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Date: April 18, 2021
Sermon: "Keep Easter Alive"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 24:50-53

Luke 24:50-53:

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

I was once Pastor of a lovely little Church, an architectural gem; wonderful people, a Church like ours. We were doing well, Church was growing, people were happy. We had good traditions going strong, adding new ideas here and there that were well received.

But then came the revolution. A woman introduced an idea certain to radicalize the Church beyond recognition, threatening the very pillars of Christianity and Western civilization itself.

That woman, that Che Guevara of Christianity, made a motion that the Church allow women ushers to usher. Usher. *Usher*. Lady ushers. Female ushers. That woman's best friend was also a woman, a longtime best friend, in and out of Church. They sat together in Church, each served on Church boards. But when the Church voted to allow women ushers, that friend quit the Church, ended the friendship. They had both been given a great gift: friendship, Church life, faith, all wrapped up together. One used it. One lost it.

I mention that all-too-human story in light of where we are today, post-Easter. Two weeks ago we celebrated the absolute apex, epitome, mountaintop of our Christian faith: Easter. In the language of old Hollywood, "The Greatest Story Ever told." In the language of the Bible, it's the Gospel, the "Good News." In the language of Faith, it's the joy of eternal life and the promise of forgiveness. In the language of hymns, it's "Joy to the World," "Blessed Assurance," "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name." That's the feeling of Easter, this amazing gift given to us

on a silver platter, an opportunity to live the rest of our lives with such freedom, such boldness, such hope, and such purpose that nothing can stop us. And yet, we got stopped. Christians frittered away the power of Easter over the silliest and most hurtful of the issues. Too often we have managed to stop what should be the unstoppable. The Easter story ends with Easter Sunday night, with most of Jesus's disciples and family believing the resurrection. They'd seen him, heard him, and were convinced.

The next six weeks, Jesus enters in and out of their lives, offering what the Bible calls "convincing proofs" of his resurrection. He shows up. They talk. He gives advice. They eat. He forgives. They reconcile. Then, 39 days after Easter, we have "Ascension Day." Jesus gathers his followers on a small hill, gives them final instructions and ascends—goes up to heaven.

That's where today's Scripture comes from, Luke's briefest version of Ascension Day. It says, "Jesus lifted up his hands, blessed his followers, was taken up to heaven . . ." And here's the important part: ". . . they returned to Jerusalem with great joy . . . they stayed together continually, praising God." They "stayed together," with "God" at their center. They loved their Easter gift! Fifty days after Easter, they had "Pentecost," when God's spirit empowers the disciples in such a way that Christianity exploded, in the best possible way. In one day of exciting drama, Jesus's followers go from a small motley crew to a fast-moving, fast-rising, fast-expanding movement that shocked Jerusalem and soon shook the Roman Empire.

What intrigues me is what all happened in those 50 days between Easter joy and Pentecost power? The Bible gives us a handful of stories that all told might have taken up a few hours. What about all those other hours, those other days, over seven weeks? Over meals, around the campfire, by the sea, what stories got told, what questions got asked, what plans got made, what ideas percolated?

They must have been champing at the bit to take on the world. Easter is like that. You get this immense gift, this astounding story, and even in our little Church, this wondrous Easter Sunday celebration, and then we've got to decide what to do with it! Like any great experience, we'd probably like to package it. But life doesn't work that way, does it? The high points, the great days, the "mountain-top" experiences, the once-in-a-lifetime event—they happen, then they fade, a long time till the next one, or maybe never repeated.

Certainly this Easter at our Church was that sort of extra-special. Watching people get out of their cars, walk across the green, come into the tent, start waving to one another, smiles all around; sun shining, three services under the tent, people, people, people, real people, live people, happy and faith-filled people. The brass quartet welcoming us with live Easter songs. Michael on the organ, inviting us to

sing along, the choir back in force. The altar filled with lilies, the beautiful wooden cross transformed by flowers. Sounds of life, sounds of laughter everywhere proclaimed, "Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!"

Alida and everything about us showed that belief in God's greatest miracle. By noon on Easter afternoon, we felt like conquering heroes, great adventurers, spiritual champions, people who could tackle anything. Whatever the world could throw at us, we were ready. That's Easter for you! But what do we do with it now, two weeks later?

