me read the last lines of the Book of Revelation and notice that’s just exactly the way the Book of Revelation ends. We had witnessed earlier the “myriads of myriads” giving their triumphal songs to Christ. But that’s not how the Book of Revelation ends, in the presence of the New Jerusalem it ends this way: “First the *ethne* bring their gifts to the Lamb and to the Tree for the Healing of Nations” (Revelation 22:1-3). That means we in our uniqueness, our individuality, bring our gifts. And then the angel speaks to John, who is the writer of the book and says, “I brought all of this to you.” John is so grateful he bows down and worships the angel and the angel says, “Don’t worship me. I’m just a creature like you are. Worship God” (Revelation 22:9). So he gets that little word of scolding but then immediately after that, Jesus Christ himself appears to John. Here’s the way it’s written, “It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the Root of David.” In other words, I am the fulfillment of David. “And I am the Bright and Morning star. In other words, I am the Light of the World.” He says this to John, but guess what he says right after that: “John, are you thirsty? Come, let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.” He invites John to have a drink of water. He assures him. “This is for you,” he feeds him from the Tree and the stream (Revelation 22:16-17).

Karl Barth says that the way we know that Jesus Christ is real in our life is because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit and he defines the ministry of the Holy Spirit this way: “When I’m able to say that this victory of Christ, this love of Christ, is not just a general truth but is also for me.”<sup>2</sup> I love that line from Karl Barth. “It’s also for me ... when I know that then I’m assured of our Lord Jesus Christ. I’m assured through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.” I think that’s what Garry Wills is getting at when he says, “The seismic change occurred when they realized it was for them.”

Let me tell you a story. When I was in the Philippines I was the pastor of the Union Church of Manila; Shirley and I were there from 1964 to 1970. One day I went to the hospital in Manila that was mainly the hospital that Americans went to. I was going to see one of my parishioners because I was pastor of an expatriate church. And I was going to go see one of my parish-



ioners who was in the hospital and in that building in order to get into the hospital through the front door; you had to go by the Emergency Room to get into the hospital itself. As I was going in the entrance by the Emergency Room, I saw a little boy. I recognized that he was a little boy from my Sunday School at the Union Church. He was about two and a half years old but a very big kid and he was sobbing uncontrollably. A nurse (he was almost as big as the nurse) was trying to comfort him. I saw him there so I walked in and I said "Hello." His name was Billy. I'll never forget that boy's name. I said, "What can I do?" And the nurse then spoke to me. I said, "I'm Reverend Palmer from the Union Church." And she said, "Well, his father just brought him in. He has a very bad stomach ache and they want the doctor to look at it. But the father brought him in and the father left quickly to get his mother and he'll be right back and, I'm just watching him until the father and mother get back and then the doctor will see him."

This little boy was just sobbing. There were quarts of water coming out of his eyes, he was just drenched with weeping and then he would go into various peels of sobbing after he kind of calmed down a little bit. And I tried to comfort him. A lot of the kids in the Union Church called me the "manager of Union Church," because one day a little boy said to his mother at the store. "Look Mom, that's the Manager of the Union Church," because all of their dads were managers in companies. So a lot of people made a joke about that, that I was the "Manager of Union Church." So I tried to comfort him with that; I said, "You know, I'm the Manager of Union Church." But that didn't seem to work and he just was so sad. Nothing I could say would comfort him. He was just weeping. So I said, "I'm going to wait here until his mom and dad come." And then finally, in through the front door his mother and dad came; his father fortunately brought a little truck with him and he walked in. And this boy, mind you, was literally sobbing... but the moment his dad came in with his mother and gave him his truck, the boy stopped instantly. He said, "Hi." That surprised me, I thought he'd cry a little bit longer to create some transition; that would give some mileage. Why did you guys leave me here? I'm suffering here while you don't care? But he didn't and he might have gotten some mileage from that if he thought it through. But he didn't. His dad walks in, gives him the truck, and the little boy stopped instantly and started going, "Brrr-rrr-rrr." He started driving his truck. I thought to myself, what a marvelous experience to see this. Billy was safe; he now was safe so he could carry on and drive his truck. That's salvation. Did you know the word "salvation" means to be safe? That's why "peace" is the word for salvation. To be at peace is to be safe. You can prove you're safe when you're able to carry on. And so he carried on doing what little boys are supposed to do, drive trucks. That's what he did.

I didn't tell his parents that... you know, there's about two quarts of water on the floor of this Emergency Room from your little boy... I didn't tell them that. What's the point? He isn't crying now. He's safe. And that's what happened on Easter morning.

You know what happened in the Book of Revelation in the last chapter? Jesus says, "John here I am. It is I. Here I am. I am the fulfillment of David; all that you've been looking for. I am the Light of the World. Here John, have a drink" (Revelation 22:16-17).

Heavenly Father, thank you for this. Thank you that this is Easter. It's for us. It's not only true that you won a victory for yourself and for all time, but you won a victory for us. You made us safe. Lord, help each of us in this room today to feel safe. Maybe some of us feel afraid. We don't know that this Good News is also for us. Help each of us to know that and then to put our weight down on it and to feel safe. We thank you that that's the message of Easter. May each of us experience it. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Wills, Garry. *What Jesus Meant*. Penguin, 2007.

2 Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. Harper Perennial, 1959.

Earl Frank Palmer Copyright © 2010 All Rights Reserved

*Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.*  
*Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20016

[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800