

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

April 12, 2020 (The Resurrection of Our Lord, Year A)
John 20:1-18

After the crucifixion, the leaders of Israel went to their homes, I'm sure, thinking that they'd done something good for the nation. How RIGHT they were, but in such a WRONG way. They had counted God OUT, but God had JUST begun.

The very WORST the disciples could imagine had happened: Jesus had been crucified. Jesus was dead. And the disciples hadn't HANDLED themselves so well during the last few hours of Jesus' life either. They'd betrayed Him, they'd fled in fear, they'd denied Him, they'd hid. NOW, their teacher and friend was DEAD. And they weren't sure what to DO. They had counted God out.

Mary Magdalene arose early in the morning. She went to the tomb EXPECTING the stone to be in place and Jesus' body STILL inside, and all she could do was weep. The DEATH of Jesus had shaken her to the core. But the stone was rolled AWAY. Peter and John run to INSPECT the empty tomb, and then they go HOME. Jesus APPEARS to Mary Magdalene, and she doesn't RECOGNIZE him. They ALL had counted God out.

WE'VE heard a lot of bad news lately too. The numbers for this Covid-19 pandemic are staggering. World-wide, 1.7 million people have been infected, and 107,000 people have lost their lives. Two weeks ago, I stood here and reported that 2,000 people had died from this virus in the United States. This week that number reached 20,000. New York alone has more cases than any other COUNTRY in the world. 5,000 people died there just this week. It's frightening. The forces of death and fear seem to be winning the day. In a time such as this, it would be EASY to count God OUT.

The Gospel says that, after SEEING the empty tomb, Peter and John just GO HOME. LIKE Peter and John, TOO often we live our lives as though NOTHING at ALL has happened. We go on with our lives as if there were NO GOD, as if this RESURRECTION doesn't really MATTER. Let's just stay alive and try to be DECENT people. GOOD ENOUGH. But this TOO is counting God out.

(Watch film He's Still Risen)

DON'T YOU COUNT GOD OUT. Because, when the day was DARKEST, when night had fallen, when EVERYONE had counted God out, even the DISCIPLES, Jesus' closest FRIENDS – THAT is when God acted.

When Jesus calls to Mary, in that moment, all OUR expectations are torn apart. JESUS IS ALIVE. Life has conquered death, love has conquered hate, grace has conquered blame, and forgiveness has conquered judgment. All that Jesus told and taught his followers is trustworthy and true. The resurrection TRANSFORMED the lives of believers in ways great and small. And we see that HAPPENING THROUGHOUT the REST of the New Testament.

The same is true today. The Risen Jesus is ALIVE and WITH us. BECAUSE of the resurrection, our HUMAN expectations are torn apart and our lives are TRANSFORMED by the love and forgiveness of God.

So when the pressures of life seem so heavy, when the brokenness of this world breaks our spirits, when we come to a dead end...we have a CERTAIN hope. Because that is EXACTLY where the risen Christ MEETS us. That's PRECISELY WHEN God gives US resurrection life.

So as Easter morning dawns, recognize that all these things we fear, even the thing we fear the MOST, have NOT overcome us. In the MIDST of them, THROUGH Christ, we are transformed. Christ's resurrection means that death and fear may show up and do their worst to destroy us, but THERE IS HOPE. THROUGH JESUS, there is RESURRECTION.

DON'T YOU COUNT GOD OUT. Even when the world seems buried deep in a rock hewn tomb, hope rings true of the one who HOLDS the universe in his HANDS – the hope that SOMETHING is happening, something NEW. GOD'S GOT this. Even when all we SEE is an occupied grave. Some HOW and some WAY, God's GOT this.

Even in THIS DARKNESS, this ISOLATION, even with our lives turned upside down, even in the MIDST of our fear and uncertainty and grief, DON'T YOU COUNT GOD OUT.

No, we are called EVERY DAY by the resurrection to COUNT GOD INTO our lives. This resurrection, this EMPTY tomb, THIS is our promise that God is NOT gone. God is NOT ABSENT. God is in the MIDST of our lives, and in the midst of this WORLD, RE-CREATING and loving and PARTICIPATING. Easter is a holy day because every ONE of us can COUNT GOD IN.

So on this Easter day, and Easter SEASON, and EVERY day for an Easter PEOPLE, we stand in DEFIANCE. Death and fear don't GET to have the last word. GOD does.

That's why we SHOUT these words at Easter, **CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!**

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May it be so in you. Amen.