

Easter Sunday 2024 - Invited To...Resurrection (Reprise)

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 00] And if you are willing, would you pray with me? Precious God, matchless one, risen king who rules in a way that opposes all the dominating rule in this world.

We gather on this morning to see you risen and to live into the meaning of that for our own lives. I pray that you would help us to settle into our own bodies in this moment, to hear your voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd. In Jesus' name, amen.

Amen. So good morning. Good morning. Yes, I like this a lot of this. Yes. I love it. My name is Tonetta.

I am one of the co-lead pastors here at the Table Church, and it is my absolute privilege to be here in front of you. This morning, we gather to celebrate, to honor a story that is at the very epicenter of the Christian faith.

[1 : 20] If you know me, you know that I often like to start my preaching with a beautiful piece of literature, or maybe a profound saying, or a poem that strikes the heart.

But today, I actually want to start with the story itself. The story of the resurrection that is found in John 20, 1 through 18.

A story that I think is more profound and more poetic than anything else I can name. And it's a story that I think is perfectly fitting for this day.

This Easter, which is also the trans day of visibility. In which, that's right. That's right. That's right. This day when we seek to follow the incredible examples of the trans folks among us when it comes to resurrection in the body.

[2 : 22] So, as we move forward, feel free to follow along with the words on the screen, or if you want to just kind of inhale the scene, feel free to close your eyes as well.

John says this. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

So, she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there. But he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came following him and went into the tomb.

[3 : 34] He saw the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple who reached the tomb first also went in and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.

Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb.

She saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, Woman, why are you weeping?

She said to them, They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.

When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there.

[4 : 43] She did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for? Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him in Hebrew, Rabuni, which means teacher. Jesus said to her, Do not touch me because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to the brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord. And she told them that he had said these things to her. This Easter, as on every Easter, we confront a mystery.

Something incredibly hard to believe, at least in a literal sense. About a month ago, the community group that I hosted my home came over, and the leader for the night suggested that we start with an icebreaker question.

[6 : 07] It was a good one. But because I was tired, and when I get tired, if you know me, I get silly and boisterous and I become extremely unfiltered. Extremely.

Extremely. I said something like, we can also break the ice by going around and saying whether we each believe in the literal resurrection, the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Everybody laughed. Some of that laughter was nervous laughter, especially for the people who are newcomers to the group. I reassured them that I was joking, sort of.

And then we went around, and every single person expressed a desire to actually answer the question. And not to my surprise, we were evenly split.

With more than one person saying that their belief in the literal bodily resurrection was like 80-20 or 40-60.

[7 : 07] It might depend on the day or if a pastor's in the room, you know. Yeah. Yeah. And this morning, I know the same is true in this room.

We are this multi-theological community. I know that we hold the resurrection in different ways. But we do confront a mystery today.

And mysteries are always there to ensure that we remain open, that we remain alert and aware.

They are meant to catch us off guard, to help us let down our defenses.

They help us remember that truth and reality are not things to pin down, but are things instead to let interrupt us, to transform us, maybe even to save us.

They help us remember that God will not be caged, will not be pinned down either, and that is a great, great gift. But we're in the next one.

[8 : 18] We're in the next one. We're in the next one. This story, which contains a transformative mystery, begins early on the first day of the week. It begins, as all true resurrection stories do, in darkness.

Mary Magdalene is so intense on going to the tomb that she sets out before the sun comes up. And when she gets to the tomb and sees the stone has been displaced, she tells the other two disciples. They run themselves to the tomb and they see the burial clothes of Jesus neatly lying outside, but without the body of Jesus himself anywhere in sight.

Only one of the two recognizes that Jesus has somehow overcome death, even though he can't grasp what that means.

And then the author of the story, John, zeroes in on the actions of Mary, who the text says stood weeping outside the tomb. That she weeps is emphasized three different times.

[9 : 30] The scene, in fact, feels like a wash, overwhelmed in her weeping and despair. She weeps and Jesus, and only Jesus, comes to comfort her.

He asks her, whom are you looking for? Echoing the very first question that Jesus ever asked the disciples in John's gospel.

