

St Mark Sermon:
April 9, 2023
“From Humiliation to Exaltation”
Rev. Stephen P. Greggo, PsyD

Lectionary Readings

First Reading Acts 10:34-43

“We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.” (Acts 10:39-40)

Psalm 118:1-2; 14-24

“The LORD’s right hand is lifted high; the LORD’s right hand has done mighty things!” (Ps 118:16).

New Testament Col 1:1-4

“When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” (Col 3:1-4).

Gospel John 20:1-18

“Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” (John 20:18)

Grace to you, and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon in a Soundbite

On Resurrection Sunday, our joy rests on this discovery: *the tomb is empty*. Jesus’ last days were filled with struggle, betrayal, suffering and humiliation. The empty tomb marks his exaltation. The Gospel of John makes the case that Jesus is the God-Man. He is human and divine. He is the Word made flesh to dwell among human beings made in God image. The empty tomb initiates a new era where Jesus resides in a resurrection and exalted body. Easter is not a celebration of Jesus’ mere survival, his resuscitation; Easter proclaims his exaltation by means of resurrection. This is not about a longer lifespan; this is new creation to life eternal. His exaltation comes with a promise: heaven is not an ongoing resuscitated existence; rather, it entails hope connected to a resurrection experience.

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Pray

I. Introduction: He is Risen; He is Risen Indeed

Let’s take a moment to recall past Easter Sundays. Do you have a favorite? Bring back a memory of a family gathering, special worship; a favorite Easter dress, or homey tradition. This exercise took a while in my case. Resurrection Sunday is a significant holiday in our family. There are dozens of special images that flood my mind.

A decade ago, my wife and I were in Kiev for Easter following delivery of an intensive course. Let me tell you, Ukrainians, with their Orthodox background and long hard winter, love Easter and celebrate it with enthusiasm. The traditional greeting is khrysos voskres (Christ has Risen) voistynu voskres (Indeed He has risen). This greeting spreads to family, friends, and strangers alike. As we walked the cobblestone streets of Kiev and turned into church after church throughout the day. Each one was filled with flowers, icons, the smell of incense, and the sound of prayers being chanted. This memory lingers. It is hard to listen to the ravages now occurring in that country with those friendly faces enduring in our memory and declaring “He is Risen”.

Ukrainians have elevated egg decorating into an art form. There is no shortage of beautiful, painted eggs everywhere. We will return to egg traditions with a Ukrainian twist before we close.

II. Discovering the Empty Tomb

This resurrection account begins with a pre-dawn footrace to the tomb. The early jog to the tomb by the disciples sets the stage for our sunrise service. Humor must be intended in this passage because what is the redemptive relevance of recording who reached the tomb first? Peter and John were stunned by Mary’s news that the tomb was empty and hurried off to investigate. I am glad there is no tradition of having to run to Easter services on foot because I certainly would be last in such a race. In order to understand how Jesus moved from humiliation to exaltation; let’s center on the verbal exchanges between Mary, the angels, and Jesus.

Mary is left alone as she stands speechless and sobbing beside the empty tomb. Some gratitude Peter and John show to her for faithfully brining them the news of the empty tomb. They actually leave her grieving all by herself. Mary is breathless from running and confused about what could possibly be happening. Only a few days prior, the traveling band of disciples were securely enjoying quiet time with their Lord. Then, she witnesses a spontaneous trial, procession to Golgotha, and crucifixion. His followers are hiding for their lives, disconnected from a mission, and dumbfounded regarding the meaning of this morning news. The truth is about to unfold.

Mary is drawn to look again at the stone enclosure that once held her Lord. The drama escalates. Two angels now sit where Jesus should have been lying. “Woman, why are your crying? these angles ask. Angels must have a sense of humor also because they as they sit in the place of the greatest miracle of all time, there is no bursting out with the good news. At least when the angels announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, they provided fanfare and rejoicing to the grand reveal. These angels ask Mary about her tears as if they had no idea about why she was there staring in bewilderment into this tomb. They sat where only moments ago Jesus’s human body had been wrapped in burial cloth. Most likely Mary still had the spices to prepare the body for the long-term in this vault. Mary answers and steps back from this inexplicable vision.

