



CLC Easter Sunrise Service
April 21, 2019
Steve Slepecki preaching

I've had a busy and interesting Lenten season, this year.

Our 2019 capital improvement campaign here at CLC is well underway, of course. It's given me plenty to do in recent weeks, and it's kept me up a night or two. (There's still time to donate to that, by the way.)

This has been our first Lent with our awesome new choir director Ed, and the choir has been hard at work learning new material as we've shaken up the Lenten music for the first time in many years here at CLC

My final, big interview with the entire synod pastoral candidacy committee (all fifteen members of it) – the interview which would determine my entrance to the candidacy program, having been preceded by three one on one interviews, and having taken months to schedule – came and went on Friday, April 5, and caused me considerable anxiety in the weeks leading up. That interview was every bit as intimidating as I expected, FYI. (I passed, in case any of you hadn't heard.)

And now, we have this service. HOW COOL IS THIS?! An entire worship service – on the biggest holiday of the Christian calendar, no less – entirely run by our young adults. On a holiday where the theme of the day is NEW LIFE, I can't possibly think of any better example than what you see before you today.

Pastor Scott approached me weeks ago to ask if I'd be willing to preach today, and of course I was happy to... this is now my fifth opportunity to preach, and I fully expected this sermon would come gushing out of my fingertips when I sat down to write it, as easily as the previous four.

So, imagine my surprise when I sat down at the computer a little over a week ago to get started, stared at the empty screen for about 20 minutes, and heard crickets as I experienced a horrible case of writer's block.

Uh oh. What in the heck kind of pastor is not able to think of something to say about Easter Sunday?! I think the candidacy committee may have made a mistake here...

Now to be fair, the issue isn't so much that I couldn't think of *anything* to say. The issue was with trying to think of some new and innovative take on it. We all know the true meaning of Easter, right? Over the course of the last two thousand years of church history, millions of sermons have been preached about the meaning of Easter – what in the heck could I possibly say about it that has not already been said countless times before?

Easter Sunday. The most important day in our calendar, around which the entire church year revolves. That glorious day on which, about one thousand nine hundred eighty-seven years ago (working back to about 32 AD, of course), our Lord and Savior conquered sin and death, and proved his divine identity as the Incarnate Son of God. That moment in history in which our gracious God reached down, while the broken and fallen human race was still completely and utterly powerless to help and save ourselves, and made us children by grace alone, thanks to Christ's death on the Cross.

Secular culture tends to switch our calendar's focus to Christmas Day – Santa and ho ho ho and all that – even though mind you, Jesus was not actually born anywhere near December 25th. Ancient Pagan religions had

been celebrating the birth of their gods right around the time of the Winter Solstice for a *long* time before Christianity came around, and when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century the holiday was appropriated for Christian use.

But not Easter. For about one thousand nine hundred eighty-seven years now, billions of sisters and brothers before us have celebrated the first Sunday morning after Passover in the same way:

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED, ALLELUIA!

(Thank heaven you all responded, because I wasn't sure what I would have done if you hadn't...)

We know what this means for us, right? He is Risen! Because he lives, we will spend eternity with God in the life to come, amen? This is all old hat for us; we've been learning this stuff since our first day of Sunday School.

But... does that always have meaning in our everyday life? Does this message always touch us where we are, in the real world? Tomorrow morning when we're fighting rush hour traffic and we get cut off about half a dozen times on the way to work, or some kid in school that doesn't like us is already talking crap about us and trying to start something before it's even lunchtime and we're not even awake yet, and we know that we have decades of life left to wait until we get to Paradise with God, while still having to deal with the darkness of this world in the meantime... that message doesn't always comfort us as much as it probably should.

Fortunately, the true meaning of Easter extends to more than just the life after and eternity. The true message of Easter is about hope. Hope in NEW LIFE. Hope in new beginnings, new possibilities, new experiences. Hope that God can always make something new and living, out of that which was once old and dead. We need not wait until the next life, to experience these blessings NOW.

This year's Resurrection story comes to us from John's gospel. In most aspects, it's pretty similar to the Resurrection stories in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but there are one or two unique points.

In the other gospels, when Mary sets out for the tomb to visit the body of Jesus, the sun has already risen. John, however, goes out of his way to specify that it was not quite dawn yet – it was still dark when Mary left. Now, this seems like an awfully stupid minor detail, doesn't it? – who cares exactly what time it was, it was around dawn-ish, that's all we need to know.

Well, the reason it matters is because the contrast between light and dark is one of the biggest themes in John's theology. Go re-read the Gospel of John and the epistle of First John from beginning to end and count how many times light and dark are referenced. It's literally how the entire gospel begins, with a mini creation story recounting the primordial darkness that existed before God's creative word brought being from nothing, and at that moment there became light instead of darkness. For John, God is light. God's people are children of light. The darkness represents the world, the fallen, the flesh, spiritual deadness. Life without God. In other words, exactly how we were before Christ was raised from the dead. Exactly how the world still was before the tomb was emptied. That's why it's significant. Christ rises, and the light dawns.

