

All the Difference in the World

John 20:19 says, "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'"

Imagine that you were there. Your friend and leader who washed your feet last evening was taken into custody by the authorities. Within a few short hours, in the wee hours of the morning, He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by crucifixion. In the morning He was hanging in mortal agony on a cross and soon, after all manner of verbal and physical abuse had been heaped upon Him, He died and was entombed before sunset.

In addition to the grief of losing your friend and master, whom you have lived with and learned from for the past three years, it seems likely that what they did to Him they will soon be doing to you. Three days have now passed and you and some of the other followers of Jesus have locked yourselves in a hideout you hope will keep you safe from those who crucified your master. But the secrecy of your hideout was compromised earlier this morning. Some of the women who followed Jesus came in all excited, saying that the tomb of Jesus had been robbed, or that they had seen angels who told them Jesus was alive from the dead. Peter and John had gone to check it out and discovered that the tomb was empty as the women said, but they did not see Jesus.

The air in the room where you are staying is thick with the smell of fearful sweaty men. The atmosphere is charged with a mixture of fear, grief, uncertainty, confusion, and a few glimmers of renewed but razor thin hope. Everybody's nerves are on edge and everyone's senses are hyper-vigilant. And, then, just when you thought things couldn't possibly get any crazier, a being materializes out of thin air right in front of you. He speaks, and appropriately, the first words out of his mouth are "Do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid? Are you kidding me? I'm looking for a window to jump out of or a piece of furniture to crawl under. My nerves are already shot. This is beyond the pale. But then I suddenly realize that I recognize the voice of the one who is speaking and my eyes are opened to recognize Him. The figure standing before us is not an apparition or an angel or a ghost:

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This is Jesus, alive from the dead. This is Jesus full of joy, inviting us to see the wounds still visible on His hands and feet and in His side. The bloody holes made by the crown of thorns can still be seen around His head, but it is also obvious that He is being healed. His wounds are fading into the background and He admits to being hungry and asks us if we have any food. We gladly share our leftovers, and He eats and drinks in our presence. There can be no more doubt. What the women said was true. Jesus is alive: Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed! And, this makes all the difference.**

Yesterday, we held Shirley Keech's memorial service in this sanctuary and later this afternoon we will have a memorial service here for Patty Augustine's and Sandy Bovard's brother, Richard Mallery. How very sad and hopeless this would all be except for the fact that Jesus died and was raised from the dead as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised. The Bible clearly teaches us that anyone who dies believing in Jesus will not perish but has everlasting life. What an amazing thing it is that we as Christians can gather this morning right smack dab in the middle of death and be able to proclaim hope. Yes, we still feel sorrow at the death of our loved ones. It still hurts that they will not be with us any more in this life, but as Paul tells us in I Thessalonians 4, we do not sorrow as those who have no hope. Because of Easter, we do have hope, hope for life after death, hope of seeing and being united with our loved ones once again, hope that we too--because of our union with Jesus Christ--will also be raised. Easter makes all the difference.

But the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ addresses more than the problem of death; it also addresses the issue of forgiveness and the restoration of relationships with God and with one another. Harkening back to the passage of Scripture I preached from last Sunday, in I Corinthians 15:3 Paul writes: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. . . ." Ephesians 1:7 says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." Romans 5:8-11 say:

But God has shown us how much he loves us; it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us! By his blood we are now put right with God; how much more, then, will we be saved by him from God's anger! We were God's enemies, but he made

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us his friends through the death of his Son. Now that we are God's friends, how much more will we be saved by Christ's life! But that is not all; we rejoice because of what God has done through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has now made us God's friends (GNV).

