

An Easter Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

Psalm 118:21-24

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Arising out of that early morning at the strangely empty tomb are all sorts of words that are Easter words. You might suppose that the words would fall in line quite naturally and behave themselves respectfully. After all, this is the grandest day in the Christian year that celebrates the single most important day in the history of the world. But the words won't cooperate. They refuse to organize themselves into a pretty, placid picture of preparedness and proper attire. Indeed, the Easter words all crash into each other and get all tangled up:

Some of those words are darkness and light; disbelief and wonder; doubt and hope; fear and assurance; beautiful and terrible; angels and demons; Heaven and Hell; old and new; buried and missing; death and life.

As hard as we try to dress Easter words up in their Easter Sunday pastel best, tie their hair in pretty bows, shine their shoes and get them to stand still so we can take a nice liturgical photo for the scrapbook, the words won't be still. They slip out of our grasp, they run this way and that. They are undisciplined and seem to always know what our next move is going to be to gain control over the uncontrollable, to rationally explain the impossible, to order the cosmic chaos that ensued when someone dead came back to life and changed the very molecules of the world.

What we know of and prepare for today as Easter—with its children's games, new dresses, special music, and yummy lunch treats—began very differently on that first morning, with confusion, fear, tears, uncertainty, and lots of running back and forth.

Yet you would suppose that the words could be neatly arranged in the Easter narrative and in our faith. Darkness gives way to light. Doubt surrenders to hope. Fear evaporates with assurance. Heaven conquers Hell. The old proceeds to the new. There is a natural arc to the world that all stories follow. Winter gives way to Spring. Birth brings life. Life ends in death. But Easter will not be so easily arranged. When you read the gospel stories, some questions arise: Is the early morning Easter more about faith in a risen Christ or disbelief that he could be raised from the dead? Is it more about hope in the impossible or fear of what seems the most-likely explanation—that they've taken his body? Is it more about the victory of Heaven or the encroachment of Hell? The reaction of the disciples—women and men—at the tomb is a mixture of every human emotion. How is this possible? And what is this anyway? And how can we fix it? And what does fixing it mean, but to continue to live in a world in which Jesus is dead? And is that something worth fixing? And why is the gardener out here so early on a Sunday morning?

The Easter words all stumble over each other and get all mixed together in all four gospel accounts of the unusual happenings out at the tomb in the garden outside of Jerusalem early that Sunday morning. Easter words, that we try so very hard to get to mind their manners, stand in line, and not speak unless spoken to, get early morning dust

on their pretty patent leather shoes and have the dew of early morning dawn on their silk bows, and won't stay in place way back there in history or even way over there in a corner of our lives.

Two thousand years of history between then and now has done little to set the words in proper order and tame them. Even though we sit in a theologically-privileged and historically-comfortable position compared to those first disciples on that morning, for the world, Easter is still the realm of darkness and light, doubt and hope, fear and assurance, things beautiful and terrible, of angels and demons, Heaven and Hell, old and new, buried and missing, death and life. Despite our best efforts, Easter is still messy.

Easter still betrays the person who claims so much confident assurance that it becomes self-righteous arrogance. It also betrays the one who has such cynical 'realism' that has no room for mystery. Easter eludes our best attempts to bring it to submission, to reduce it to a doctrine, to make of it a proof, or to box it up and put it away another year. The language of Easter is the vocabulary of life. It is the day when the world changed and extended an invitation to every one of us to be transformed with it. This is the day. And it is worth, perhaps just for one day, to live in the day. To be. To say, "This is the day the Lord has made" whatever this day holds. Easter is messy.

And that's good, because so is life. We gather this morning in the light of Easter morning as messy people with messy lives. In this room there are minds torn and hearts breaking, there is worry about the future and regrets about the past. There is deep faith and there is creeping doubt. It's all here. Everything that was there that morning at the tomb is here in this room. It's in every room where people are gathered. Life is messy.