And when I think about this relationship between the light and the dark, it makes me think about the way in which my experience of Easter Sunday was completely transformed, years ago, when Julie and I began getting into the habit of attending the full slate of Holy Week services, rather than just showing up for Easter morning and ALLELUIA! and all the celebration and festivity. I understand of course, that life happens and with work schedules and families and whatnot, not everyone can attend the weekday evening services... but if you get

the chance and you've never done so, I highly encourage you to give it a try one of these years. You'll be amazed at what happens to your appreciation for the joy of Easter morning after enduring the cathartic, penitential, and soul cleansing solemnity of the Good Friday Tenebrae service. (Literally, the "Service of Shadows.")

You see, the light means nothing until we've first experienced the dark. The Resurrection means nothing until we've first experienced the Crucifixion. In order to appreciate the magnitude of what Christ does for us on the Cross, we must confront the darkness, face to face, point blank, in all its horror.

And I think there's a life lesson to be found in there, that we carry with us into every day life. We've all heard platitudes about this so many times, that they've become cliché and we tune them out. "It's always darkest before the dawn." "Life is a series of peaks and valleys, and we have to endure the valleys to appreciate the peaks." "There's a season for everything." But there's profound life wisdom to be found here, that cuts to the core of our Lutheran faith.

Every day a struggle between being saint and sinner, alternating between seasons of light and seasons of darkness. Every event in life being an opportunity to experience both spirit and flesh. We cannot appreciate the Gospel, without the Law first confronting us with its specter of death and condemnation. And so it is that our daily sufferings in this world, are opportunities to experience new life and the grace of God when we pull thru. There is no suffering that God cannot redeem, from which God cannot bring about NEW LIFE. NEW LIFE is the key to understanding what Easter is all about. The hope of NEW LIFE is what pulls us thru the seasons of dark with the expectation of experiencing light once again.

Quick, just making sure you're all still awake:

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!

Another curiosity in John's Resurrection narrative, is the detail regarding the little foot race between the apostles trying to make it to the tomb. The "disciple who Jesus loved", of course, is the author of the gospel (he identifies himself as such at the very end of the book), whom tradition attributes as being John himself. Tradition also tells us that John was the youngest of the twelve and only a boy at the time Jesus was alive. So naturally, being a young kid, he outran the tired old apostle Peter and reached the tomb first, but waits for Peter before going inside. What exactly is the significance of this??

Well, to be totally honest with you, there is little consensus among theologians about this. Some speculate John is just tooting his own horn here, boasting about how quick he was as a young man. Some believe it was a detail added simply for the purposes of apologetics and historical witness. Some Roman Catholics believe it's a proof-text for the Papacy, with John showing deference to Pope Peter as he waits for him to enter the tomb first.

The meaning I choose to take away from it is this: John's innocent, simple, childlike faith allowed him to believe, when old, pessimistic, cynical Peter (representing most of us), could not. This is a point that means even more to us right here at CLC this morning as we sit in this incredible service officiated by our young people.

NEW LIFE. God is doing a NEW THING. God is bringing forth hope and growth out of old death, old pain, old suffering.

Our good and gracious God took the most wicked and evil event to ever happen in all human history – God's own Son, innocent of any crime, brutally tortured to death – and used that occasion to bring forth the most

wonderful event to ever happen in all human history – the salvation of all humanity. If God can do this, then God can take every one of our failures, every one of our pains, every one of our sufferings, and find a way to make growth and NEW LIFE come about from them.

This is not, by the way, a message only for the young. One might wonder, as I'm steering this sermon in this direction, "What good news is there here for the old?? What good news is in this message for the 90-year-old who is bedridden? What new life can there be for that person?" Well... yes, granted, that person is at a stage in life where the hope of life eternal in the hereafter, probably matters a bit more to them, no doubt. But even for them, NEW LIFE in THIS WORLD is still a possibility! Their family, their friends come to visit them and give them an opportunity to share their life wisdom, tell their story, share their experiences... and their family and friends can be inspired by those stories in ways that we'll never know. Their lives can be transformed and keep the legacy of their elders alive long after they've passed into life eternal.

Please understand: God does not promise we'll always be satisfied with the resolution we're given, to the trials of our lives. God does not promise we'll always LIKE the ways in which he uses us to bring about new life. Neither does God promise that we'll always even be *aware* of the ways in which we're being used... the early Church was built upon the blood of the martyrs, and they never lived to see the ways in which their deaths would inspire and grow the faith. But the fact that we don't always see the ways in which God redeems our suffering, does not prove that it doesn't happen. In fact, our faith requires us to believe it will happen, because it already has happened.

You ever wonder why eggs, baby peeps, and rabbits are symbols of this season? These things all represent NEW LIFE. They all represent new beginnings, new hope. Yes, the primary hope of our faith is life eternal, in the Church Triumphant. But we need not wait until the next life, to begin experiencing the blessings of the Easter message. We can begin experiencing these things RIGHT NOW! Let us not spend so much time looking forward to Heaven, that we forget to live in THIS WORLD, and to bring the Easter message of hope to a darkened world who desperately needs to hear it, being Christ for our neighbor, and showing them the meaning of the Empty Tomb, bringing them hope and light.

And what is the basis for that hope?

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!

Amen.