



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Surprised by Life

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

April 4, 2010

Easter Sunday (Year C)

**Luke 24:1-12**

### Luke 24:1-12

*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 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. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 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.*

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In one of his prayers, Walter Brueggemann asks God to "Easter us in joy and strength." I must admit that as much as I like the language of that prayer, I'm not certain that I'm ready to be Eastered by God, or anyone else for that matter. It sounds like a painful process to me. How exactly does one get Eastered anyway?

One thing's for sure: we don't get Eastered by saccharine celebrations of an Easter joy that fail to take seriously the ache of loss that the world longs to have soothed. Kathleen O'Connor rightly affirms, "Easter joy is the gift of life in the teeth of death."

Yes, this Easter, like countless before, we can look around and see a congregation resplendent in dress, looking better than we do any other Sunday of the year. We can hear the choir outdo itself, and even the lowliest of singers in the congregation have been belting out the *alleluia* hymns. The air is filled with the smell of lilies (and the accompanying sound of allergic sneezing) and everyone knows what to do. There is such energy and anticipation in the air that when the worship leader announces, *Christ is risen*, we joyfully shout the response, *He is risen indeed!*

Yes, on this glorious Easter morning, Christians around the world have been gathering to shout the good news: Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! We've been making plans for weeks now, perhaps months, and there has been little doubt that we would usher in this morning with unequalled joy.

That's one of the gifts of living on this side of Easter. Even though we go through

the painful story of Jesus' death at our service on Friday night, we do so in the full awareness that the one who suffered and died was raised from the dead by the power of God on the third day. And so, when we wake up on Saturday morning, on that day after the worst has happened, it becomes for us a day of anticipation. And so, we woke up this morning fully expecting to hear the news that the tomb was empty, that Jesus—the one who had suffered and died—is alive and at work in the world.

It was not so for the women so many years ago. Luke's description of the women's slow march to the tomb stands in stark contrast to our Easter journey. With heavy steps, they stumbled through the darkness on their way to Jesus' tomb. The darkness of their spirits was mirrored in the darkness of the night, and they were swept along only by the grief that moves us toward the graves of those we love.

As they trudged along, they seemed to be carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders, which, in a way I guess, they were. They had watched the one they and the others had committed their lives to be crushed on the Cross. They and the other disciples had invested their whole lives in what appeared now to be nothing more than a cruel joke. When they had sealed the tomb of Jesus that day, they had done more than seal away his body. They had also buried their own hopes and dreams. One preacher described it as "the night of the end of human hope."

Though we don't have the precise details of how they spent that day after Jesus' death, we do know that they weren't planning their Easter luncheons. Unlike us on this side of Easter who know that Saturday is the day before the great day of God's action to deliver us, Saturday for Mary and the other disciples was the day after the worst that could have happened. As Saturday dawned, it seemed to mark the crowning of the old order, as if everything that plagued human life had somehow prevailed. All that they had hoped for had come crashing down on that terrible Friday, and that long Saturday when nothing seemed to be happening only confirmed their deepest fears. When "the night of the end of human hope" finally ended, the disciples woke to a world that seemed void of everything they hoped that God was up to in Jesus Christ. Hate still seemed stronger than love; despair was far more real than hope; and death seemed to have silenced life forever.

And that's why, if God is to Easter us in joy and strength, God will do so in the teeth of death. The resurrection is God's way of giving us new life, of birthing in us an enduring hope. We announce on Easter morning that the God we worship is the God who has promised to wipe away all tears from all faces, to put an end to our suffering, and to swallow up death forever. We announce that the One who was crucified and buried now lives.

It will be painful to be Eastered by God. It will mean an engagement with the hurts of the world. It will mean becoming acutely aware of the pain of death that torments creation. And to be Eastered will also mean that this pain will not steal our voice. We will shout a word of resurrection directly into the teeth of death. We will speak of "God's limitless ability to raise up life in the midst of every conceivable death."