Romans 3:23 affirms that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Most of us are well aware that we do and have sinned. While all sins are offensive to God, some of us have lived under the weight of significant moral failures. Some of us have hurt our children or parents or siblings or someone else in ways that cannot easily be rectified. And, in some cases there is no possible way for us to make up for what we've done. I read a story recently about a father who was talking on his cell phone and pulled out in front of an oncoming car. He almost killed his son in the process and his negligence has resulted in impairments that child will live with for the rest of his life. Sometimes living with our sins is, we think, a fate worse than death, and knowing that we are such sinners would seem to disqualify us for heaven. I saw a clip from a movie recently in which one battle hardened soldier says to another battle hardened soldier, "I'll see you in hell," and the other man replies "I'll see you in hell." Some of us have experienced or been involved in such traumatic sins, that the idea of God's forgiveness seems impossible.

But when Jesus died on the cross--hear this--when Jesus died on that cross, He died for us. No matter what we've done, how bad we've failed, or how much we have hurt someone else, the sufferings of Christ can set us free. As Isaiah 53:4-6 say, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." If we admit our sin before God, turn away from that sin, renounce evil, and receive the forgiveness purchased for us in the blood of Christ, any and all of us can be set free from sin's bondage and be restored in our relationship with God. Not only can we be set free from the fear of death, we can also be set free from the fear of rejection or punishment. We can with unveiled faces live in the light of God's extravagant love flooding into our lives from an open heaven. Even we can be assured that we are the children of God and full heirs of His kingdom.

What's more, we can become ambassadors of God's love and forgiveness for others: Notice John 20, verse 23: Jesus

says, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." I love what Eugene Peterson does with this verse. Peterson renders it this way: "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?" In other words, God empowers us to forgive sins and to be

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freed from the burden of holding grudges, but if we don't take advantage of that authority and that freedom, what are we going to do with such sins? Surely the memory of those offenses will fester inside of us, poisoning our relationship with God and with other people.

Receiving God's forgiveness for our sins and being able to forgive those who sin against it is all part of the miracle made possible in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. **The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ makes all the difference.**

Jesus conquers death and overcomes our sins and breaks the power of sins perpetrated against us. John 20:22 gives us another result of the death and resurrection of our Lord. John tells us "And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

I had a fascinating discussion with the men in our Promise Keepers' Bible Study Wednesday evening. I quizzed each man about his appetite for spiritual growth. Each man testified that he had a hunger to grow more like Christ and a hunger to grow to the degree that other people would be able to recognize the presence of the Lord in his life. Each man expressed this spiritual hunger in his own unique way, but I was blessed to hear it being expressed in each one. And then I asked another question; I asked: "Where does your desire for more of God come from? Where does your hunger to be more like Christ come from? What drives your desire to be a more effective witness for Jesus Christ or to bring His love and the message of salvation into other people's lives? The answer I received here was consistent around our circle: It is God Who gives us this desire. This is the evidence of the Holy Spirit living in our lives.

When Jesus was preparing His disciples for His return to heaven, He told them in John 16:7, "But I am telling you the truth: it is better for you that I go away, because if I do not go, the Helper will not come to you. But if I do go away, then I will send

him to you." John 16:13 adds, "When, however, the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth." In verses 14 & 15 Jesus says of the Spirit: "He will give me glory, because he will take what I say and tell it to you. All that my Father has is mine; that is why I said that the Spirit will take what I give him and tell it to you."

There are three major outcomes of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are #1: victory over death, or the death of death. #2 forgiveness of our sins and the ability to forgive those who have sinned against us. And, #3 the desire and the power to live Christlike lives. When Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," He was foreshadowing what would soon transpire on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit descended on the believers with power and began to work in them and through them to turn their known world upside down. We who believe in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and have the Holy Spirit living within us are in the process of growing into what has sometimes described as "little Christs." Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2:14-16a: "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may be innocent and pure as God's perfect children, who live in a world of corrupt and sinful people. You must shine among them like stars lighting up the sky, as you offer them the message of life. . . ." (GNV).

I am convinced of something this morning that you may or may not be aware of: I'm convinced that God is shaping us into the image of Christ to a degree that we have never seen here before. We need to pay attention to the spiritual desires and appetites for God that the Holy Spirit is creating in us and we need to pursue those desires and appetites. If we follow where God is leading, we will discover as never before that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ makes all the difference. **He makes all the difference in the world.**

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John 20:19-22

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