

First Day Stories 3

(Living the Resurrection)

Psalm 90:1-2

John 20:19-20

Scripture Lesson from the OT: “Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were born, or Thou didst give birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.”

Scripture Lesson from the NT: “When therefore it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were in fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you.” And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. The disciples therefore rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”

This is the word of the Lord for the people of God.

About a century ago, a sealed vase was found in the tomb of an Egyptian Pharaoh. Its finder had unfortunately broken the seal in the process of recovery, revealing a few dried and wrinkled old peas as the extent of its contents. Using the carbon dating system, it was determined that the seeds had been buried for about three thousand years, at around the time of Moses and the Exodus.

As an experiment, the peas were carefully planted in the soil under glass in early June of 1922. At the end of thirty days the seeds were seen to be sprouting with new life, having laid dormant in the dust of the tomb as if dead for all of that time awaiting the trumpet call of sun and soil and water to rise again.

Two weeks ago, we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday with an Easter message from the preacher, special music and with much fanfare and many celebrations to follow after. There comes another time on the day after Easter, or the day after that, when it is time to put away the celebrations for another year and start living the resurrection for ourselves. That time has now come.

Living the resurrection is not easy, and sometimes, it seems to be nearly impossible. So much so that we would rather close the windows, shut the doors and forget about until next year.

When this happens, we shut ourselves off from the painful realities of our lives and hide behind the doors and walls of the house where the world cannot find us. That's what the disciples in John's Gospel Chapter 20 were doing.

But there's a double-whammy problem with this sort of thinking. Every time we close the windows and lock the doors of our lives to keep out the world, we end up imprisoned by work of our own hands. As a result, we push people away from us and reject opportunities for ministry.

And as a result of that, every person we push away from us, and every ministry opportunity we ignore or reject becomes another shut window and closed door in the prison house we are building. This is what has happened to the disciples in John's gospel.

Let's revisit the disciples house one more time to refresh our memory, shall we?

It's Easter evening on the day of the resurrection. The disciples saw the open door, and the stone rolled away and the empty tomb. They've heard Mary testify, "I have seen the Lord." They've seen how excited she is about what she believes has happened. The problem is that they haven't seen it for themselves as yet, so all her excitement isn't doing very much for them.

The dominant emotion exhibited by them is fear. In fact, the only emotion exhibited by them is fear. Fear of the Romans, fear of the Jews and fear of what the future will bring. As a result, they have closed every window and locked every door in the house, huddling together desperately and hanging on for dear life without hope for the future.

A week later we find that they are still mostly in the same place. Nothing has changed except that the first-day story is now on its seventh day.

Now, let's look at what has happened to them as a result of their fears.

Jesus house is open and free, but the disciples house is closed and locked down.

Jesus is raised from the dead, and the disciples are the living dead.

Jesus is a free man on the loose, and the disciples are slaves in chains.

The tomb of Jesus has become a house of heaven, the house of the disciples has become a tomb of hell.

Do you see what has happened here? By rejecting what their eyes have plainly seen and what their ears heard through Mary's testimony, the disciples have willfully cut themselves off from the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a result, they have become blind to the truth of God's sovereign power over life and death.

They have left the house of faith and trust in Jesus and entered their own house of fear and doubt. Instead of having been made free by Jesus' resurrection from the grave, the closed windows and locked doors of the house have become a great stone that has re-sealed their tombs, and now must be rolled away again.

The sad part of it all is that they have locked themselves inside the house by their own volition as a result of them refusing to accept the truth of Jesus' resurrection. The doors of our tombs are ALWAYS locked by us from the inside! And to think that it took only one week without God for this to happen to them!!!

It is thought by historians that the house where they were staying was the same one containing the upper room where the Last Supper was held. But this room was no longer a joyous place of eating and drinking in the presence of their Lord with their friends.

Now as they sit together in this room, they do so in wide-eyed terror wondering which one will be first to betray the rest, listening in constant fear of every step on the stairway, and of every knock on the door.

John's gospel physically describes the closed windows, and the locked doors of the house, but his gospel is describing more than merely the physical condition of the building. His gospel is also describing the spiritual condition of the disciples inside. This is because the closed and locked places of our lives are always more about what is going on within us than what is going on outside us.

As they found themselves sitting there in abject fear and misery, Jesus is suddenly and without warning somehow right there with them. John 20:19b says, "Jesus came and stood in their midst."

And when He appeared to them, He came not as a ghost or apparition, but in the flesh as a dear friend greeting them with the friendly greeting of the Hebrew people saying: “Peace be to you.”

When we speak of “passing the peace” to each other during our worship service, we think of conveying God’s good wish that we all might be saved from the many travails of life. However, in the Hebrew culture of Jesus’ time “Peace be to you” meant: “May God bless you with life and health” as only a living man could do!

Some modern scholars have questioned whether the word “Easter” should be a noun, or whether it should be a verb. You may remember from last week’s message that I spoke of the difference between facts and stories.

