

## “Seeing Jesus”

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**First Presbyterian Church**  
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**New Testament Lesson:** Matthew 28:1-10

**Old Testament Lesson:** Psalm 118:19-24

A busy father trying to meet a work deadline was forced to take his 5-year-old son to the office with him one Saturday. Eventually, the boy tired of all the toys they'd packed and started pestering his dad for something to do.

The father grabbed a magazine that had a large fold-out map of the world, used scissors to cut it into pieces, and spread the pieces on a table. “See if you can put all these pieces together,” he said, “and when you get finished, it'll be time to go.”

The boy settled down and started matching pieces (kind of like this picture). The father figured he had at least a half-hour before another meltdown. But it was only a few minutes later that the boy was back. “I put all the pieces together,” he said.

Amazed, the father took a look, and sure enough, there was the world, every continent in place. “How did you do that so quickly?” he asked. “It was simple,” said the boy. “On the back of the world was a picture of a man. When I put the man together, the whole world fell into place!”

This morning is about getting our world to fall into place using the picture – or pattern – of the risen Lord. Not the picture we have here, but rather the pattern of the resurrection as given to us in today's New Testament lesson.

The first recorded words of Jesus after being raised from the dead are words of welcome. “Greetings,” he says. “... Do not be afraid.” How do we go from the horrific struggle of the crucifixion to the joyful embrace of the risen Lord? I mean we all have struggles in life and times when we feel like we are being crucified.

The relentless pull and overwhelm of our busy, active lives – sometimes it feels like we're being pulled apart, like we're hanging on the cross with Jesus, being pulled down by the world around us. But look, the cross is empty. There is a way forward, no matter how many pieces of the puzzle you are struggling with.

The financial pressure of raising a family, paying the monthly bills, or being prepared for retirement – it's like we're being drained of everything we have, the joy and ease of life, sucked right out of us.

Or maybe for you, it's “relationship issues.” Whether that's with your boss or teachers, your parents or children or spouse, or the friends and family you count on most – we all get let down from time to time, and it leaves us feeling like we've taken the beating, like we're the one's who have been betrayed, like the people who are supposed to have our backs have now turned their backs, on us.

That's how Jesus must have felt – betrayed by his closest friends, the weight of the world on his shoulders, the pain of being crucified tearing at his body and soul. We've all felt like that, but only Jesus has actually lived through it. There is a difference between feeling like your world is coming to an end – like we do sometimes – and actually having gone through it and beyond, like Jesus has.

It's the difference we see between the two women in the following story: On a flight to Florida, an educational psychologist was preparing her notes for one of the parent-education seminars she conducts across the nation. The elderly woman sitting next to her explained that she was returning to Miami after having spent two weeks in Boston visiting her six children, 18 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. Then she asked, "And what do you do for a living?" The child psychologist answered and she was fully expecting the woman to pester her, the whole flight for free, professional advice. Instead, this mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother woman sat back, picked up a magazine and said, "If there's anything you want to know, just ask me."

That's the difference between learning about life's struggles and actually living through them. As much as that grandmother has gone through in life, there is only one way to do it with such quite wisdom and confidence. And that's through our faith in Jesus Christ. It is Christ who keeps us from falling into despair, from suffering the pain of rejection, from getting overwhelmed by the pressures of life?

If we look closely at today's New Testament lesson, there is a pattern of movement that takes the women at the tomb from despair and suffering to peace and joy, a pattern that we also can follow in facing our own difficulties. This pattern has to do with our expectations, our struggles, and our faith.

The women come to the tomb not expecting to find anything hopeful. They "... went to see the tomb," says Matthew, not the risen Lord. The brief time they spent apart from Jesus – after he died on the cross – has left their faith unable to support them in their time of need. But the good news for them – and for us – is that God does not leave us that way – with nowhere to turn. They "... went to see the tomb," says Matthew, "and suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it."

