

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

## **Easter Day**

**Principal Service**

**Year B**

**RCL**



1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Psalm 114:1-8

Mark 16:1-8

### **The Collect**

O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*or this*

O God, who made this most holy night to shine with the glory of the Lord's resurrection: Stir up in your Church that Spirit of adoption which is given to us in Baptism, that we, being renewed both in body and mind, may worship you in sincerity and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*or this*

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## PSALM 114:1-8

- 1 When Israel went out from Egypt,  
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
- 2 Judah became God's sanctuary,  
Israel his dominion.
- 3 The sea looked and fled;  
Jordan turned back.
- 4 The mountains skipped like rams,  
the hills like lambs.
- 5 Why is it, O sea, that you flee?  
O Jordan, that you turn back?
- 6 O mountains, that you skip like rams?  
O hills, like lambs?
- 7 Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,  
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
- 8 who turns the rock into a pool of water,  
the flint into a spring of water.

**1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you--unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is

with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim  
and so you have come to believe.

**Mark 16:1-8**

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

## SERMON

You know who was really smart? Sidhartha, the Buddha. He lived about 500 years before Jesus. He thought up all kinds of nuanced and subtle things about how to relate to our existence. His thoughts are the foundation of Buddhism today, twenty-five hundred years later.

You know who else was smart? Lao-tzu, that's who. Best guess is that he lived in the Sixth Century B.C., too (although he may be a myth). Lao-tzu remains a very big deal in China, and his thoughts are believed to form the foundation of Taoism, which views him as a deity. He's the guy who came up with, "The way which can be spoken is not the true way", which is not only very deep, but is guaranteed to cut down on a lot of unnecessary arguments.

You want to talk about smart? Pythagoras. There's a

smart one. He thought up all kinds of things in the fields of music and ethics, and when he was done with that, he came up with that thing with right triangles that drove all of us crazy in high school math. And he had to do it using Roman numerals or something.

The point is that the world is full of smart people, then and now. More than that, the world has always been blessed with wise people, who can look at the world and make sense of it. And when such a one doesn't exist, as in the case of Lao-Tzu, we sometimes make up the person and put in their mouths the combined wisdom of the age.

Then there's this guy, Jesus, the single most famous man ever to have lived. I do not know how far up the Amazon you would have to go to find someone who had never heard about Jesus. What is it about this Jesus that makes him inescapable, not just in Western countries,



but all around the world from tin huts in the Philippines to Russian Orthodox cathedrals in Siberia to Westminster Abbey to Community Presbyterian Church of Bellefonte?

When we talk about Jesus, we also have to talk about His church, and that's something entirely different. We'd be foolish to describe the church as central to culture as it once was within our memory. That time is past, when we informed culture. But strangely enough, Jesus is not past. The majority of people in western Europe and parts of this country may have decided that the church is not relevant to their lives, but no one has suggested that Jesus has retreated into the mists of memory in the way Pythagoras did after we finished high school math. Accept Him or reject Him, He still requires a choice.

If we search about for a reason that this one man is

still the most famous name on the planet, we can't find anything in the usual places we look for famous people. The ethical teaching of Jesus was largely in accord with Pharisaic Judaism. He wasn't starting over with an ethical tabula rosa and writing large thereon. His teaching was firmly rooted in Jewish ethics.

Neither, in his lifetime, did he overturn anything more substantial than a table. We can't look to great acts of power on the world stage for an answer to the question of why He is so unavoidable.

Neither can we look to the healing miracles. The miracles recounted in the Gospels were performed for the most part with the poor, the outcast, the people no one would believe in any event.

Even the Resurrection, itself, won't explain it. A story that outrageous won't convince non-believers of anything. Those who have chosen not to believe that Jesus

was the Incarnation come up with endless explanations of the Resurrection, the most common being that someone stole the body.

The irreducible facts to which we have recourse to answer the question of why Jesus is inescapable are the post-Easter appearances of Jesus. Jesus is the most famous man in history because Jesus was unquestionably killed in a very public way, then appeared to many, many people and gave them hope and certainty. Hope, that no matter how bad we are, no matter the depths of sin of which we are capable, this loving God is able to overcome even our worst impulses. Certainty, that we are in the hands of an all-powerful God who loves us.