Whom are you looking for? Echoing, perhaps, one of the most important questions that we have to ask ourselves when we come face to face with the scandalous life of Jesus.

Then Mary misunderstands who Jesus is until Jesus calls her by name, which I love. She, this weeping woman, shows herself to be one of the sheep who knows the shepherd's voice.

And once recognized, Jesus commissions Mary to tell the other disciples that he is risen and is going to God. And she does just that, making clear that her proclamation is that Jesus both lives and that Jesus is Lord.

[10 : 51] That's the story. That's the mystery that we encounter this Easter and every Easter. But what might it mean that the stone has been removed and Jesus has been raised?

What might it mean for our lives in the overall scheme of things? What might it mean in our lives? In the ordinary, brilliant, everyday mess of our lives?

Our walking around lives? When I think about this first question, what it might mean in the overall scheme of things, I've got to do a little bit of coming out.

You might have thought I had already done all the coming out I needed to do on this stage, but you know. I very much believe in the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus.

I'm one of those, y'all. I'm one of those. Yeah. Oh, my God. Multi-theological, y'all.

[12:03] Multi-theological, okay? See, growing up, Easter was one of my favorite times of the year. There was so much fun to be had.

Easter egg hunts and new clothes and bright candy and cakes everywhere. The ladies in the church where I grew up, they knew how to choose their hats and parade them on Easter. Some of y'all know. And the preacher never, never failed in his exquisite art of dramatizing the miracle of Easter.

When he explored the agony of the cross leading to the climactic joy of Jesus' literal resurrection. He, and let's be honest, it was always a he, would name the terror of crucifixion.

And then he would say in the grandest tones, But early on Sunday morning, Jesus got up with all power in his hands.

[13:08] And I loved it. I really can't preach without saying that, if you notice. And I believed it. And I believed it at least as much as I could as a child.

But it wasn't until I read the Dr. James Cone's book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, that I really began to understand what the Easter mystery is really all about.

Cone, the father of black liberation theology, wrote this. The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. Both were public spectacle, shameful events, instruments of punishment reserved for the most despised people in society.

Any genuine theology and any genuine preaching of the Christian gospel must be measured against the test of the scandal of the cross and the lynching tree.

Then, we began to witness in our TV screens the public lynchings of black men and women. I understood even more. It wasn't until I learned the name of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown and Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland and...

[14:29] Okay. The saints. The saints who never wanted to be canonized. The next links in a much too long chain of violence and unjust death.

Sometimes I hear people talk about the oppression of my own people while in the same breath saying, But you, Toneta, you are the dream of your ancestors.

As if that fact redeems the injustice they experienced in their lives and the injustice of their deaths. Tonahase Coates, in his extraordinary work *Between the World and Me*, put it this way as he writes to his son.

The enslaved were not bricks in your road. And their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. It is wrong to claim our circumstance, no matter how improved, as redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children.

Our triumphs can never compensate for this. Did you get that? Never compensate for this.

[15:49] This is something our Jewish siblings understood. When they began to conceive of the possibility of resurrection, they thought of it mainly as God's answer to those who had been martyred by the forces of empire.

The regular people who had been killed because of who they were and what they represented. If those who were faithful had been tortured and beaten physically, then God had to answer that with a vindication of physically tortured and beaten bodies.

Resurrection, they believed, just might be that vindication. For the Jewish followers of Jesus, for him to have been raised meant not only his own vindication, but the vindication of all the lives and all the bodies of those unjustly killed.

All those crucified on all the lynching trees of the world. It meant that the places of hellish death had been plundered by Jesus.

And ultimately it meant that the injustice of death had been answered as well for the martyrs, as well as for us. Considering my own history and the histories of the crucified peoples of the world, that was a doorway for me into a deeper understanding of the Easter mystery.

[17:26] Into what Easter means beyond the new clothes and the bright colors and those exquisitely worn hats. And I need this understanding.

I need it because of the suffering and senseless violence that is inescapable in our world. That there will be vindication, resurrection.

I need to know that death has been defeated. But I also need to know the way that death has been defeated. If you are at the Good Friday service, you heard me say that I've been enjoying this podcast called Strange New Things and this season they've been doing on Easter.