Easter, in all its truth and reality and messiness, resists being organized into words, even the best of our words. Will Willimon, named several years ago as one of the 12 most effective preachers in the English language, reflected, "I made the mistake, a couple of Easters ago, of asking one of you (on your way out as you said to me how much you got from the service) how you liked the sermon. You said (you know who you are), "Sermon? Oh, Easter's usually much too great a challenge for a mere sermon. No, it's the music, the crowd, the building, I don't know. All that, the feel, may be more to the point than the sermon, don't you think?"

I've sat in one of Will Willimon's Easter sermons. Or better to say, I stood. Jenny and I were a bit late, or not quite early enough, to Duke Chapel for the Easter service. We had to stand in the narthex without a bulletin, without a chair, without a line of sight for the whole service. They did have speakers built in out there for such occasions, so we could hear just fine. Honestly, I don't remember a word that one of the 12 most effective preachers in the English language said that day. I do remember the building, and the music, and the crowd spilling out in the sunny North Carolina spring day amidst the red and yellow tulips. Easter was and is too much for a mere sermon. Thanks be to God.

But it is not too much for a prayer. The psalmist in the 118th psalm prays a prayer that seems to be all about Easter day, "I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

In a real way, this is an every-day prayer for every day is the day the Lord has made. Any workday. Every weekday. Even hard and sad days of our lives are days the Lord has made. We don't think about that much. In some African-American churches there is a tradition of praying "Lord, thank you for waking me up this morning." There's a recognition that our very lives are so fully contingent on God's sustaining grace that to wake up this morning and see another sunrise was a profound gift to itself. Thank you Lord for extending your life-giving presence to me for one more day.

This is the day the Lord has made could certainly describe any Sunday. The Sabbath day was always regarded as different from all the others. It possesses in itself a holiness that sets it apart from the mundane pursuits of other days. People from Abraham Heschel, who writes that God made Sabbath to be different, set apart as a first fruit of the world to come, a world that is yet to be—to Johnny Cash who sings about Sunday morning sidewalks—have sensed something different about Sabbath just because it's Sabbath.

But there are some days when it seems the sun shines a bit brighter, the breeze blows a bit warmer, the day feels like a gift that God's hands carefully crafted with special tenderness and love.

Graduation Day when you stand at the moment between all that was and all the unknown that will be.

Wedding Day when all you have planned for and hoped for is actually happening—to you.

The day your child is born into this world and you lay your eyes upon the one you have been imagining and hoping for for a long, long time.

There are days that are beyond words. That are pictures in your soul. But they are not perfect days. There are no perfect days. There are no days in the reality of life that are without context and contours. Life is messy. Even on Easter.

In this very room there is some doubt about all of these old stories. Could Jesus really have come back to life? There's some sentimental memories. I wish mom could be here again this year. There's some regret. I wish our family could be reconciled. There's a whole lot of Heaven in this room, and there's too much Hell in us. There's the whole bunch of us peering into a tomb, our eyes adjusting to the dark only to find the one we were looking for who we wish wasn't there isn't there, and that's more disturbing in the moment than had He been there because that's where He's supposed to be, but He's not, and so now what? Life has taken an unexpected turn and will need a new word to take us forward into this new reality that undoubtedly will change everything. Only one word will do.

Only one word has the power to acknowledge the reality of the messiness of our lives, which end in death and yet at the very same time give us hope beyond the realities of life. Only one word is big enough for sin and salvation, endings and beginnings, messiness and holiness, Hell and Heaven. Only one word will do: resurrection. Martin Luther penned these words in "Mighty Fortress"

And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo, his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers,
no thanks to them, abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours,
thru him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever.

If there were ever a day for which there are no categories to contain its events, it is this day—the moment between all that was and all that will be, the day when all that God planned came to be—the day when we lay our eyes on the one who is impossibly, inexplicably, supernaturally, mysteriously, alive and with us.

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Even if we are reduced to whispering in wonder the few words passed down to us from the first days: “Christ is risen. Indeed, Christ is risen today.”