

### **The Living Love of God**

Today, we are at the pinnacle. With the cross of last Friday now empty and behind us, and with the empty tomb before us, we are at the pinnacle of all things spiritual.

Is it the pinnacle that is reached after the slow and steady ascent when making the way to a mountain summit? If so, the weariness and fatigue from expending so much effort and energy has been replaced with the exhilaration of the sense of destination that there is no place higher to go from here. We are at the top. We are at the end of our upward trek.

Or is this pinnacle that is Easter Sunday more like the goal one reaches for over the long course of living in anticipation of accomplishment? In this case it may be more like the sense of reward for all that was forfeited in the interest of reaching the goal. This pinnacle is a well-deserved reward or outcome.

Easter is indeed a pinnacle—the pinnacle for us as Christians. But it is a pinnacle unlike those that we set out to reach on our own. For those who were the first witnesses to Easter, it was unexpected, unanticipated, and really the last thing they thought would happen. In fact, in Luke's account that we have read this morning, the women who went to the tomb only very slowly came to understand that they were on this pinnacle, and the men to whom they reported their experience, saw nothing of the sort, at least for awhile.

We pick up the story in Luke's gospel on this Easter Sunday morning where it left off on Friday evening. After dying on the cross, Jesus' body is taken down and at the request of a man named Joseph, it is laid in a tomb. The women who had witnessed Jesus' death observe the placement of Jesus' corpse and then return to town to prepare the burial spices for use on Jesus' body as soon as the Sabbath day of rest is over at sunup on Sunday.

The excruciating events of Jesus' death and all that led up to it had left Jesus' followers in a deep morass of grief, confusion and terror. While the men appear to be paralyzed by these feelings, the women gather the strength that came from their love for Jesus to emerge on Sunday morning ready to resume their time-honored role of attending to the dead.

As they make their way into the cemetery where the tomb is located, they are perhaps surprised to see that the stone sealing the tomb has been rolled aside. Unfazed though they enter it anyway with the burial spices in hand. Perplexed by the discovery that there is no body of Jesus to be found, they are met with terror when suddenly two men in dazzling white appear beside them. And as they bow down in fear the women are met with the question, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." (Lk. 24:57)

Why do you look for the living among the dead? How odd this question must have been to the women. They were not looking for the living. They were looking for the dead. That's why they were in that graveyard—the place of the dead. And although the men in dazzling white seem to imply that the women are not looking for the dead, the truth is that that's exactly what they were looking for.

In many ways, this is a timeless question: why are you looking for the living among the dead? So much of our lives are spent in the pursuit of that which will stave off death. As long as we are able to stave off death we can even trick ourselves into believing, if only for a time, that death is not in our future, that death is not on our time line of life.

And for many, life is lived in pursuit of what we're tempted to believe are death-defying priorities. When we do this though, we end up looking for the living among the dead.

On this Easter Sunday we are once again confronted with a reality that changed the course of history for the people of God ever since that first Easter Sunday. Because it was on that first Easter Sunday that the death that defines us as mortal creatures was redefined in such a way that it is no longer the end of the story.

The women who came to Jesus' tomb on that Sunday morning thought they were at the end of the story. Of course they were not happy about it—far from it for sure. It probably sort of felt like a Sunday-morning-epilogue to them in that the story of Jesus that had ended on Friday afternoon when Jesus breathed his last and gave up his spirit. What they were doing was bringing that story to an orderly end. Because there had not been time on Friday to properly attend to the full burial rites, it would now be accomplished on this Sunday morning. Once Jesus' body was properly prepared and honored, then the women could go home, and with the other followers of Jesus, engage in a period of mourning while figuring out what to do now that their leader was dead and gone. It was a pretty dismal state of affairs that had little or no energy going forward. The women were not looking for the living among the dead. They were looking for the dead among the dead.

Easter has been described as a keystone of sorts that holds everything else together. In an arch that holds up a structure like a bridge, or a window, or a roof, the stone at the top of that arch, in the middle of that arch, is called the keystone. It is shaped in the form of a wedge of sorts in which the two sides of the arch both press inward. Those two forces coming from opposite sides of the keystone each bring strength and stability to the arch thereby enabling it to bear a lot of weight. The next time you see a weight-bearing arch made of stone, look for the keystone in the middle at the top of the arch.

Easter can be understood as the keystone that gives Christianity great strength. One aspect of this understanding is that the forces of our mortal lives are given enduring strength that come from the Easter keystone that withstands and overcomes the forces that would otherwise lead to collapse and destruction.

The other aspect of this keystone that Easter is to us is that everything changes with the Easter event. The women at the tomb are met by the two men in dazzling white who patiently remind them that Jesus had been telling them what to expect in the way of Jesus being put to death by crucifixion, as well the assurance that he would rise again after three days. It's then that the women indeed remembered this. For them this is the turning point—the biggest turning point of their lives. From here on out everything was changed. So they abandon their graveyard plans and return to the 11 apostles and all the rest to tell them what has happened.

For the women the trajectory of their lives has changed from death-defying living, to life-embracing living. Easter is the pinnacle, the keystone, the high point from which they are able to move forward in living without fear, with the assurance that what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead opens the way for the followers of Jesus to also live free in the living love of God.

But then there is the matter of the men back at headquarters so to speak. While the women ventured out into the new light of Sunday to do what needed to be done, the men were still in hiding, still in shock, still assuming that it was all over. They were sure that the trajectory of their lives had changed as well. With the death of the one to whom they had devoted the last 3 years of their lives, there was the matter of deciding what to do next. There was no way forward for them that they could see other than to slip back into the lives that they had had before meeting Jesus. But even that must have seemed unmanageable.

So dejected were they that when the women came back into their midst to report what they had experienced in the graveyard, they did not believe the women, for it seemed an idle tale to them. They thought the women were making it all up. Even good old Peter, that disciple whose faith strength waxes and wanes just like the phases of the moon, has to go to the graveyard and see the empty tomb for himself. But even after seeing it, he is not convinced other than to be amazed or perplexed by what he sees, for he simply went home, presumably keeping it all to himself.

My friends, where are we today in this story of Easter? Are we amidst the women who at first are puzzled but then remember and believe? Are we at that point where the Easter event of Jesus' resurrection is a dawning of sorts for us when we can see the future of God's living love among us?

Or are we among those who, like those men—those disciples, who at first see this Easter story as an idle tale that has no bearing on our lives today?

I submit to you today, in the year 2019, that the resurrection of Jesus, while happening some 2000 years ago, stunning the world of that time, remains powerfully relevant today. For us, the resurrection of Jesus is at the center of absolutely everything else for us as Christians. Without Easter there is no meaning to any of the other special days that we observe. Without Easter there is no Christmas. Without Easter there is no Pentecost. It is upon Easter that all other Christian festivals and seasons depend.

Today, I choose to renew my acceptance, and affirmation of the testimony of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who were at the tomb that first Easter Sunday. And with that acceptance and affirmation, I also renew my appreciation for their faithfulness and bravery that led to the turning point in their lives that has become the turning point of ours as well.

And today, I invite you to take a step of faith as well. For some of you it is a renewal that you make every Sunday. For some others it is a renewal of faith from a time earlier in your life. And for others still, this may be the first time you accept this invitation.

Come with me as we step from the place of looking for the living among the dead and into that place where we seek and find the living love of God made real and perfect for us in the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen. (Rev. 7:12)