Even then, some will ask, "But how can this be?" That's a natural question for someone to ask when we dare to affirm on Easter morning that life is more powerful than death, that love is stronger than hate, that hope is more real than despair. *How can this*

*be?*

At one level, that's the question that drives the Gospel of Luke. By the time the church arrives breathless at the tomb in Luke's gospel, the question has been voiced countless times: By Zechariah, who couldn't imagine that Elizabeth would give birth. By Mary, who never could have dreamed all that she would have to ponder in her heart. Time and again, Luke pauses just long enough for us to ask the question. How can rough places be made plain and crooked ways straight? How can valleys be lifted up and mountains and hills brought low? How can the poor rejoice and the hungry be fed and the barren ones give birth and the lowly ones be lifted up? How can the deaf ones hear and the weeping ones laugh? *How can this be?*

All throughout his gospel, Luke places this question on the lips of those who encounter the unexpected newness of God in Jesus Christ. And, even when it's not on someone's lips, you can almost hear the stones whispering it to us—even the stone that had been rolled away by the power of God. *How can this be?*

This is the mystery of the God who has power to bring life out of death. Underlying all that we proclaim on Easter morning is Gabriel's announcement from earlier in Luke: "For nothing will be impossible with God." Not the undoing of death. Not the gift of life from the grave. Not even the birth of hope that all flesh will see the salvation of God.

It is in our Easter song—in our proclamation of resurrection—that the church announces the presence of the reign of God in the midst of the world. We announce that God is in charge. As C.S. Song observed, "The resurrection life is the reign of God. To live that life is to live a life in all fullness in spite of the fact that it has to be lived in hardship, pain, and suffering."

Twelve years ago, on the way home from the denominational senior high conference (CPYC), one of the vans from Texas was involved in an accident. Six teenagers were killed and an entire denomination was reeling. The six were from three different churches in Texas, and each held services for their own.

But the young people who had participated in CPYC with them wanted a memorial service as well. Several weeks later, we gathered in Milan, TN to bear witness to the resurrection for six people who died far too soon.

I had been the worship leader at the conference that week, so I was invited to assist the conference director during the service. As I glanced over the program, it all seemed eerily familiar. The director had crafted the memorial service by using prayers and responses and affirmations from the worship bulletins we had all used during the conference.

The music was also the same. The songs that we sang that night were the ones that we had sung together all that week at camp. One song in particular grabbed our attention—*The Lord of the Dance*. That song had an accompanying tradition at CPYC. As soon as it started, huge lines would form and folks would start bunny hopping all over the place. You could feel the tension in the air as that song approached. Everyone seemed to be wondering, "Are we going to dance? Should we dance now like we did then? Is it appropriate to dance tonight?"

The song started, and we sang together, *I danced in the morning when the world was begun, and I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun, and I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth, at Bethlehem I had my birth. Dance, then, wherever you may be, for I am the Lord of the Dance, said he, and I'll lead you on, wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.*

Somehow, a line formed. I don't remember seeing who started it, or how it began, but before long, most of the young people and more than a few of the adults were on their feet dancing a jig in the face of death. Here was the worst thing that many of them had lived through, and yet they were able to dance life because they heard the risen Christ calling to them, *Dance then, wherever you may be, for I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.*

The last thing we expected to do that night was dance. We were not unlike the women who made their way to Jesus' tomb in Luke's Gospel who never dreamed that they would be running back to witness to what they had seen, heard, and remembered at the tomb. We were simply swept away by something that I'm not sure we could fully explain.

How can it be that the church could dance at a time like that? How can we dance life today in a world where we fire missiles at enemies, where violence stalks our streets, where apathy infects our schools, and where so many are in the depths of despair? We dance not because we always feel like dancing. No, we dance because the life of faith lived within the context of the church is created and guided by the Spirit's power through the gift of Christ's resurrection. The church allows its imagination to be formed by scripture, in which we find a world that redefines the world around us. The church "imagines itself in a world filled with the power of the resurrected life, and in the constant presence of the Living One through word, sacrament, fellowship, prayer and solidarity with the suffering."

Those gathered for worship in Milan, Tennessee that night heard the risen Christ beckoning them onto the dance floor, to dance life, to celebrate resurrection, even though they were in the teeth of death. This was a deep joy that could not have been expected or generated by human effort. It was the gift of a God who drew near to Easter us in joy and strength.

And so, God now sends us into this world, and we dare not forget the truth: that this world is filled with the power of resurrection, and God is making all things new.

At its heart that's what Massanutten Cares is all about. If you're not signed up to take part yet, stop by the table following worship and find a place to serve. We will leave the sanctuary today with the news ringing in our hearts and ears: Christ is risen indeed! And God will send us into the world literally teeming with resurrection, and we will go as those sent to bear witness that God is ready to Easter us this day: May God help us be Eastered out of death into life: "You defeater of death, whose power could not hold you, come in your Easter, come in your sweeping victory, come in your glorious new life. Easter us, salve wounds, break injustice, bring peace, guarantee neighbor, Easter us in joy and strength."