One of the lenses that the host uses to frame the death and resurrection of Jesus is through the practice of jujitsu. A more modern form of which is judo.

Now, I don't know. I know very little about martial arts. So that is my caveat. I don't imagine I would excel at any martial arts.

[18 : 36] If you saw me in the three-legged race with Pastor Anthony, you know. No. Okay. So it's not really a surprise that I have this really strong memory of someone recommending that I try jujitsu.

That I try judo. It was a colleague of mine who said this a number of years ago. A middle-aged convertible driving librarian. Yep.

Who participated in martial arts tournaments every single weekend. She said judo would work well because since I wasn't particularly tall or particularly big, it would allow me to use the weight of my enemy against me.

See, that term, judo, in Japanese essentially means soft way or gentle way. It's about using the energy of an opponent's attack to disarm them.

It's about dominating or conquering or defeating in the traditional sense. It's about incorporating the problem into the solution.

[19 : 48] Making the sword itself by your own creative response into a plowshare. And that's what Jesus does.

Jesus transforms the worst thing in the world. The Roman cross of torture.

Into the foundation of new life. If you don't believe me on this, or you want another example, just check out one of the themes in John's gospel that demonstrates this kind of judo.

John 3 records Jesus saying, And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

That same theme is echoed later in the book. And Jesus says, And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself. This lifting is a reference to a story in the book of Numbers.

[20 : 53] That story is about the way the Hebrew people begin to complain and grumble to Moses during their wandering in the wilderness. They complain and they complain until poisonous snakes are sent among them.

The snakes bite the people. Some of them die. Then they begin to repent. And God mercifully tells Moses to make an object that would bring about their healing.

That that would ensure that they don't die. What was that object? It was a bronze snake lifted up on a pole.

When the people looked at it, they would be healed. A problem was incorporated into the solution. So it is with Jesus.

The Roman cross, the instrument of death, is transformed into the tree of life. And Jesus' death and resurrection, not only is death itself defeated, the lives of all those unjustly killed, vindicated, but the soft way, the gentle way of Jesus, is demonstrated to be the road of new life.

[22 : 14] And that, all of that means that in your own brilliant, everyday walking around life, you, you, you are called to come out of any tomb that has dared to try to keep you yoked to death.

It doesn't matter if you were locked into that tomb by somebody else's actions, or if you built the tomb stone by stone with your own hands.

The mystery, the joy of resurrection, means that it is time to come out. It is time to hear your own name called.

It is time to leave your tomb of fear and to walk in courage. It is time to leave your tomb of cynicism and to admit that you are, in fact, a hopeless romantic.

It is time to walk out of the tomb called unlovable and into the open space of lovable and worthy. It is time to run and to tell others, to proclaim what you have seen, what you have seen, and what you have heard, what you know to be true.

[23 : 37] It is time to take the hand of the one who is the first fruit of the life to come, of the world to come. Praise God, his name is Jesus.

Now, before I sit down, I have to acknowledge that it is likely that some of you in this room might have struggled a little bit with this sermon. If you are like me, you might have grown up and been taught to have a low view of yourself, particularly in church.

You might have been taught that the death and resurrection of Jesus was primarily about your guilt, about the sins that made you shameful in the eyes of God, about Jesus needing to pay God so that you could escape the hell that you so rightly deserve.

You might have been taught that you are wretched. You are no better than a worm. You are no better than a worm. You are no better than a worm. And if that's you, what I've said has been a little bit hard to take or felt a little bit off center, I've got some good news.

As a favorite writer of mine, Jeff Chew says, worms are magic. Worms are magic. And any farmer will tell you that.

[25 : 10] They're decomposers. They take what is dead inside of themselves and they make new life from it. Yeah. They are secret agents in transforming death into life.

We all do not have to see Easter in exactly the same way. But my prayer is that we all remember the last lines of this story, this Easter resurrection story.

Jesus says this, but go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.

The implication is that we now have the same relationship with God as Jesus does, that we are now his body. And in light of his resurrection, we are invited every single day to the gentle way, the soft way, the way of incorporating the problem into the solution, the way of eating death like worms and creating new life, the way of transforming swords into plowshares.

Amen. Amen.

[26 : 41] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.