

Easter Sermon 2022

“. . .the angels said to the women, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.’” Luke 24:5

The Reverend Luther Zeigler
Emmanuel Church, Manchester-by-the-Sea, MA
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I was driving to New Hampshire this past Wednesday to prepare for Holy Week services at the Lutheran Church I am presently serving in Newington, when something came on the radio that grabbed my attention. It was a local station broadcasting an interview with an elderly Ukrainian-American woman. Her name was Irina. She had emigrated with her late husband to the United States some fifty years ago from Bucha and had moved to a small town somewhere in the Green Mountains of New Hampshire where she still lives. Irina’s younger sister, however, and the rest of her extended family had remained in Bucha.

Most of us, I suspect, had never heard of Bucha until these past few weeks when this commuter suburb of Kiev became the focus of international concern and moral outrage in the wake of an alleged massacre of hundreds Ukrainian civilians by invading Russian soldiers.

“I haven’t heard from my sister in weeks,” Irina tearfully explained to the radio host. “I can’t get any information out of Bucha. I don’t know whether she is dead or live. All I can do is wait,” she said, “and pray.”

The radio host paused, obviously moved by Irina’s deep pain. Then, he said: “The waiting must be excruciating. What do you do to keep yourself from going crazy?”

“I paint pysanky eggs,” Irina offered. “In my country it is customary to paint these eggs during Lent as we wait for the coming of Easter and the resurrection of Christ. We show our faith in God’s love and promise of new life by creating eggs of spectacular color and intricate design. Painting pysanky at least helps to calm my nerves.”

Irina then went on to share the Ukrainian folk legend behind pysanky. On the other side of the world, the story goes, Evil is chained to a cliff, eager to break the shackles that keep him tied down, so that he might wreak havoc on the world. But every time a pysanka is painted anywhere in the world, this act of faith tightens the chains just a bit more, keeping evil at bay.

“Our faith,” Irina explained to her radio host, “is in a God who overcomes evil and suffering by inviting His people to use their hearts to love and their hands to create beautiful symbols of new life in gratitude for the gift of the risen Christ.”

Irina is just one more faithful woman in a long line of faithful women staking their lives on the hope of Easter. When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women went to the tomb on Easter morning thousands of years ago, they too were worried that all had been lost. They had witnessed an atrocity every bit as horrible as what is coming out of Bucha. With their own eyes they saw the brutality of an arrogant and power-thirsty world crush the body of their beloved Teacher, Jesus. These women had every reason to believe that Jesus’ broken body on the Cross was the end of the story, that hate and death had won out after all.

But rather than flee like the male disciples, the women, moved by compassion and unconcerned for their own safety, went to the tomb on Sunday morning to care for the body of their friend. We can only imagine their astonishment when they

found no body, but were instead greeted by angels gently asking them: “why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”

What do we make of this strange scene? An empty tomb, a group of bewildered women, a holy report that Jesus is not dead but alive.

The first thing to notice is that these women are *present*. Despite their grief and the obvious risk of being caught by the authorities, the women are all there, *seeking* Jesus. Unlike the men, all of whom have fled in fear, in some cases having repeatedly denied even knowing Jesus, the women show up. They persevere. They don't give up on God. Among many other things, their example teaches us that the living Christ comes to those who seek him.

The second thing to note about these women is that their presence is animated neither by idle curiosity nor self-interest, but rather by an overwhelming sense of *compassion*. They bring spices to honor and care for the dead body they are expecting to find. Indeed, it was this same outpouring of compassion that brought many of these same women, according to John's gospel, to sit at the foot of the Cross as Jesus died on Friday. These women want to be a balm to the wounded, a comfort to the dying. Thus, the second lesson we can take away from this story is that Christ appears to those who open themselves to the hurts of the world.

Finally, upon discovering that the tomb is empty, and being reminded by the angelic visitors that Jesus had promised he would rise to new life, note that the women immediately *trust* in the risen Christ's presence and *run to tell their story to others*. Again, unlike the male disciples, who initially dismiss the angel's report as an idle tale, and who demand some tangible evidence of resurrection, the women come to faith by trusting in the power of Jesus' ministry and the promises he had made to

them. They are willing to believe in the enduring goodness of what they had experienced.

This is no mere gullibility on their part. Remember that these women, whom we first encountered in the eighth chapter of Luke, had been followers of Jesus throughout his Galilean ministry. Indeed, Luke tells us that they were women of means who had given up their resources to support Jesus and the disciples. Selfless servants, a silent presence in the background, they nevertheless had been devoted followers from the beginning, and were present for Jesus' teaching, for his healing of the sick, and for his prophetic challenges to the powers and principalities of this world.

The women, in short, kept their faith in Jesus' divine authority and the Kingdom he had begun to inaugurate. These truths were not things they could prove, but they were truths they had come to live by and were willing to stake their lives on. They had met a man who was a true God-bearer and they believed in his risen life. And they were eager to proclaim his message of love, peace, and reconciliation.

In sum, one of the most striking truths about the gospels is that Christ's story begins and ends with women. God chose to enter our world through the faithful willingness of a young woman, Mary, to bear him as an infant child, and God also chose to entrust the astonishing news of his Son's resurrected life first to the care of women. While the women of the gospels are nearly always faithful and trusting in their response to Jesus, the men more often than not are off pursuing their own glory (like James and John vying to be the greatest of the disciples), or denying their friend in a pinch (like Peter), or watching from afar in a crisis (like Andrew,

Matthew, Thomas, Nathaniel, Bartholomew, Philip, and Simon), or even worse, betraying their friend into the hands of death (like Judas).

Which brings me back to Irina. Despite my best efforts to learn more about her story, and the plight of her sister and family back in Bucha, I have come up dry. I am left only with the memory of Irina's plaintive voice echoing over the airwaves and the vision of her faithfully painting pysanky as she waits for the coming of Christ and the salvation he brings.

If we want to know what it means to have an Easter faith in the midst of a dark and uncertain world, maybe, just maybe, it is to people like Irina, and to the women of the New Testament, that we should turn: to their abiding presence; to their tender care for the suffering and abandoned; to their willingness to trust in God's promises; and to their courage in fearlessly proclaiming the Easter message to a suspicious world. These faithful women folk are the true messengers of the gospel.

The Easter story is no idle tale, my friends. Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!