Next, she sees a strange person standing with her beside the tomb.

“Why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?” the stranger speaks up. This is a surprising and disarming question. Mary is alone in a burial area; a cemetery. The sun has begun to rise, but it is still somewhat dark. Mary stands adjacent to an open and empty tomb. Any one of us in that moment would be overcome by shock and likely driven to tears. Less than a week

ago, people were waving palm branches and shouting hosanna. This tomb-side exchange is shocking and far too fresh to comprehend.

Lesson one. A resurrected body is not identical to an ordinary human body.

The familiar Jesus is not so easily recognized in his resurrection body. There is a corporal form because Mary mistakes this person for the gardener. The text tells us as readers that this is Jesus but, in that moment, Mary had to absorb changes in his countenance, stature and overall impression. The new creation body, and the low light of sunrise; left Jesus' resurrection identity hidden. Then Jesus speaks.

“Mary.”

Lesson two. A resurrection body is recognizable; personal human identity is retained.

When the Good Shepherd speaks, he calls Mary by name in recognition of her hurt and dismay. This is Jesus and He calls her by name, *Mary*. His gentleness is obvious; his tenderness is evident; and readiness to ease her pain flow from his heart to hers. Jesus' continuity with his earthy life is perceptible in his resurrection body. Further, there are angels in their ethereal/spiritual state and Jesus in his resurrection body. There is no confusion between the two.

Lesson three. A resurrection body is not limited by earthy constraints.

“I am ascending to my father, and your father, to my God and your God.” Mary, please do not hold me back. What is happening here is very real, but I am now ready to return to my place at my Father's side. Jesus is exalted once again. He is no longer held in a human body that dwells on earth among others just like it. There is a recognizable physical stature, but this is a new creation; a resurrection encasement for the soul. This is not a return to a body that will change or decay; this is life anew.

Mary obeys Jesus' command. “Don't touch; go tell” She returns to her companions and exclaims the meaning of the empty tomb. “I have seen the Lord.”

Three lessons: A resurrected body is not identical to one's earthly body. A resurrection body is recognizable as personal identity is retained. A resurrection body is not limited by earthy constraints. These lessons combine to declare the meaning of the empty tomb. Jesus the Christ was not resuscitated within his earthly body; he became something new with a resurrected body. As John would write later in Rev 1:5: *Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.* This is the reason to celebrate on Easter. The tomb is empty. Our hope in the resurrection is grounded in this real historical event. Jesus's rise to his exaltation is the reason for our hope of becoming a new creation.

We look forward not to an eternity of resuscitation but resurrection. The contrast between resuscitation and resurrection was a fresh insight that I uncovered in the writings of John Stott as

he offered comments on why Easter is the major Christian holiday. When Lazarus died, he was brought back to life but would die again. This is a resuscitated existence. The miracle of Easter surpasses the raising of Lazarus for when Jesus is resurrected, he would never die again.

In short, Jesus' exaltation is greatest news because it gives us a place with him for all eternity *and* because all of the effects of the fall will be undone. Our soul will not persist in a body that is merely resuscitated or reconstituted; rather we will be reembodied in a resurrected state. The empty tomb means the elimination of the consequences of partaking of the forbidden fruit. Someday, like Jesus, we will stand outside of our final resting place. With new ease and mobility, we will enter his presence with a resurrected body similar to the one Mary saw before her on that first Easter morning.

This gives a wonderful reason to proclaim: He is risen. He is risen Indeed.

III. Application

Olena's Easter Discovery: A Story from the Holodomor (Soviet Rule of Ukraine under Stalin).

This story is available upon request from the author [Steve Greggo].

Endnote: The Holodomor- the starvation death- is the story of a man-made famine that devastated 3.9 million peasants and leaders, maybe more in Ukraine during 1932-33. Despite repeated hardship, the Easter egg remains a symbol of hope as the nation's favorite folk art treasure.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.