

JESUS IS ALIVE

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Matthew 28:1-10
1 Corinthians 15:1-10a

April 5, 2026
10:00am

This is truly a glorious day, the music is exciting, the flowers are beautiful, and the resurrection good news is joyous. All of these things add up to a wonderfully uplifting experience. But do you know what one of the best parts of today is for me? It's you! I am thrilled to see you – faces I recognize and faces I don't recognize. What could it be that has brought out so many of you to this place of worship today?

I have concluded that you are here either because Easter is true, or because you hope it is true. You are here either because Jesus has found you, or you want to be found by him. I have convinced myself that you are not just here to show off new clothes, or because mom twisted your arm. And I don't want to believe it's just because of tradition either. I think you are here today because either you have already found and embraced a faith that is able to defeat death or you are hoping that in Jesus Christ you will today discover faith that defeats death.

And so, on this Easter Sunday, you have come to the right place. Here and now I share with each one of you a message of great hope – Jesus is alive! I know it is an unbelievable proclamation, especially after his horrendous death on a cross. But it's true, and people have been celebrating that glorious, life impacting, faith inspiring truth for 2000 years.

It was early on a Sunday morning that women went to the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed on Friday. Their hearts were heavy with sadness, and their eyes were red from crying. I imagine they were practically numb as feelings of hopelessness and despair hung heavy over them. As they neared the place where their friend, their teacher, their Lord was buried, they saw that the stone was rolled away from the entrance of the cave. An angel appeared to the women; the angel's *"appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow"* (Matthew 28:3). Unlike many biblical angels whose appearance was not immediately recognizable because they looked like regular human beings, there is no doubt that this angel is an angel sent directly from the presence of God. As is typical for angels, the angel at the tomb said, *"Do not be afraid..."* He then tells the women that Jesus is no longer in the tomb because *"he has been raised..."* The angel invites the women to *"Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead...'"* (Matthew 28:5-7).

After looking and discovering for themselves that the tomb truly was empty, we are told that they quickly left with "fear and great joy" (Matthew 28:8) to tell the disciples. But before they got far, Matthew tells us that Jesus suddenly appeared to the women. Apparently they knew right away that it was Jesus, so they *"took hold of his feet and worshiped him"* (Matthew 28:9). The dread they felt earlier as they made their way to the tomb, and the fear that had overcome

them at the appearance of the angel was replaced with joy and praise. The hope they thought had been buried with Jesus on Friday bubbled up from the depth of their souls. Somehow, Jesus was alive. So they ran and shared the good news with the other disciples. That empty tomb discovery by those women on that first Easter started a reaction that grew and spread and changed everything.

Over the centuries, many have argued against the validity of the resurrection. They have come up with a variety of explanations to try and explain why the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty that morning the women went to prepare Jesus' body. Some have said that Jesus' enemies came and took the body. It was either the Jewish leaders or the Romans who took it so that if there was a Resurrection claim, they could then present the corpse and stop the rumors. Well, there were lots of resurrection claims, and yet Jesus' body was never presented to dispel those rumors.

Others have said that Jesus only fainted on the Cross; he was not actually dead. Therefore, when he was placed in the cool tomb, he revived after a period of rest and was then able to release himself from the tomb. To believe that we have to believe that the Romans, who were experts at crucifixion, did not know when a man was dead. We must further believe that Jesus after hanging for more than six hours on the Cross, and being jabbed in the side with a spear, could be placed into a tomb with no food and no water and significant blood loss, but still revive. And then at that point he could get up, walk on his wounded feet, and with his crushed hands push away the huge stone that had likely taken two if not more men to move in the first place. Then, after he pushing away that stone, he overpowered armed guards who were placed at the tomb to guard it, and then escaped. When confronted by those incredible details, I think it's easier and makes more sense to believe that Jesus rose from the dead just as the Gospel story proclaims.

Others have said that the friends of Jesus came and stole his body so that they might claim that he had risen from the dead. But to believe this we must believe that the disciples were not as scared and hopeless as all four of the Gospels seem to indicate. We must believe that common working-class men overpowered or somehow drugged trained soldiers and then stole the body. We must also believe, and I find this utterly impossible even to conceive of, that the disciples were willing to die for what they knew to be untrue. For you see, many of those first disciples were themselves crucified, burned alive, thrown to wild animals, and stoned to death. Would they have been willing to endure unspeakable punishment and torture for what they knew all along to be a lie? I cannot even imagine that a possibility.

