Living in Light of the Resurrection
A Sermon by Jeff Carlson
St. Pauls United Church of Christ, Chicago
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Christ is risen!
Christ is risen, indeed!

I love hearing that! We’re saying those words a lot this morning, and I don’t think we can possibly say them enough. It’s easy to forget that Christ is indeed risen. Everyday life and everyday death have a way of making us forget the resurrection.

Mary Magdalene and Joanna and all the other Marys – there’s something about Mary and Easter, isn’t there? - the Marys forgot. They forgot that Jesus had told them that it would happen this way, that on the third day he would rise again. They came to the tomb expecting to find death, and so the angels at the tomb say to them, “Don’t you remember?”

They did not remember what Jesus had said, but they did remember something that weekend. They remembered the Sabbath. That’s how Luke begins the story of Easter, not on Sunday morning, but on Saturday. The women had prepared spices to perfume his body, but there wasn’t enough time to finish the job, because it was Saturday, and the women had to rest. Keeping the Sabbath was a habit, a way of life that they had known since they were little girls and memorized the Ten Commandments.

Keeping the Sabbath is about remembering. “Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy,” is how the commandment goes. The thing about this command is that it doesn’t tell you to do anything. It tells you to do absolutely nothing at all.

Sabbath is rooted in the story of creation. Remember: God rested from the work of creation, and if God can rest so can you. It’s a commandment that’s rooted in deliverance. Remember: God freed you from slavery, so you don’t have to be a slave anymore. Your worth is not measured by your net worth, by what you produce or by what you own. Your life is a gift. You can rest. Remember. The women’s lives had been shaped through a lifetime of keeping the Sabbath, and so they put down their spices, they stopped dealing with death and they rested. All of their pain, all of their anxiety to make sure Jesus had a proper burial, all of their desire to do something useful, they had to let it rest with God.
On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment, but on the first day of the week. Easter morning arrives with just one little word - but. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb.

They expect to pick up right where they’d left off on Friday afternoon, dealing with death. But they find no body to anoint. There is no body to perfume with the spices they’d prepared to keep away the stench of death. When I read this story, I wonder what did they do with all of those unused spices?

I like to think that on Sunday night they used them to make mulled wine. And the smell of those spices reminded them that instead of being met by the stench of death when they came to the tomb all they could smell was the cool, sweet breeze of dawn.

The Marys find no body; instead they realize that they are the ones who have been found. They’ve been found by angels. The angels ask the women a question: Why do you seek the living among the dead?

Why? The women are not seeking the living at all. They are seeking the dead among the dead. But if they want to find Jesus - if we want to find Jesus - then we must look for him among the living.

What I find remarkable in Luke’s version of the story is the way in which Jesus spends his first day of life in the world as the risen Christ. If you knew that you were never going to die, how would you spend the rest of this day? How would you live your life if you knew that death had no power over you? Those are the questions of Easter.

The way that Jesus spends his first day of resurrected life is by going for a walk in the country.

On Easter Sunday, two of his disciples leave Jerusalem for a village called Emmaus, seven miles away. And while they’re walking along they’re joined by a stranger. As they walk, they discuss with the stranger the recent events in Jerusalem. They talk about scripture and how it connects with what happened to Jesus. As they approach the village, it’s late, and they say to the stranger, “Stay with us, it soon is evening and night is falling.” They invite him into their home and he stays; they share a meal together. And when he breaks the bread their eyes are opened and they recognize that the stranger has been Jesus all along. The living is among the living.

That’s how Jesus spends the first day of resurrection life. He goes for a walk in the country with old friends. He engages them in rich, thoughtful conversation. He spends the evening in their home and they share a meal together. The first Easter Sunday is a perfectly ordinary day - a good, full, simply beautiful human day that is fully alive with the presence of the risen Christ.
In March of 1944, a year before his execution by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this in a letter from prison: “To live in the light of the resurrection – that is what Easter means – to live in the light of the resurrection…most people don’t know what they really live by.” Do you know what you live by?

