

Easter 2016 The Story

We have spent this week in our services following the events of Holy Week. Last Sunday we talked about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Sunday night we discussed the events of the week up to Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Friday night we talked about the events from his arrest in the garden through his death upon the cross. This morning I want to take us the rest of the way! Turn first to Luke 22. I want to point out something Jesus said as he was arrested in the garden. As he is taken into custody by the temple guards, Jesus said, **"Am I leading a rebellion that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour – when darkness reigns."** Luke 22:52-53

What a stark phrase. "This is your hour – when darkness reigns." Jesus wasn't talking about a lack of illumination in the garden. The phrase more literally reads "this is your hour and that of the authority of darkness." Jesus knew who and what was behind all of this. Satan had planned and plotted from the beginning to bring an end to the Savior of the world. Ironically, Jesus' death on the cross would accomplish the very opposite of what the powers and authority of darkness desired. Through the resurrection, Jesus will conquer Satan and death and hell and all of its authority and power. But for the moment, darkness reigns. For the moment, in this hour, Jesus is betrayed into the hands of sinners. For the moment, darkness rules and Satan seems to have the upper hand.

Everything about those events must have seemed dark to the disciples. It had been a confusing week to say the least. It had begun with the high emotion of the triumphal entry into the city, the crowds accompanying Jesus crying, "hosanna," but the talk at the table during the Passover meal that night had turned to talk of betrayal and death. "One of you will betray me," Jesus had said. Hardly pleasant dinner conversation. He had spoken of his body broken, his blood spilled out for their sins and then they had come to the garden. Jesus had gone alone some distance where he agonized in prayer while his disciples slept. Jesus awakens them to the sounds of guards approaching. There is confusion as Judas suddenly steps out of the darkness and kisses Jesus on the cheek, betraying him into the hands of the chief priest and the temple guards. They place him under arrest, bind him and take him to the house of Caiaphas, the chief priest. This is the hour – when darkness reigns.

The authority of darkness reigned as the innocent, sinless, Son of God is condemned to die upon the cross. In agony the innocent dies for the guilty. The apostle Paul declaring, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21** The one who had never sinned was made to be sin for us. God laid the sins of the whole world upon this supreme and sinless substitute. As he hung on the cross Luke tells us “darkness came over the whole land... for the sun stopped shining.” Darkness seemed to be literally reigning as Jesus gave his life for us.

Think for a moment about the darkness that must have fallen on the disciples. They had scattered in fear when Jesus was arrested. John and the Mother of Jesus and some of the women had followed Jesus to Golgotha and they were there as he died. They had to be thinking, “What can we do now? It’s almost the start of Sabbath. We don’t even have a place to bury him. We can’t take him back to the Galilee, to Nazareth. What will we do?”

Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who had not consented to the decision to convict Jesus owned a tomb in a garden area just below Golgotha. He had asked permission from Pilate to claim Jesus’ body for burial and Pilate had agreed. Joseph and Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had come to Jesus secretly by night asking how he could be born again, took Jesus’ body, wrapped it in linen along with some spices and carried it down the hill to the garden, placing Jesus’ body into one of the tombs that had been cut out of the rock.

A rolling stone was placed over the entrance to the tomb with a sealing stone rolled into place above it, securing the entrance. If you’ve ever walked away from the gravesite of a loved one, you know the sadness and darkness that accompanied them on the walk back to town. High hopes lie buried in that borrowed tomb. They had hoped he was the Messiah, the one to redeem Israel, but now, all hope was gone. Jesus was dead and darkness reigned.

All of us who have lost someone precious to us know how they felt that evening as they returned to the city. We don’t know where they went. Remember they were visitors to Jerusalem. Perhaps they went back to the upper room where they had celebrated the Passover with Jesus. It was a guest room, a guest house so it is possible they had kept the room along with the others who had come along with Jesus from the Galilee. Maybe some of them went back to the garden, to the meeting place where they had last been with Jesus. Perhaps they thought they might feel his presence there once again. You know the feeling. Exhausted, numb, sad, frightened, insecure about the future. It’s like there is a mental and emotional fog that settles

over you. You can't quite break free from the grief and sorrow. You can't make your way through the fog. Darkness reigns.

The disciples go through the motions of their evening prayers. After all, it is the Sabbath. The candles are lit and the Shabbat prayers are prayed. I wonder what they felt as they passed the bread and the cup that evening, remembering Jesus' words at the last supper. The Sabbath meal is eaten with gratitude, but the darkness almost feels as if it is choking them. The permanence of death, the magnitude of their loss robs them of peace.

The darkness and silence of Saturday must have been overwhelming to the disciples. They awakened Saturday morning hoping it had all been a bad dream, only to find it was reality. Jesus was still dead. Their hopes were still shut up in that tomb. Death appears to have the last and final word. Darkness reigns.

We know what they were feeling, all of us. Maybe you've escaped the loss of a family member or close friend so far, but if you live long enough, you'll know the feeling. But all of us know what it is like to have our hopes shattered, to be disappointed because things didn't turn out the way we hoped, the way we planned. All of us know what it is like to see darkness reign, to see injustice prevail, to see the innocent suffer unfairly. We know what it's like to suffer defeat and wonder where God was when it was happening. Why didn't he step in to change things? Why didn't he deliver us? Why didn't he intervene? Darkness reigns.