I woke up Monday morning, opened my *New York Times* to the front page, (front page, mind you), and there is an article about evangelical Christians leading the charge against . . . I'm going to hold you in suspense for a bit . . . leading the charge against what exactly? It's the day after Easter, and there's a lead story about Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, believers in the Easter story. Leading the charge against . . . ?

Oh, I'll bet some of you guessed "poverty," or "oppression" or "despair" or "racism" or "evil" or a wide range of "sins." Nope. Against *vaccinations* and *facemasks*. Certain Christians are the biggest block of opponents against vaccinations and facemasks.

Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins on Good Friday. Jesus was raised up from the dead to show us eternal life on Easter Sunday. And in his honor, let's mock medicine, science, public health, and the needs of the elderly. Not much Easter there. The world needs more from us. People expect more from us. Christ deserves more from us.

If you have followed our prayer list recently, you've noticed we've done a lot of funerals, 18 this year so far. Two during Holy Week, three the week after. They run the gamut from tragic to expected, but this I know: Every death leaves a hole, every death creates a grief. Every death breaks a heart.

In preparing for one funeral, I spoke with an elderly mom whose adult son we'd be burying. She'd already lost her husband and another child. She knew sorrow. We chatted about her son, her family, her life, and the funeral service. As I always do, I asked her if she had any special requests, favorite Scriptures or music, maybe a reading. "Tell me what you'd like," I asked gently. There was silence for a bit. Then she said, "Don't tell me how to grieve. Tell me how to believe." *Don't tell me how to grieve, tell me how to believe*. She wanted Easter. She knew how to sorrow, how to weep, how to feel broken, to know loss, to be sad. She wanted a funeral that would bring back hope, restore faith. We talked about that explicitly, specifically, she wanted Easter. And that's what we gave her.

Last week a Church friend, Ross Strickland, sent me a Ted Talk, one of those online lectures by an expert in a certain field. And this lecture was from Christchurch, New Zealand, a woman talking about “resilience.” *Resilience*. How to get back up, how to keep going, how to look forward. She asks simple questions: What helps you? What hurts you? What holds you back? What leads you forward? *Resilience*. Easter is the ultimate resilience. It leads us forward. It keeps us going. It gets us back up.

So how do we keep that Easter resilience with us? I’ll admit it, that Easter joy, that Easter euphoria, like any euphoria, is hard to sustain. We don’t have a brass quartet every Sunday. We don’t have lilies every Sunday. We don’t preach Easter resurrection every Sunday. We don’t have the delight of everybody back together after a long time every Sunday. But the heart of Easter, the impact—we can sustain that.

Jesus’s followers had Easter joy. And 50 days later, Pentecost power. What sustained them during that in-between period? The simple truth is they stayed close to one another, and they stayed close to God. When Jesus was ready for them, they were ready for him. They stayed connected to Easter joy.

Here’s an old hymn from my Baptist days that captures that desire for staying connected:

Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross

*Jesus, keep me near the cross,
There a precious fountain—
Free to all, a healing stream—
Flows from Calv’ry’s mountain.*

*Refrain:
In the cross, in the cross,
Be my glory ever;
Till my ransomed soul shall find
Rest beyond the river.*

*Near the cross, a trembling soul,
Love and Mercy found me;
There the bright and morning star
Sheds its beams around me.*

*Near the cross! O Lamb of God,
Bring its scenes before me;*

*Help me walk from day to day,
With its shadows o'er me.*

*Near the cross I'll watch and wait
Hoping, trusting ever,
Till I reach the golden strand,
Just beyond the river.*

I love that hymn, but I would open it up more widely. I'd say, "Keep me near Holy Week. Keep all of that Holy Week drama, all of that Holy Week emotion, all of that Holy Week humanity and divinity. Keep all of that close. Keep all of that fresh. The human downside will keep us humble. The joyful prize will keep us inspired.

I started with the story of two women who took two different paths, the story about women ushers. I'll close with another two best friends. Both teachers who retired the same year after long careers. Both loved the piano, lots of lessons when they were children. At retirement, both considered taking up the piano. One did, making the most of her desire and her passion and learned to play quite well. The other felt she was too old, never tried, and lived to regret it.

That's a simple story to tell a bigger truth. We all have these gifts in life. Retirement. A new job. A health recovery. Starting college. A new season. Or Easter.

Let's not squander it. Stay close. To our Church, to one another, to our God.