Most people will not die for what they believe to be the truth, let alone for what they know to be a lie. But those early disciples knew it was NOT a lie. Why? Because not only was the tomb empty, but Jesus was alive. And not only was he alive, but they had personally encountered the Resurrected Jesus. It wasn't Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or his many wonderful teachings about love and grace; it wasn't his amazing miracles or even the cross that turned history

upside down. It was the good news that Jesus is alive that birthed Christianity and changed the course of human history!

It is a fantastic and many would say "unbelievable" claim. And I know that no argument can convince you that Jesus is alive. No philosophy or ideology can convince you of it. The only way you or anyone can know that Jesus is alive is to encounter his living presence in your own life and through the lives of others. Many of you in this sanctuary today have had that experience. You have a joy, a calmness and peace, an absence of fear, a deep positive spirit that is explained by only one thing, you have met and invited Jesus to take up residence in your heart. You have handed over the controlling rights of your life to the Living Christ, and it shows.

Back a number of years ago, when the Czech republic was a communist led satellite state of the Soviet Union, there was a lecture being presented in one of the country's principal educational institutions to explain that the resurrection was a fabrication, it couldn't possibly have happened. Over the years, similar kinds of lectures have taken place in many places throughout the world, including here in the United States. This particular lecture in Czechoslovakia was well publicized and well attended. Students came from all over and they filled the huge lecture hall at the university. For over an hour, a very educated lecturer attacked the concept of resurrection with various logical details and with what were described as researched facts.

As a response to this lengthy attack on the resurrection, an orthodox priest was invited to give a five-minute rebuttal. The disproportionate amount of time hardly seemed fair. However, the priest got up and said he didn't need the five minutes, he only needed five seconds. He then turned to the students in the lecture hall, and he said with a strong voice of confidence "Christos Anesti," which is the opening phrase of an orthodox worship service on Easter Sunday. What the priest said was, "Christ is Risen!" And immediately, thundering back from most of the students in that lecture hall came the response, "He is risen, indeed!"

You see, those who have met him and know him to be alive need no other convincing. The power of the risen Christ releases us from the burden of sin and guilt and offers us an opportunity for new life. The power of the risen Christ gives us joy and peace. The power of the risen Christ inspires and motivates us. The living reality of Jesus Christ makes all the difference for those who have encountered him. A respected professor with many impressive degrees may present pages of intelligent arguments against resurrection, and he may eloquently talk until his voice is raspy and worn out, but he will not change the mind of someone who has personally encountered the living Lord.

When persons come to know Christ as their risen Lord, they not only have a deep peace and joy, but they also have in them a motivating power that directs them to accomplish remarkable things. Many of these remarkable things have been accomplished over the centuries against great odds, and often at great personal cost. For example, how did the Gentile world come to know about Jesus? They were told by Paul and Jesus. Who painted the Cistine Ceiling?

Michelangelo and Jesus. Who wrote the B minor Mass? Bach and Jesus. Who opened the door to discover the cure for leprosy? Father Damien and Jesus. Who led the civil rights movement? Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesus. Who cared for the sick, poor outcasts of India? Mother Teresa and Jesus. Who was instrumental in the ending of apartheid in South Africa? Nelson Mandela and Jesus. Who is it that can accomplish remarkable things today? You and Jesus! This Jesus who died but then rose from the dead on the third day is by far the greatest motivator in all of human history.

Countless lives have been turned around because of this Jesus. Convicted criminals have become spokespersons for Jesus. Alcoholics, who couldn't get away from the bottle, have found through Christ the strength to let it go. People who have experienced terrible tragedies and have known deep despair, have found hope and renewed purpose for their lives because of Jesus. Drug addicts have found the strength to break free from their addiction, and gang members have found the courage to leave behind their gangs, gamblers have found a new thrill to live for, workaholics have found a more profound and meaningful purpose for their lives, those content to do nothing with their lives have found a passion that ignites them, and completely self-absorbed individuals have had their eyes opened to the hurts and needs of others. I've met people whose lives have been transformed against all odds. Perhaps you know such individuals, maybe you are one of them. How else do you explain this transformation – how do you explain the emergence of hope, purpose and new life where there was little to none? I have no other reasonable explanation to give you this day, than the presence of the risen Christ and the transformational power of resurrection life.

It's been 2000 years, and Jesus is still changing lives. So, if the Living Lord isn't the greatest motivator in your life today, then who or what is? And if you can't seem to invest yourself in the hope of Easter, then where is it that you place your hope? And if Jesus is not the source of new and abundant life in you, then what kind of a life are you really living? On this Easter Sunday, may the presence of the living Christ dispel all doubt! For Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is the Lord of life and the Ruler of life after death. I invite you to enthusiastically join me in the final declaration of today's message: Jesus is alive! Alleluia! Amen!