

“Look Up!”

A sermon concluding the Lenten series
“Listen Up!”—Following Jesus More Closely”
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April 16, 2017—Easter

- Mark 16:1-8 ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”
- Romans 14:7-9 ⁷We don’t live for ourselves and we don’t die for ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to God. ⁹This is why Christ died and lived: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. (Common English Bible)
- Theme: By “looking up” in trust to God we are enabled to see beyond obstacles.

How do you keep abreast of what’s happening in the world? Maybe you’re in the habit of turning on the TV to watch the nightly news, or scanning the headlines in the daily newspaper. Maybe you check your smartphone’s continuous feed of information from *The Daily Beast* or CNN or the *Los Angeles Times*, from *Reddit.com* or *Huffington Post* or *Slate* or *Fox News*. Whatever your news sources, you’d be pretty surprised – not to mention disappointed – if every time you scrolled down or tuned in or unfolded the paper the story was the same.

But in a way that’s what happens whenever we come to a worship service on Easter. The story is unchanged: Jesus of Nazareth, the savior sent from God – the one we know had died – is alive again!

Now, we all know that we experience life on multiple levels simultaneously:

- For instance, you can be behind the wheel transporting yourself from one place to another, and at the same time on the phone brokering a deal, perhaps, or conversing with your child strapped into her booster seat, or forming a to-do list in your mind.
- We experience life on multiple levels simultaneously. Three times a day you sit down to eat because on one level your body needs fuel to function, and on another level you want the experience of sharing food and drink and conversation with people who matter to you.
- And right now, you’re here in worship this morning. Why? On one level because Easter declares God’s message of hope and comfort for all who trust in Jesus the Son. On another level you’re here in order to be with family and friends.

So on one level Easter offers a never-changing message. But on another level we can discover new insight every time we hear the story of Easter.

A six-week season of Lent led up to this morning. On the Sundays in Lent this year, in a series I called “Listen Up!,” I guided this congregation in looking at lessons we can learn from the fact that Jesus was always “up to” something. What was he up to? That might be teaching or praying or healing or traveling or eating or preaching or whatever. Through those six weeks I suggested we “Listen Up” to scripture, and that our response should be that we “Come Up” and “Store Up” and “Take Up” and “Light Up” and “Sit Up,” relying on God for strength we can’t provide ourselves and responding to the world with Christ-like compassion and love.

But in order for us to be able to “Come Up” and “Store Up” and “Take Up” and “Light Up” and “Sit Up,” today I suggest that we first need to “Look Up.” That’s a lesson I’d like us to consider today from the experience of the women going to the tomb centuries and centuries ago on what was the very first Easter morning.

Every year we hear about the women going to the tomb. Why were they going? They had to finish preparing a body for burial. Why were they going on “the first day of the week?” Jesus had died on Friday. Jewish custom required that he be buried before the beginning of the Sabbath religious observance which started at sundown Friday night and lasted until sundown Saturday night. So Jesus had been buried hastily on Friday before sunset. Once the Sabbath ended at sunset on Saturday, the women could have gone to the cemetery... after dark – but back then as now, who wants to go to a cemetery after dark! So instead, the women went at first light the next day, which would be Sunday. Remember, they went to finish cleaning and anointing and wrapping the body of their dear friend; they *didn’t* go to see if Jesus had been resurrected.

The women who went to the tomb faced a sad and weighty task, complicated by a literal obstacle – a stone closing off the tomb. They could have been stopped in their tracks by their worry about how they might contend with that obstacle. In the Easter story in all four gospels the stone sealing the tomb has already been removed from the tomb’s entrance when the women arrive. As we heard this morning, though, Mark’s gospel is the only one of the four Easter accounts noting that as they make their way to the cemetery the women actually ask themselves how they are going to re-open the sealed tomb. As they’re wondering this, though, they *look up*... they look up and discover that the obstacle they expected to find in their way has already been removed. Yes, *when they looked up* they realized that God had already removed the obstacle that would have otherwise prevented them from moving forward.

