

Christ Presbyterian Church

Edina, Minnesota

April 4, 2010 - Easter

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"Two Kinds of Wonder"

Luke 24:10-25

It is the ancient tradition of the church that when the Gospel story is read, the people stand. Will the congregation please rise.

Luke tells the story of this day with these words. "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning the women took spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were **wondering** about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down to the ground, but the men said, '**Why do you look for the living among the dead?** He is not here; He has risen! Remember what He told you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinners, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.' Then they remembered His words.

"When they came back from the tomb, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them told everything to the eleven and all the others. But they did not believe the women because it seemed like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, **wondering** to himself what had happened." The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated.

Each year you hear the Easter story differently. This year as I read the text, three things struck me. Can you see what they are? The women were "wondering." The angels were asking "Why?" Peter was "wondering." What hit me was the idea of wonder, maybe because I had just been reading a book, part of the autobiography of Albert Einstein called *Einstein's God*. In his childhood, Einstein was a deeply curious little boy. He writes about it this way. "Why, sometimes spontaneously, do we wonder about something? I think that wondering...occurs when an experience conflicts with our fixed ways of seeing the world." Einstein says, "I had one such experience of wondering when I was a child of four or five, and my father showed me a compass. This needle behaved in such a determined way and did not fit into the usual explanation of how the world works. That is, that you must touch something to move it....This experience made a deep and lasting impression on me. There must be something deeply hidden behind everything." Einstein: "There must be something deeply hidden behind everything." And off he went.

There are **two kinds of wonder**. The first and the most common kind of wonder is like Einstein's, **questioning**, "I wonder what happened here?" But even that isn't very common. Most of us spend our days with our heads down looking forward, just one day after the other not asking a lot of questions.

Wondering people are those who ask questions. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" "Where is the body?" "What happened here?" So on Easter we wonder and we bring our questions. If somebody were to come and say, "I wonder what really happened there?" what would we say to them? I hope we would start by saying, "Welcome! We're glad you're here. We don't have this all figured out. We all have got questions. We all wonder about some things too but we have been convinced." Then we would point to some of the things that convince us that the body wasn't stolen, that something extraordinary happened and we would say, "You know what convinces us? *First, it is the idea that there were witnesses.*"

About 20 years after the tomb was emptied, a Jewish rabbi named Paul writes this, "For what I received from the others, I passed on to you as of first importance." That is, this is the most important thing, the only thing that matters. "That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day, that He appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. After that, He appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep." What helps convince us is that there were so many witnesses that were still alive.

The second thing I would point to is that *this couldn't have just happened by itself*. It seems to beg God to be at work. The Jewish leaders were mostly opposed to the message of Jesus and especially to this idea that He had risen from the dead. When Peter and the apostles started to spread this, they opposed it. Then it says this, "But Gamaliel, a chief teacher of the Jewish Pharisees, honored by everyone...said: 'Revolutionaries come and go all the time...So, in this case I advise you: 'Leave these men alone! Let them go! If their purpose is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you won't be able to stop them: you'll only find yourselves fighting against God.'" Everybody agreed *that day*.

But the Jews wouldn't let them alone. Then the Romans wouldn't let them alone and they tried to stuff it. So whom would you bet on? The United States Army or Aunt Susie's Brownie Troop? The Roman Empire with all of its legions or a small bunch of frightened fishermen and some women with shaky reputations? Only the power of God explains why Christianity flourished and the Roman Empire fell. I point to the witnesses. I point to what seems like history turned upside down. I point to how this story changed lives back then and has changed lives ever since to anyone who wondered about what really happened.

In the very first days of the church, one account says, "When the Jewish judges saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were just ignorant, unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished. They noticed that these were the men who had been with Jesus, but since they could see the man who had been healed standing right there with them, there was nothing they could say. These were the same men who just days before had run away and hidden and denied ever knowing Jesus and now they were not only filled with courage, they were not only saying they had seen him walk around, they were willing to die for this. Why would you die for something you know is a lie? And for the rest of their lives they were changed.

So when somebody says, “I wonder what happened?” this kind of wonder is a question.

