

But

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Eagle River, Wisconsin
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Text: Luke 24:1-12

It was April of 1997. The scene was the small Indian village of Acteal in the Mexican province of Chiapas. Four months earlier, to the day, there had been a massacre in this village. A group of Catholic pacifist activists who called themselves, Las Abejas, “the bees,” had been gunned down by members of a militia. No one was completely certain why. Some think that the Mexican government, which was putting down an insurgency in Chiapas, may have been behind it; others conjectured that more militant revolutionaries had taken exception to the Abejas’ nonviolent approach. But whoever did it, the end result was that 45 people had been killed in the village church while they were worshipping.

On that April day, four months later, there was a memorial service in the village, and I, accompanied by some companions, was privileged to attend it. It was the first day of the rainy season, and the rain was coming down in buckets. Blue tarps supported by poles served as a makeshift roof sheltering the worshippers who had assembled in the graveyard where the victims of the massacre had been buried. From time to time a guy would come around with a long pole, which he would use to poke at the sagging tarps where water had pooled. If you found yourself at the wrong spot at the wrong moment, you were a candidate for a thorough drenching. The ground was so saturated with water that we had to keep shifting our feet to keep from sinking in.

All of the people attending this service, except our group from the United States, were indigenous people. They were wearing their Sunday best--immaculate white, knee-length tunics with embroidered trim. The service was conducted in their Indian language and in Spanish by the village priest, and was translated for us by friends from the local Catholic diocese. Even though it was already three weeks after Easter, the theme of the service was the resurrection. “Our friends are not dead,” the priest told the assembled worshippers. “They are alive; they live among us; their spirit inspires us, their example is always before us. Death has won no victory here. We believe in the resurrection because we have

experienced it.” At the conclusion of the service, the elements of communion were distributed, and everybody knelt in the mud and we prayed our prayers of thanksgiving for the risen Christ who had been made known to us in the breaking of the bread. That soggy service lasted two and a half hours, but nobody, including us North Americans who normally chafe at any worship service that exceeds an hour, looked at their watches.

Afterward, a U.S.-based journalist came up to me to express his pent-up frustration. “I came here to interview the relatives of the victims of the massacre, but nobody will talk to me. How am I going to write my story?” I said, “You just saw people kneeling in the mud over the graves of their friends and family members while they were celebrating the reality of resurrection. This is a story that should write itself.” He smiled, and asked, “If it wrote itself, what would it say?”

Well, here’s what it would say. “But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee 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. . . . Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. . . ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.’”

In Luke’s account of the discovery of Jesus’ resurrection, a passage of only 12 verses, Luke uses the word “but” six times. “But on the first day of the week,” the passage begins. “But when they went in they did not find the body,” it continues, “the women bowed down, but the men in white said to them, ‘He is not here, but has risen.’” And after these women had reported all this to the fearful men, we read, “But these words seemed to (the disciples) an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb.”

That little three-letter conjunction, “but” introduces statements that are contrary to expectation, and Luke uses it over and over again to stress how unbelievable, how totally unexpected, these events were, and are. You can almost feel Luke’s breathless amazement even as he wrote this account some thirty years after the event. The women expected to have to roll the stone away from the tomb, *but* the stone had already been rolled away. They expected find Jesus’ body, *but* it was gone, and in its place were two men in dazzling white. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, *but* he is

risen!” And then, and then, those women rushed to tell the disciples, the men who had followed Jesus, the ones who were hunkered down and fearful in their little hideout in Jerusalem. And, of course, they didn’t believe this astonishing story. Would you? *But* Peter at least had the gumption to check it out. And it was exactly as he had been told.

If we’re not amazed and breathless at the Easter story; if it is, each year, the same ol’ same ol’, if it is what we expect to hear, then we haven’t really heard the story. The amazing thing about the Easter story, if we really listen to it, is that things don’t turn out the way we expect them to. The Easter story is all about surprise. On Palm Sunday, just a week earlier, when Pilate came marching into Jerusalem on his war horse with his troops, while Jesus was coming in through another gate, riding a donkey, with his ragtag group of unemployed fishermen, tax-collectors, and people on the wrong side of respectability, who would you think would have the final word? And later in the week, when even that motley crew of followers had melted away and Jesus was left, utterly abandoned and alone, when he was one solitary soul at the mercy of the political and religious powers of the day and a belligerent mob, when he was dying an excruciating death on that lonely Jerusalem hillside, who would you think would have the final word?

The message of Easter is that it is love, and not death, that has the final word. The powers of death can do their worst, but love endures. Pilate is but a historical footnote; the high priests Annas and Caiaphas are but difficult names for those who have to read scripture during Holy Week. But Jesus, the one who emptied himself on the cross, is eternally with us; his name lies at the very center of our identity, and the identity of another 2 billion or so people around the world. Those other seemingly powerful men are mere footnotes in history. Jesus, on the other hand, shaped history and promises a future.

The enduring truth of our faith tells us that love survives the grave; it tells us, as St. Paul so wonderfully put it, that love hopes all things, believes all things, and endures all things. The enduring truth of Easter is that love never ends. The eternity of love isn’t time without end; it’s timelessness. The Pilates of this world, the hypocrites who use religion cynically and destructively, all of them come and go; they do their mischief, they play with their illusory power, and then they’re gone. They’ve left nothing that survives the grave, except, perhaps, a bad reputation. But love--the love that was and is Jesus in the flesh, Immanuel, God-with-us: that love is eternal, that love is timeless. People under the

spell of sin may cruelly wield the power of death, but they never have the last word. Martin Luther King, Jr., lives in our memory, but only a few of us remember the name of his killer, James Earl Ray. We remember Archbishop Romero, but his cowardly assassins remain nameless, blanks in the historical record.

In the graveyard of Acteal in Mexico, those Indian peasants were celebrating. They weren't consumed by revenge; they weren't looking forward to the day when they could dance on the graves of their enemies, as we might expect angry and grieving people to do. In that cemetery, kneeling on the graves of those they had lost, they were keeping alive the memories and the witness of those who had been murdered, they were reliving the resurrection story of scripture in their own lives. "You can't kill love," they were saying. Love will always outlast human sin. You can't seal up love in a tomb; love will always break the bonds of death. No matter how large the boulder that blocks the tomb we've built for ourselves, love will roll it away and let the light of Easter morning shine in.

This morning, we sang that beloved Easter hymn that includes the words, "love's redeeming work is done." I love that hymn. It always brings tears of joy to my eyes, sweet recollections of Easters past, renewed joy after a long season of Lent and the tragedy of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But I have a small quibble with that one phrase of the hymn. The message of Easter is that love's redeeming work is never done. If we are the body of Christ, then Jesus' resurrection isn't the end of the story; it's the beginning of the story, and it's our responsibility not only to tell of the resurrection but to live it. Those flawed and fearful disciples were transformed by experience of the resurrection; they became new people. Most of them, the very same people who had abandoned Jesus, were inspired by the resurrection to endure martyrdom as they professed their faith to a disbelieving world. Their witness is immortal. So, no, Easter isn't the end of the story. For us, it's just the beginning.

Sometimes in our lives, it seems that sin and death do have the upper hand. Sometimes our fears can literally overwhelm us. "The darkness around us is deep," as the poet William Stafford put it. But, here's the story that should write itself: in the most unlikely of places, from the most unlikely of people, from the one who was betrayed, abandoned and murdered, there is the light of new life. So with Luke we say, "But....but, Christ is risen! Christ is risen! Alleluia!" Amen.