Friends, we can hear the expression “the stone was rolled away” on two levels. On one level is the startling, unchanging, life-changing, hope-instilling news of the resurrection of Jesus. In raising Jesus from endless death to Eternal Life God urges us to “look up,” for God has negated our reason for fearing our destiny when our years on earth are done. The great promise of Easter is for all who hear and believe: we have a life yet to come that removes the permanently paralyzing sting from the experience of death. Yes, we still grieve, but as Paul wrote in a letter to the Thessalonians,

...you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.¹

On one level Easter speaks to our eternity. On another level Easter speaks to us right here and now. God doesn’t make us wait until life’s end to experience God’s power to move aside obstacles which otherwise would keep us from achieving the fulfillment God has in store for us. This week, today, right now, God urges us to look up and realize that God moves aside other obstacles, too. After all,

- It’s easy, isn’t it, to focus only on the quagmire we sometimes feel we’re stuck in.
- It’s easy to moan “Poor me!” as we recite the list of ways others seem to have intentionally inconvenienced us.
- It’s easy to welcome self-pity as we think of what we *don’t* have, what we *can’t* do.
- It’s easy to allow ourselves to sink into despair when political rancor ratchets up or perceived global threats escalate.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:13b-14 New Revised Standard Version

That's what is like when we only look around at where we are. But this is the other level of the Easter story to consider this morning. For in addition to Easter's grand promise that earthly death is not the final word in our journey with God, from the Easter story we also gain insight into how God blesses us to live in these days.

For we who believe, for we who embrace the truth that the God of heaven and earth has dominion not only over all of life but even over death... my friends, for we who put our trust in the Risen Christ, life is "looking up." Because we trust in the Risen Christ we choose not to obsess over pesky problems or complex challenges or depressing details or contentious chatter or boisterous babbling. We choose to "look up" to Jesus who assured us that we belong to God whether in life or in death.

After all, God moved aside the stone that would have kept the women from accomplishing what they set out to do at the tomb. God wants us to look up, to call on God to clear away obstacles that would keep us from living life generously, selflessly, sincerely, devoutly.

Finally, here's a postscript to today's message. The story of the Resurrection of Jesus is one of the few stories of Jesus that appears in all four gospels. Even then, in Matthew and Luke and John the women who went to the tomb then go and tell someone about what they found, but not in Mark's gospel. According to Mark, "They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."²

Of course, if you think about it, they would *have* to have said something to someone, otherwise we'd never have known about their journey to the tomb and what they experienced.

From that I hear the Easter story asking us to do two things. First, we are urged to believe. Believe that Jesus is the Son of the Almighty God. Believe that God raised Jesus from real death to real life. Believe that resurrection life awaits you and me, too.

The other thing Easter asks of us is to tell others what we've seen and heard: that the Risen Christ continues to show us how to live in ways that honor God's will. Now, before you start plotting how you're going to ambush someone with the good news of the gospel and "lay it on 'em," hold on—you don't have to find some unsuspecting person, back them into a corner, "get in their face" and announce with scary enthusiasm, "Let me tell you about the Risen Christ!" Actions may not necessarily speak *louder* than words, but your actions and your attitude do have power. Jesus himself urged, "...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."³

So don't be afraid, and don't hesitate, to tell a neighbor or relative or classmate or co-worker why you don't allow life's obstacles to stop you in your tracks: because Jesus the Son has conquered even death, "things are looking up."

Let us pray. *Holy God, help us see past any obstacles along our life's way. May we "look up" and remember that we are yours in this life and in eternity, because we place our trust in you through your Son Jesus, who lived and died and lives forever. Amen.*

[sermons: se20170416; © 2017 Jon M. Fancher]

² Mark 16:8 Good News translation

³ Matthew 5:16 New Revised Standard Version