The problem, of course, is that those within the church have heard this story so often that it has lost all its power to amaze, and those without the church explain it all away. If you tell kids today about Jesus raised

from the dead, walking about and speaking to His disciples and others, the mental image they will get is that of a zombie. Even in the first century, the assertion that a man might be raised from the dead to walk again upon the earth was just too far a reach for many. Our passage today ends with these words:

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Look in your Bibles. There should be a note indicating that this is the original ending of Mark's Gospel, a bleak and troubling ending in which the tomb is empty, but Jesus is no longer to be found upon the earth. Even the evidence for the empty tomb in Mark is slight. In Mark's telling the only witnesses to the empty tomb are three women. The testimony of women in the first century was not acceptable, so in Mark's telling, the only

witnesses to the Resurrection were people who would not be believed, and even they said nothing. No mention of post-Easter appearances until a later hand added the longer and shorter endings of Mark.

Mark is our earliest Gospel, written in the late 60's, a time of horrible trouble in Jerusalem as Rome besieged and subsequently sacked it. Scholars think the Gospel was written in Syria, or perhaps Italy, so it is an account written some 40 years after the Resurrection, from a different country and even the Evangelist has trouble with the idea of a once-dead Jesus walking and talking with people.

Well, who could blame him? And who could blame those today who say that's just impossible? It's an extraordinary claim and extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. All that Mark gives us is the testimony of three women, unacceptable at the time to prove the as-

sertion. How come the story bolstered by such slight evidence didn't die out? How come less than three hundred years later a Jewish movement of eleven disciples running from the execution of their leader became the state religion of Rome?

When we look at Mark's bleak ending, we need to remember that the Gospels aren't the oldest material in the New Testament. That honor goes to Paul's letters and we read from one today, his first letter to his church at Corinth, written from Ephesus about 54 A.D., nearly two decades before Mark. Paul has no trouble with the post-Easter appearances of Jesus:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred

brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.

Mark's words are the hinge pin upon which the entire enterprise swings. "Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died." What power in those simple words! "... most of whom are still alive, though some have died."

Paul recounts, "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me". That is the road to Damascus experience of Paul. Those who want to explain it away suggest that he suffered an epileptic seizure or simply fallen off his donkey and hit his head making him imagine the whole thing. If that were so, how do we account for this precise language, "more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died"? Why not say five thou-

sand? Why not say “All of whom now testify to what they saw”? This is first Century Judea! It’s not like Diane Sawyer and the ABC News team is going to send out a satellite truck and check up on him! If you’re going to make it up, make it up good.

Yet his statement is modest, and his statement resonated through the churches he founded, through the witnesses in Jerusalem, through the work of the early Apostles, through the unwritten witness of those five hundred in so persuasive a way that Jesus two thousand years later is the most famous man in the world.

I started off this sermon by listing teachers of ethics from antiquity, and Jesus is certainly among them. To love the relationship in which we find ourselves with a God beyond our ability to describe and to love the relationships we find ourselves in with our brothers and sisters is unequalled ethical teaching. Just to do that much



is the work of a lifetime. But Jesus is unique. Jesus returned from the dead, walked and talked with his friends, promised a comforter.

There was another Jesus, called “Jesus the Egyptian”. You likely never heard of him. There were other very great teachers of ethics at the time. You likely never heard of them, either. Jesus is the one you have heard of and that is because Jesus’ uniqueness was so unassailably documented that it would have been perverse at the time to deny it. The story of Jesus, His execution and Resurrection, the accounts of His Post-Easter appearances attested to the people who lived through this time that Jesus was who He was — the very incarnation of God.

So, those outside the church who claim that Paul founded all those churches on the strength of an epileptic seizure, and who explain Jesus as mass hysteria, do

so for their own reasons and that's no business of mine or yours. Our business is with those within the church, and those are often the ones so numbed by this story that they have forgotten its power to move them.

Tuesday at the Holy Week service, I said that I imagined that most of the people there had seen the movie “The Titanic”. I also assume that many saw the National Geographic special, “Return to the Titanic”. Which one made you cry? Which one touched you in a memorable way? Which one grabbed your heart? Our business as Christians isn’t to sell our understanding of history to those who really believe in a different account. Our business is to surrender ourselves to the story of a man who once walked the face of the earth – a unique man who was obedient to the will of a God too enormous for us to describe. This man was obedient unto death, even death on a cross, for our benefit so that

we could see that our worst impulses are not enough to defeat the love of God.

Jesus, dying in agony on the cross, shows us the depths of depravity of which we are capable. The needs of the world, the common sense of the time that lead Caiaphas to say, “You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” hanged Jesus on a tree to save the accepted way of the world.

The post-Easter appearances of Jesus shouted “Even so, even at your worst and least aware, I am God, the most High. My love will conquer even your worst impulses.”

It is upon this hinge pin that your response to the Easter story hangs, church. Know that the evil which hanged Him on the tree is the sin within you and the power that raised Him is the salvation offered to you.

Repent, and open your heart to the Good News.

AMEN

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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