

God's Future Now

Easter Weekend – April 15/16, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Psalm 57:8-11 (NRSV)

⁸ Awake, my soul!

Awake, O harp and lyre!

I will awake the dawn.

⁹ I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;

I will sing praises to you among the nations.

¹⁰ For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens;

your faithfulness extends to the clouds.

¹¹ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.

Let your glory be over all the earth.

Luke 24:1-12 (NRSV)

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

We gather as a grateful people to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and to embrace the challenge of living as new creations ourselves, witnessing to the love of God in all things.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

Easter Monday

What must Monday morning have been like for Jesus' disciples? On Friday afternoon, Jesus had been crucified by the Romans and the disciples had gone into hiding, fearful of being swept up by the Romans. Then, on Sunday, some of the women who had gone to finish laying Jesus' body out for burial had come telling amazing stories about an empty tomb and a living Jesus. And then . . . on Sunday evening, Jesus had come to the disciples himself. . . . Alive. In the flesh. Not a ghost. Not even like someone brought back from the dead. No, Jesus had been bodily resurrected.¹ He was himself, though not quite the same as before. He could simply appear inside a closed room, but it was still Jesus.

¹ Like most first-century Jews, the disciples believed that when the long-promised Day of the Lord arrived, all the dead would be *resurrected*. This is not “resuscitation,” which is returning to life only to go on to die at a later time, like being yanked back to life on the operating table. And it has nothing to do with ghosts or other spirits. “Resurrection” (*anastasis* in the Greek) was a word that meant passing through death to a new bodily (truly physical) and eternal life on the other side. Lazarus was resuscitated, having been brought back from the dead, but still going on to age and to die. Jesus of Nazareth, on the hand, was *resurrected* by God. Jesus passed through death to the other side. He lives still, and not just in our hearts or in the pages of Scripture – he lives, bodily, in God's place, God's dimension, God's Kingdom. And, Hallelujah, God promises the same future for those who entrust themselves to Jesus.

Reading *Thru the Bible*

As a congregation, we began reading through the Bible in January. We are now well again this journey. We are reading it straight through from Genesis to Revelation, but, instead, using a reading plan that moves back and forth between the Old and New Testaments.

Each week, the Scripture passages read during worship and used as the basis for the sermon are drawn from the readings for the week before. We will follow this plan all the way through the year, though at certain times, (such as today!), we will read extra season-appropriate passages.

If you do not have a copy of the reading plan, you can pick one up at the information booth in the narthex and around the church. The reading plan is also posted online: www.standrewcccl.org.

If you are new to the *Thru the Bible* reading plan you can jump in at any point. And if you've fallen so far behind that you are tempted to give up, just pick up with the current reading. You can always go back and read what you missed after we've finished the reading plan.

Many of us have tried and failed to read all the way through the entire Bible. But by doing this together, we are confident that we will be able to help each other through any difficulties and, most important, that we will grow closer to one another and to God.

Surely they awoke on Easter Monday joyful and confused, excited and bewildered. Joyful and excited, because Jesus, their beloved master and teacher, lived. Confused and bewildered because none of it made any sense to them. The resurrection of the dead was part of a larger package – Messiah, liberation, victory, judgment, the bodily resurrection of the dead, God’s return, the new heavens and new earth, and more. The Jews often referred to this whole package as the “Day of the Lord” and its coming meant the arrival of God’s kingdom and the fulfillment of all God’s promises.

So . . . try to imagine for a moment that you are Peter. You wake up on Easter Monday, perhaps half expecting that you’ll stumble outside to find the resurrection of the rest of the dead underway and Jesus sitting in triumph over all Judea. But you quickly realize that the world on Monday looks pretty much as it did on Sunday and Saturday and Friday and Thursday. The dead are still in their graves (with the exception of Jesus). There is still plenty of sickness and tragedy. The Romans still stand watch over the temple. To all outward appearances, the world was unchanged and the Day of the Lord had not arrived. But, of course, Peter also knew that Jesus had been resurrected the day before. What did it mean??!

God’s Future Now

What it meant was that God’s future had arrived. God’s kingdom had come. It was the time of New Creation. It was the long-awaited Day of the Lord . . . it just wasn’t playing out like Peter or any other Jew expected. Regardless of what it looked like, Jesus’ resurrection could mean only one thing ~ that the resurrection of the dead had begun.² We don’t know whether Peter thought that the playing out of the whole Day of the Lord package, would last an instant or a day or a week or a month or longer. But however long it would take to complete, Jesus’ resurrection meant that it had started. And what God starts is as good as done.

Frankly, this isn’t really any easier for us to understand than it was for Peter and the others. We live in a world filled with sickness and tragedy. The dead are still in their graves. Our own eyes can tell us that what began with Jesus is still not complete. Yes, God’s victory has been won, but the mopping up work goes on.