Look around. Read the paper or watch the nightly news. It's obvious that darkness reigns. It seems to me things are so broken they are beyond repair. Everywhere we look there is conflict and wickedness, suffering and trouble. Why doesn't God intervene? What are we going to do? It all looks hopeless. I think that might have been what was running through the minds of the disciples as they went to bed Saturday night. Sabbath was over. Jesus was dead. There wasn't much point in staying around Jerusalem. We'll spend a few more days and then make a plan for the journey home.

Early Sunday morning, everything changed. The reports came one after the other. Luke tells us **“On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with 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; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ Then they remembered his words.” Luke 24:1-8

The women that had gone to the tomb included Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Salome, Mary the mother of James and others. Mark tells us some of them, “trembling and bewildered, fled from the tomb.” Mary Magdalene and some of the others found their way to the disciples and told them what they had seen and heard but Luke tells us the disciples didn’t believe the women because it sounded like hysterical nonsense to them. How could the stone be rolled away and the body gone? Who would have taken his body? Could he really have risen from the dead? While some questioned, Peter and John ran all the way to the tomb to investigate. From the evidence they believed something miraculous had happened, they just weren’t certain what that was.

Apparently when Peter and John ran to the tomb, Mary Magdalene had followed after them. Peter and John left to return to the disciples but Mary lingered outside the tomb, weeping. When she turned around she saw a man standing there that she assumed was the gardener, the person in charge. He asked, **“Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”** she said, **“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.”** **“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her.” John 20:15-18**

Later that same evening the disciples were together with the doors locked, frightened that the authorities might be coming after them and trying to make sense of all they had seen and heard. Two followers of Jesus, Cleopas and another brother had returned from Emmaus saying they had met the risen Lord and had talked with him. They recognized him when he broke bread with them and he had suddenly disappeared from their sight! While the disciples are trying to process all of this, suddenly, Jesus is standing among them, saying “Peace be with you.” They couldn’t believe it Luke tells us until Jesus showed them his hands and his side, ate some broiled fish with them and convinced them he was in fact alive, flesh and bone. He was risen indeed.

John tells us that one of the disciples, Thomas, wasn't there when Jesus appeared to them. He said he wouldn't believe it unless he could touch the holes in Jesus hands where the nails had been. A few days later, Jesus came to them again and this time Thomas was present. Thomas saw him and declared "My Lord and My God!" Jesus said, **"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."** John 20:29. John then wrote, **"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name."** John 20:30-31

There's the Easter story and here are three simple thoughts to take with you. First of all, **Easter means Jesus died for our sins.** The prophet Isaiah said, "He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, chastised for our transgressions." In other words, the punishment that should have fallen on us because we were guilty of breaking God's commands, we were sinners...that punishment was laid upon Jesus. He took our place, bore our sin and our punishment and died in our stead.

Second, **Easter means Jesus rose from the dead.** Bodily. Physically. These weren't apparitions or ghost like appearances. He ate with them, cooked breakfast for them, walked with them, talked with them. He was seen by more than 500 people at once according to the apostle Paul and some of those eye witnesses were still alive at the end of the first century. He is risen and his resurrection assures us that everything Jesus said and did was the truth. He really was the Son of God and our Savior. The cross lets us know atonement was made for our sins. The empty tomb and the resurrection lets us know the atonement has been accepted by the Father. Our sins have been forgiven and that was validated by his resurrection!

The bible says **"That if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."** Romans 10:9-10

John said by believing – that Jesus died for your sins and rose again, by believing that he is Savior and Lord – by trusting in him to save you, you will have life in his name. That's what Easter is all about.

Finally, the third thing I want you to consider is the events we've discussed this morning, the silence of Friday and Saturday reminds us, **Easter means God hasn't said all he is going to say and he hasn't done all he is going to do, yet!** This is the hour when darkness reigns, but don't let the darkness fool you into believing this is the last word. Don't let the darkness defeat you. It looks like darkness will win. Injustice seems to be prevailing. Bad things happen to good people, but God hasn't said all he is going to say and he hasn't done all he is going to do, yet. Friday and Saturday were long and painful for the disciples because it seemed like darkness had the last word, but God wasn't finished yet. He hadn't said all he was going to say. Easter and the resurrection remind us the day is coming when God himself will have the final say. He will have the last words over sin and sickness and injustice and death. He will have the last words and those words will be Victory! Life! Resurrection! Reunion! Home! Darkness and death aren't going to have the last word!

That Easter Sunday morning was just a glimpse, just a foretaste of what will be when God has the final word for all of us. This may be the hour when darkness reigns, but God hasn't said all he is going to say and he hasn't done all he is going to do yet. Trust and believe and keep on trusting. Darkness isn't going to reign forever. The resurrection is proof that Jesus will have the final word and He will reign forever and ever! King of Kings and Lord of Lords!