

APRIL 11, 2021

Marion

weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”

EASTER SUNDAY: Not Counterfeit At All Mark 16:1-19

This week we break out of the counterfeit Christianity series. As you can see, we are celebrating today something that is “Not Counterfeit At All.” The resurrection is something that is hard for many to grasp. It isn’t natural in any sense of the word. It’s also impossible to prove that it happened. That there is no tomb or grave marker, or remains isn’t necessarily evidence. For those who do not believe, the incredible nature of the event is enough to dismiss it. For those who do, faith is what jumps the gap between the impossible and the possible, the natural and supernatural. What is masterful about the writing of the gospels is that they anticipated doubt. Each evangelist writes the story a little differently, including and highlighting sometimes the same, sometimes different details. The cumulative images of the burial stories and what happened after Jesus was resurrected leave no doubt as to what occurred.

The burial:

Jesus was taken down from the cross. An argument may have been that the body had been stolen away by an animal. The actual Roman practice was to leave the bodies hang on the cross for some time after as a message to those who may see it. That Jesus was taken down is worth noting because it was unusual, and also dispelled any possibility that He had removed by some other means.

Jesus was laid in an empty tomb. Most tombs held multiple bodies. That He was the only one laid in it leaves no room to doubt the who that came out and let it empty.

A guard was posted. This is in Matthew, likely written to a Jewish community, and understandable why he would include this detail. There was a rumor that the disciples would steal the body away. This detachment of guards affirms that this wasn’t a possibility. The lie that the Priests had the guards tell can be seen as a lie simply by the reality exposed in their command. Even if word that they had fallen asleep reached the governor they would step in so they didn’t get in trouble.

Guards failing in their duty often faced harsh consequences as a result. Thus the Priests assurances. In reality, it’s doubtful they would have fallen asleep, and if so it would have been in shifts. The understandable diligence of the guards as it actually played out reinforces that no disciple would be thieving the body.

The Resurrection itself:

Having the linens there is another important detail. Were the body stolen, they wouldn’t have unwrapped it. In the story of Lazarus, his unexpected return from the dead left him confused and still wrapped in his burial linens. Here there is only one explanation for the linens. If Jesus was resurrected, He did it of His own accord. “I lay down my life willingly and I can take it up again.”

Afterward:

Jesus appears to the disciples not once, but several times.

The nature of His appearance is intently and intensely physical. He walks with them, talks with them, eats with them, and even physically demonstrates His identity through the wounds.

The message here? There is no doubt it is Jesus. There is no question a physical resurrection. This physicality is important to note as at the same time there seems a kind of glorious supernatural ability. He pops in and out of closed spaces seemingly without a trace. This could be mistaken for a hallucination or hocus pocus were it not for the genuinely physical circumstances He enjoys with the disciples.

These incidents after the Resurrection also show us at least two awesome and necessary things about Jesus in what He reveals and in His character.

Character:

The appearances after the empty tomb is discovered reveal something truly remarkable about Jesus, particularly keeping in mind that He had just been crucified, entombed, and raised. He had fulfilled His mission to redeem all of humanity and been glorified. Despite this reality and status, what do we see?

He speaks to those discovering the empty tomb to add another measure of assurance beyond what the angels say.

He assures the disciples that He is who He is by showing them His wounds, even allowing Thomas to feel them for himself.

He walks with two disciples, once again teaching them, and using a moment where he reenacts the institution of communion to wake them up and help them see that He is risen.

He greets the disciples on the shore as they are finishing a frustrating night of fruitless fishing, and provides them a miracle of an enormous catch. He literally cooks them breakfast on the beach as they return from that fishing trip the night before. This one for me is arguably the most poignant in what it says about His character.

One might posit that Jesus just miraculously whipped up a fire, some fish, and some dough to cook. I don’t think this scene reflects anything of the sort as it is intentionally earthy in its details. Much more likely Jesus would have brought the fish with Him, or maybe even caught them Himself. Fishing for many is a lot of fun, but let’s face it, getting them and cleaning them can seem for many kind of gross. Making a fire takes time, and often patience. Putting together the dough for the bread is likewise an intentional act. Standing in the smoke leaves that “campfire film” on us even as we tend the food to make sure it doesn’t burn.

This is an intentional, and wonderful image of servanthood. All of it. The assurance in the midst of fear and uncertainty. The patience to help the disciples see that He is who He is. The caring for them, feeding them, and preparing them for what lies ahead in their calling. In all of it, despite His glory and all that He had done, Jesus is still a model of servanthood.

How amazing is this? One might expect instead that the hero of the story is rewarded with luxury and being served. Here, the hero continues a humble message of uplifting others.

Perhaps part of this is making sure that the disciples have one last example of who they are called to be as they forge ahead in ministry. They can see that even in His most glorious state, Jesus is still the One who washed their feet, and calls them to do likewise.

For us, it is a similar reminder. Should we ever find ourselves thinking some task is beneath us, or we are “better than that”, the Jesus that appears after the resurrection demonstrates that there is not task to menial or small, and perhaps in those tasks particularly the humility it speaks is more inspiring than the loftiest of otherwise acts or words.

Promise:

Living into this servant heart of Jesus leads us to the second and perhaps greatest message from the resurrection. This is something the disciples needed, and they and they alone are unique in history in what they were privileged to witness.

In revealing Himself to them, they saw firsthand that the grave has been conquered. “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where o death is your victory? Where o death is your sting?” There is no need to fear what has no hold on them, or us any longer.

As Jesus ascends, He punctuates the promise and the hope. In conquering the grave, where does He return? To the Father. Where does He go? To prepare a place for them. What does He leave behind? He sends the Holy Spirit to empower and equip them for the ministry ahead.

This is the answer to the transformation of these disciples who boldly faced persecution and death for the sake of the gospel message. The ones who scattered, the one who denied Jesus three times, are now courageous and passionate. They aren’t the same as they were before. The gift of the resurrection and ascension is the gift of hope and promise. In following Jesus, in serving as He did and does, they live into this hope and no matter what their end in this world looks like, the next step is the same. Tasting death in faith and in this life means tasting life in the Kingdom of God eternally.

My hope and prayer is that this dual message will give us all both purpose and hope, and a reason to celebrate both. We celebrate our purpose, the same as those first disciples, to inspire and invite the world into a redeeming relationship with Jesus. We get to share our hope and invite them into a common mission. We also celebrate that hope, the knowledge that Jesus is the first, but not the last to be raised from the grave. All the faithful share in that same inheritance and joy. That is you, and that is me.

A reminder-

Pastor Brent is on a two-week/one Sunday vacation. He will return to the pulpit on April 18th and be back in the office April 19th.

This Sunday we will have a visiting minister, David Deatrich, In from Waynesboro.

