

4 Matthew 26:14–27:66 also contains almost a countless number of body references. This is clearly a Jesus identifying with humanity. His suffering is real (not tempered by his divinity). Also, the trajectory of last Sunday is reversed (Lazarus's death to life; and today, life moving toward death). Death is able to be endured (even alone) because of what we have already witnessed and know to be true (death to life).

Responding
Sharing/Offering

Sending

We have encountered the God who can save. Go as witnesses to that saving power in your life. As you go, be watchful this coming week for evidence that life is more powerful than death.



Easter Sunday ~ April 20, 2014

Encountering God: What have we witnessed . . .

. . . in Jesus' empty tomb?

Scriptures: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2; 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

Focus statement

We encounter God's triumphant power in Jesus' empty tomb. Mary Magdalene encountered the resurrected Jesus and shared this news with the disciples. We who God chooses to be witnesses are raised with Christ to the miracle of new life. We rejoice in glad song!

Song suggestions

Congregations will (and should!) choose songs that they love to sing on Easter. In addition, the following fit especially well with the theme of encounter and/or the gospel reading.

Hymnal and supplements

STS 88 *That Easter Morn, at Break of Day*

STS 101 *The Risen Christ*

HWB 269 *Thine Is the Glory*

Praise and worship

10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord) by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin

Who but You (Abraham and Sarah) by Bernie Herms and Nichole Nordeman

I Will Bless You by Bryan Moyer Suderman (www.smalltallmusic.com)

Blessed Be Your Name by Matt Redman and Beth Redman

Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone) by John Newton, Chris Tomlin, and Louie Giglio

Born Again by Brad Avery, David Carr, Mac Powell, Mark Lee, and Tai Anderson

ENCOUNTERING

Call to Worship

Leader: Let us rejoice, for the tomb has been found empty.

People: **He is risen from the grave!**

Leader: Let glad songs of victory rise up this Easter day.

People: He is risen from the grave!

Leader: Let us sound the trumpets in the house of the Lord!

People: Our Christ is not dead. He lives forevermore!

Leader: Let us stand in awe at what the Lord has done.

*All: Share the good news: Christ is risen!
Let us rejoice in glad song!*

Opening prayer

Triumphant God, this resurrection morning has burst open with good news. It is the best news we could ever imagine hearing! The old world has been shaken to the foundation. And what once was shall never be again. Hallelujah! The tomb guarding death is empty. Death's power over us is now missing and is not coming back! Jesus, you are alive and you reign victorious. And because of what you have accomplished, we will sing your praises for all eternity, including this hour. In the name of the One worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise forever and ever. Amen.

Confessing our sin

Leader: Acclaim the Lord, for the Lord is good!

People: Forever is the Lord's kindness!

Leader: Let all of Israel say:

People: Forever is the Lord's kindness!

Leader: Let those who fear the Lord say:

People: Forever is the Lord's kindness!

Leader: The Lord is our strength.

People: The Lord is our might.

All: The Lord has become our salvation.

Leader: Today there are glad songs in the tents of the just;

People: For though we were chastised, we were not given over to death.

Leader: The right hand of the Lord is valiant!

People: The right hand of the Lord is exalted!

Leader: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

People: The Lord has answered our cries.

All: The Lord has become our rescue.

Leader: This is the Lord's doing.

People: This is the day that the Lord has made!

All: This is marvelous in our eyes.

WITNESSING

Drama: (see www.leaderonline.org)

Preparing to preach

“Encountering God in resurrection . . . again and again!” (Matthew 28:1-10 and John 20:1-18).

The lectionary offers no Old Testament option, with the exception of a portion of Psalm 118. Instead, two Gospel resurrection stories are included. While attempts could be made to use both John and Matthew and reconcile details, it may be more helpful to focus on only one account. A more useful complementary passage could be Colossians 3:1-4, which describes a life that has been raised with Christ.

Also, if you have preached many Easter sermons, a temptation may be to find some new, never-heard-of-before slant. Resist! “Jesus is alive” is the core message of the Christian faith that begs to be repeated every year and never grows old. Be reminded and remind the congregation that we have seen resurrection before (Lazarus and dry bones) and shall see it again and again. God-encounters bring new life out of death! Rejoice in this day and be glad in it!

Additional ideas

- 1 In both texts, God’s best news ever begins in the most unlikely of settings, in a cemetery. If our faith can be stretched enough to believe in a God who creates celebrations in a cemetery, surely it will be a faith expansive enough to trust God for whatever else happens in life. In this place of sorrow and hushed whispers, God declares, “No more!” The grave has received a makeover, and what is over is the power of death!
- 2 One Matthew sermon could pay attention to the two earthquakes, one on Good Friday and again on Easter Sunday. Earthquakes are the result of a seismic shift. Earthquakes shake our once-stable world and always grab our attention. God is trying to get us to see the significance of the life-altering change that is happening. On Good Friday and Great Sunday, the earth shook and rearranged reality forever. What has gotten our attention these past six weeks?
- 3 Another Matthew approach is to notice the response of the women. Matthew describes their emotion as they leave the tomb as filled with joy, which is what we might expect. Recall the prodigal son and Lazarus. When the dead are later discovered alive, parties and joy result. But a second emotion tags along with joy: fear. What is fear doing here? Recall your graduation or the birth of your child. Were emotions present? Were you full of joy, yet afraid? This is a common response when the past known reality is gone for good, and new, uncharted territory lies ahead. If God can raise the dead, imagine what God could do with the little I have to offer God! This could be a good opportunity for a “resurrection” testimony of God bringing amazing results from what was offered with joy, despite fear.
- 4 Notice all the running on Easter morning in John 20. Mary Magdalene is seen running from the tomb. Peter and John go racing to the tomb. Adults are not generally seen running. The older we get, the less graceful our running becomes. First-century adults running was even more rare. Pulling up garments to run literally could expose and humiliate. One did not run without good reason, often fear (running away) or love (running toward). The Calvary/Easter story is about God (like the prodigal son’s father) running toward us, willing to be humiliated on a cross. The reason: love, a love that has been running loose in the world ever since!
- 5 John’s telling of Easter calls attention to our Lent-long question, “What have we witnessed?” Notice the many instances people see but do not see. Mary Magdalene sees the empty tomb, but “sees” a missing body rather than resurrection. Later she sees two angels, but “sees” a possible source of information. Last she sees Jesus, but “sees” a gardener. John and Peter manage to see the same interior of the tomb; Peter “sees” nothing but the literal; John “sees” enough to stir some level of belief. The eyes of faith, implanted by resurrection encounters with God, allow us to see in new ways not previously possible. Angels, empty tombs, gardeners, and “ordinary” days can mean nothing, unless seen through faith’s eyes. What have we witnessed? To whom have we witnessed?

Responding Sharing/Offering

Sending

We have encountered the God who has power over even death. We are witnesses to what God has done. Go now, as long as God gives you breath, as witnesses to others, sharing the joy of what God can yet do in their lives and ours, through Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.