Bonhoeffer is getting at the same thing that the angels asked the women: Why do you seek the living among the dead? Why do you live like you do? Why do you live in the light of death, rather than in the light of the resurrection?

To not live in light of the resurrection is to live in a state of anxiety. Death makes us think that we might miss out on something. We are living in light of death when we try to fill our lives with as many comforts and as many experiences as we possibly can before we kick the bucket. We lead incredibly busy lives, choosing breadth over depth, because there is never enough time to cram it all in.

In the resurrection of Jesus, God gives time back to us. God gives us all the time that we need to live deeply and to be fully human, fully alive, because we no longer need fear death. We no longer need fear that we are missing out on anything. To live in light of the resurrection is to wake up each morning and remember: this is the day that the Lord has made and I will rejoice and live fully in it.

Stanley Hauerwas says that Jesus is nothing less than the embodiment of God’s Sabbath as a reality for all people. Like the women who came to the tomb, formed by a lifetime of keeping the Sabbath one day a week, “the resurrection of Jesus makes it possible for all of us to rest, to have confidence that our lives are in God’s hands. No longer”, says Hauerwas, “is the Sabbath just one day, but it’s the form of life of a people on the move. We can rest in God because we are no longer driven by the assumption that we must be in control of history.” Easter gives us rest “because we are no longer driven by the assumption that it’s up to us to make everything come out right.”

This afternoon, right after church, I’m catching a train to North Dakota. It’s been 6 months since I’ve seen my mother, and it’s time for a visit. She turned 88 last Monday. The train is significantly cheaper than flying, but I’ve also found that it’s significantly more human. It’s like a 700-mile road to Emmaus. There is time to read. There is time to walk around and stretch your legs. There is time to eat a meal with strangers.

When I get to North Dakota, I will spend my evenings with my sister, and I will spend my days with my mother in her room at the nursing home. The big excitement of the day is when we eat dinner in the dining room with her table mates; but there’s not much conversation at the table because the ones who are alert enough to converse are unable to hear. The rest of the day we sit
next to each other in her room. She naps. We visit. Her room is too warm, and so I find myself 
joining her in a nap. I’ll rub her 88 year-old feet and we’ll remember life together. At 88, her life is 
every bit as precious and beloved by God as when her feet were 8 years-old and running barefoot through the pastures of her father’s farm.

I speak of my experience with her not because it is unique but because it is one we all share, or 
will share. Your aging parents take you to Iowa or Michigan or Ohio. You go to medical 
appointments that are not your own. You learn patience. You learn to speak a little more slowly and a little more loudly. You learn how quickly life passes and what a precious gift life is. You learn to live in light of the resurrection.

Living in the light of the resurrection opens up time for life, time for depth – time to sit quietly 
with the elderly; time to go on long walks with friends and to welcome strangers into your home; 
time to share in good conversation; time to eat slow meals together around the table; time to feed 
the hungry and to look out for the least among us; time to create art and to sing many songs; time 
to forgive and to be forgiven. Easter gives us time to live fully and deeply human lives among 
the living, because the one who is fully divine and lived a fully human life is risen from the dead, 
and we don’t need to be afraid that we will miss out on anything.

Easter is a promise: God has not abandoned our world, even when we crucified God’s very own. 
The world matters to God. Creation matters to God. Your life matters to God. In the life, death 
and resurrection of Christ, God embraces us completely and will never abandon us.

At this communion table we will soon eat the flesh and drink the blood of the risen Christ. 
Hauerwas notes that at this table we are consumed by what we consume. We are always 
consumed by what we consume, aren’t we? At this table we consume life. We eat his body and 
drink his blood to remember that the body is not in the tomb. The body is not in the tomb 
because the body of Christ is right here – it’s all of you in this room. The living one is among the 
living. Christ is risen indeed!

1 Stanley Hauerwas, The Hauerwas Reader, eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University 
Press, 2001), 133.

Luke 24:1-12
On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment, 
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.