The second kind of wonder in the Easter story is a response – the sense that something incredible has happened. We talk about the Seven Wonders of the World. When we see the Grand Canyon, when we see a beautiful baby, when we look for the first time at Victoria Falls, or catch a glimpse of the pyramids, when we see the Cloud Nebula for the first time, or at night time on the Fourth of July when you’re lying on the grass looking up at the fireworks with thousands of other people, and you go “Ooooooooooh! Wow!” that’s wonder! That is what wonder is like.

The word *miracle* comes from the Latin word *mirari*. *Mirari* means to wonder at, to be filled with wonder. Miracles fill us with wonder. The sense of wonder at Easter doesn’t come from our questions. It comes from “It’s true!” and the wonder sense of “Ooooooooooh! Wow!” is that everything, *everything* has changed! Death doesn’t have the final word any more! Easter doesn’t stop people from dying but it shows that death is no longer the end of the story.

A couple of weeks ago we had two funerals here in the same week, both for people who had died suddenly, both where the sanctuary was filled with people who cried for an hour and told stories and cried some more and heard and tried to believe the message about hope. In one there was despair but, in the other, mixed in with all the tears there was a *sense of hope*.

He wasn’t anybody special. His name was Bob. There was picture of Bob with his wife Lorri. For a gift, Lorri had given Bob tickets to a fantasy baseball clinic where you can go and pretend you are 18 again. Bob went with all the other big “kids” and had one of these cards made like he was a big-time baseball player. The back of the card introduced Bob. It said he was born in Nebraska, and after the U.S. Navy, he graduated from Nebraska. He met Lorri in California and they moved here. He was blessed with three kids, Todd, Randy, and Amber. Then it said this: “Became personally acquainted with Jesus July 29, 1980. A recent highlight of his life is his grandchildren.” A short life cut short.

On the table as friends and family walked in and got one of these cards, there were little baseballs. I picked up one of the baseballs and looked at it. One of his friends had written on it “Bob PH310.” I looked it up. It’s Philippians, chapter 3, verse 10. “I want to know Christ, the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings and become like Him death, and so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the death.”

When the world has done its worst, when we wonder what it’s all about, the wonder of an empty tomb transforms *everything* including death. It changes *everything* when you have wonder. Kyle didn’t stand here and go, “The Dow has risen,” and you didn’t yell back, “The Dow has risen indeed” because you know that the day after tomorrow it’s going to go back down again. Especially *these* years.

The wonder of an empty tomb can put my fears and yours in perspective and give hope that no stock market or job loss can take away. The wonder of the empty tomb says it doesn’t matter how bad you messed up. It doesn’t matter if you’ve made a Tiger Woods or a Bernie Madoff-scale screw-up or you have your own, very private shame that nobody has found out about. On Easter the wonder is that you can be forgiven! You can begin again, *clean!*

The wonder of an empty tomb reminds us how much God loves us. If you are deeply loved, you become more able to love deeply, to risk loving in a crazy way. We've had a lot of neat services here this week but the most holy time in this church did not happen in the Sanctuary. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and this morning our church was home to the homeless. There were homeless families living in our church, blessing us to love them the way that God loves us. You are being given the chance to risk loving people that you will never see – the least, the lost, the left behind whether they are in Zambia, little children, or folks on the other side of the cul-de-sac.

The wonder of an empty tomb has not ceased. God's power is still at work today in us and around us and through us. Easter only loses its power when it becomes just another day to feel good. Easter loses its power when you lose your sense of wonder, your astonishment. Mike Yaconelli once wrote, "These days Jesus doesn't change people into radicals any more. Now He changes us into *nice* people. If Christianity is just about being *nice*, I'm not interested." Neither am I!

But here is the wonder of Easter: God is irrevocably committed forever to everyone who turns His way. You have nothing to lose. You have nothing to fear. Your life can be filled with wonder! Life can be wonder-filled! So, is your Easter a wondering question, "So what's that all about?" Or is it a wonder-filled response, "Oh! Wow! God, what's next?"

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You can hear my voice and that You can look into the hearts of my friends and brothers and sisters here. Whether there are questions and doubts when we wonder, You can speak to us. When it has become just religion, this Easter morning You can fill our hearts with wonder again. The tomb is empty. Christ is risen. and Christ will come again. Let us live for that with You now and forever. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.