The fact that it has now been 2,000 years since Jesus’ resurrection doesn’t change the meaning of Easter nor does it change the final outcome. Decades after the first Easter, the writer of 2 Peter would caution the Christians that a day for the Lord is like a thousand years for us (2 Peter 3:8). In other words, God will bring about the consummation of his kingdom according to his schedule, not ours. We can safely bet that it took a long time for Peter and the others to come to grips with this.

The Easter Challenge

We tend to diminish the meaning of Easter in two ways. First, we sometimes make the mistake of seeing the resurrection as no more than a demonstration of God’s power, perhaps the greatest “miracle” ever but little more than that. Second, we might think of the resurrection as Jesus proving something about what will happen to us after we die, showing us the “way to heaven” as it were.³ The problem is that both of these meanings short-change Easter. For the New Testament writers, Jesus’ resurrection meant that the kingdom of God had arrived and that it was time for the people of God to get to work being the light to the world and the salt of the earth, feeding the poor and clothing the naked, making disciples of all nations.

Hence, when Paul concludes his glorious chapter on the resurrection in his letter to the Corinthians, he doesn’t say, “Jesus has been raised and God’s victory won, so have faith and you’ll get to heaven.” Instead, Paul writes, “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Easter is a very public proclamation that God has acted decisively in human history to rescue us and to renew all of creation. God has called us to build *for* his kingdom as we confidently await its final consummation. And, thankfully, God is with us in this. God’s Spirit enables us to do the work that God has given, refreshing us in our prayers, our worship, our learning, our loving, and our serving. God’s new creation has begun and we are summoned to be part of it. Alleluia. Christ is risen indeed!

²A little more than twenty years later, Paul would describe Jesus as the “first-fruits” of the resurrection, the first to be harvested in a harvest that had begun and would one day be completed.

³As in so many other things, the writings of N.T. Wright have helped me understand this. There is more on Easter in his new book, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. I highly recommend it and will make it my May book recommendation in our bookstore.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

April 16 - 22

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 5 - 7; Psalm 61 Jesus' Sermon the Mount: A portrait of the kingdom of God and a challenge to live it</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 8 - 10; Psalm 62 Jesus enacts the kingdom of God (the "kingdom of heaven," as Matthew puts it) in his healings and exorcisms.</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 11 - 13; Psalm 63 Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God with his parables</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 14 - 16; Psalm 64 Peter comes to see that Jesus is the Messiah but still is blind to what it will really entail.</p>
<p>Day 5 Matthew 17 - 19; Psalm 65 Jesus continues to try to help his disciples the truth about God's kingdom and Jesus' vocation as Messiah.</p>	<p>Day 6 A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Day 7 Matthew 20 - 22; Psalm 66 Jesus comes to Jerusalem where his confrontation with the temple leadership and Rome come to a head.</p>	

Sermon Notes

Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got questions about the Bible?

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up fast. A good study Bible can help. And our library has some excellent commentaries. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to gain a better understanding of the readings and what they mean for us.

We hope you'll join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten small groups meeting now and a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewcccl.org.

April Book Recommendation

***Finding God in the Questions*, by Dr. Timothy Johnson**

Yes, this is the Dr. Timothy Johnson you often see on *Good Morning America*, as he is the Medical Editor for ABC News. He also graduated from seminary before becoming a doctor. In this brief volume, Dr. Johnson tackles some of the big questions he has had to face as he sought to maintain a commitment to Jesus and to science. The book has three sections: "Does God Exist," "What is God Like?," "What Difference Does It Make?" I thought that the portions of the book looking at science and the existence of God were the most interesting. He also includes an epilogue with many recommendations for further reading in the sciences and biblical studies – including a strong recommendation to read N.T. Wright.

New Sermon Series Begins Next Week: *Extreme Makeover*

We'll be talking about what it *really* means to be transformed.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

We struggle for words when it comes to Easter, or at least we should. Easter is BIG. It is public. It matters for the whole world. It is about God's victory over sin and death, a victory won on the cross. It is about the God who keeps faith with his creation. It is about the arrival of God's kingdom and the beginning of God's new creation. When we pray "your kingdom come" in the Lord's prayer, we are not praying for its arrival but for its fulfillment, that what was begun in Jesus' death and resurrection will be consummated.

How does the understanding of Easter that I've tried to convey in this brief study differ from your own, from what you were taught, or from what you've read? Why does it matter? What makes Jesus' resurrection the linchpin on which Christianity stands or falls?

God's work of new creation goes on still. Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ – New Creation! The old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). What evidence do you see in our world of God's work of new creation? Where do you see glimpses of God's kingdom in the world around us? If we are to build *for* God's kingdom, to what work God called you?