When we face those empty moments in life – when our faith is insufficient – that's when God comes to us and rolls away the debris, so that we might see Jesus more clearly. We all have things in our lives that get in the way of our faith, of our seeing Jesus in the midst of our struggles.

I don't know what that is for you – a busy schedule, the violence and despair of this world, the pressures of life. But whatever it is that has you wondering if God even cares anymore, today is the day to know that God not only cares, God acts, God takes action. It's when things get roughest that God begins to shake up our world, revealing to us what's missing as we struggle to put our lives back together.

We come to life with certain expectations, our faith get's challenged, and things fall apart. That's a pretty common pattern. What then? Then God speaks to us. "The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.'"

In Christ, God reminds us that there's nothing in this world too big for God to overcome, there's nowhere we can go in life where God doesn't reach out to us, and there is no struggle we have that God can't see us through. It just takes us letting God roll away the stones – the clutter – in our lives that gets in between us and God.

The hardest part about letting God into our lives is uncertainty. The women at the tomb had no idea what to expect when the stone was rolled away, just like we have no idea what to expect when we step out in faith and let God guide our decisions. But God told them not to be afraid – God tells us to not be afraid. And God gives us what we need to not be afraid – Jesus Christ.

Now this doesn't mean we don't get frightened; it's OK to be scared. Matthew tells us that the women "left the tomb quickly with fear AND great joy!" It's OK to be frightened as long as we don't let our fear consume us. In the promise of the risen Lord – "for he has been raised, as he said" – and in that promise and all that it reveals to us, we have reason to be hopeful, always.

We can take joy in the Lord even in tough times, knowing that our faith in God through Jesus Christ will see us through. This is the pattern of our lives as followers of Jesus. We come to life with certain expectations, our faith get's challenged, things get shaken up, God clears a way forward, and we step forth, in faith, into the promise and certainty of the risen Lord. And it doesn't end there!

When Jesus appeared to the women at the tomb, Matthew tells us (quote), "... They came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'" Jesus sending us out into the world so that others might see him more clearly.

This simple pattern of coming to Jesus, taking hold of him, worshiping him, being encouraged and assured by him, and then being sent out to share words of encouragement with others – that's what we are called to in this church on Sunday mornings and, in our GenOn youth program, on Wednesday evenings.

God calls us to this regular pattern of encountering the risen Lord. It's God's way of preparing and equipping us to meet any and all challenges in life, whether we are expecting them or not. Just as so much of what the women encountered at the tomb was unexpected – a great earthquake, an angel of the Lord, the empty tomb, the face of Jesus – so too, we never know what life will bring us and when we will need our faith to carry us through.

So we follow this simple pattern of embracing the word of the Lord through prayer, song, scripture and sermon, and from this act of worship, Jesus goes with

us, to guide us and protect us, bless us and use us, in blessing the lives of others.

If you have not made this your pattern in life, let this be your invitation to do so. I've got a wallet card or bookmark for each of you; the ushers will pass these out as you leave, or you can get one later from the credenza in the Parlour.

It looks just like this poster of Jesus pulling the world together. Take the wallet card with you, and all of us, let's pray about it this week.

What expectations about life do we have that aren't working for us; and how is God calling us to piece our lives together – to rearrange things – so that we might help create and enjoy the world as God pictures it, a world of great hope and joy in Jesus Christ. Amen.

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

God of glory, we gather to celebrate your victory over death and the power of sin in our misguided world. The empty cross and the promise of the resurrection are tangible signs of hope.

We give thanks for those who glorify you this day in places where hope is in short supply – in countries recovering from natural disasters or torn by war.

We pray for those who suffer in mind, body or spirit, who lack the strength to sing alleluia. We offer alleluias on their behalf, praying for healing so their voices can join in the joyful songs of praise.

We give you thanks for those who have gone before us, singing in your heavenly choir, grateful for their lives of faith.

Help us live as Easter people throughout the year; let our lives be signs of your unending love.

We pray in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ, raising our eyes toward heaven and our voices in prayerful song, singing together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**