In my message, I noted that facts are the structure of the story but do not contain the fullness of its meaning. In this way, facts are static nouns and stories are active verbs. When viewed this way, is “Easter” a fact or is it a story? What part of speech is “Easter?” Is “Easter” a noun or is it a verb? Does the name “Easter” convey its meaning to us, or does Easter require action to give it meaning?

You will notice the use of a verb of action whenever I say that Jesus is “breaking through” the closed windows and locked doors of our lives. In this understanding of Easter, we see Jesus pushing aside every human barrier “eastering us” into God’s presence.

The post-resurrection story in John’s gospel contains an active verb of Jesus coming in to the disciples through closed windows and locked doors. It is a story of God doing the unexpected miracle that sets everything right again.

Standing in the midst of our fears and hatred, He comes to us, blessing us despite ourselves with every possible good gift of heaven. He doesn’t open the closed windows and locked doors for us, He leaves that for us to do, but He provides for every need that we may have right there and then, so we might “see the Lord” for who He is, and open the windows and doors for ourselves.

I read this past week of over five hundred refugee families being fed cooked meals at a food pantry in a Methodist church in Uvalde, Texas. I’m sure you are all aware of the problems faced by the US Border Patrol in past months and years as they have tried to provide basic needs and protection for the people of Texas and

other border states in the face of the overwhelming numbers of refugees from various countries that have flooded across the southern border of the US.

I'm sure y'all have formed some kind of opinion as to what you think ought to be done in response to this problem, probably ranging from somewhere between the polarities of universal assimilation and unilateral deportation.

Some are saying that according to the laws of the land, the refugees are "illegal" and have no right to be here. Others have argued that basic human need transcends the bias of law and politics, and in coming to the USA, they are just doing what they feel is necessary to survive and better their lives.

It seems that through the mission of this church, planted at the center of this raging human maelstrom, complete strangers are sharing warm meals and feeding each other, cultural differences are melting away, and enemies are becoming friends.

In light of the fact that today is Communion Sunday, it is no coincidence that food and drink have become the real presence of Jesus Christ standing in their midst, and breathing the holy spirit of peace through all the closed windows and locked doors of hatred and distrust.

Reading further, I learned that this outreach in the name of Jesus has been an ongoing mission at the church every week for the last several years. Here Christ stands among His people breathing life and faith, and hope into what was once hatred and fear and death.

Here all the boundaries of race, creed, religion, economics, language and culture, have all fallen away to nothing as host and guest feed each other with the bread and wine of human kindness and friendship.

Here the word "Easter" is no longer a noun describing a static moment in time, but has instead become a verb that is opening closed windows and shut doors to a new hope and a fresh expression of life. And suddenly and unexpectedly Jesus has appeared in their midst and is seen and heard by all as He says, "Peace be with you" that they all might be made glad by having at last "seen the Lord."

I am glad to report this morning that the life-giving holy wind of the resurrection is blowing today in Texas.

The life-giving holy wind of the resurrection is always blowing everywhere. The question for us here in Kentucky is, do we have the faith and will to lift our sails to catch its breeze?

Friends, peace and life are both resurrection realities. Regardless of our circumstances, when Jesus appears, all barriers are pushed aside and peace and life become real for us. Regardless of our circumstances, Jesus always brings peace, because Jesus is peace.

Regardless of our circumstances, Jesus always brings life, because Jesus is life. Peace and life by themselves do not change the circumstances of our lives and our world, much as we wish they would.

Despite the presence of ICE agents, millions of homeless refugees still roam the streets of American cities.

Despite Jesus calming the sea, hurricanes and tornadoes still form sometimes, and hail still falls from the sky.

Despite the feeding of the five thousand on the mountain, the hungry will still need bread tomorrow in Uvalde. But the peace and life that Jesus gives to us through the resurrection will bless us with every good gift from God, even right here in the midst of all these perils.

“Because He lives, I can face tomorrow” that’s what the old Gaither hymn says. “Because He lives, all fear is gone.” Because He lives... we are free to open the shut windows and closed doors of our lives and rejoice because we have seen the resurrected Lord.

As you reflect on how you will choose to live the resurrection in the coming weeks and months, I would ask you to look deep within yourself to see the most closed-off and shut-down places of your life. The places of death in you where a great stone has been rolled across the entrance to the tomb.

You can be sure like the disciples that your stone is the fear of someone or something unknown. If we allow these stones of fear to remain unmoved from the entrance to our tomb, death will control our lives and shut life down in us, closing us off from the resurrection every time.

Friends, the fact of the resurrection is history, plain and simple. Nothing need be or ever can be added to this incredible life-changing event.

On the other hand, the story of the resurrection must be re-lived and re-told by us again and again every day so that the fact has eternal meaning in our lives.

Christ is present with us today to eat this bread and juice of life and peace, not for us to merely see the resurrection with our eyes and then return to our old ways but that we might also touch it and taste it for ourselves and be nourished and renewed by it.

The Methodist communion table is always open to anyone who believes and trusts in Christ for their salvation. As you come today, I would remind you that this should be a time of self-reflection and self-examination as we stand together in the presence of our Lord.

Let us pray...

And all God's people say, "Amen and amen."