

Series: (NONE)

Sermon: "Powerful Easter"

Text: Romans 1:1-4; 1 Corinthians 15:12-19; Philippians 3: 1-11

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- Last Sunday those of us Baptists and Presbyterians who would hardly ever, if ever, raise a "holy hand" in worship had a good excuse to "raise holy palm fronds" in worship.
- It was "Palm Sunday" the day we celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem. Some of the crowd back then made way for the humble king waving and placing in his path palm fronds. They had lots of them around free. We had to buy ours.
- Jesus came into Jerusalem with the understanding that he would likely be arrested and killed as a rebel leader opposing the Roman rulers who had conquered the city and the nation of Israel—the OT people of God.
- As always eventually happens, the secular government had come to a place where it could no longer tolerate even a hint of divided loyalty. The idea of a sovereign Jewish LORD, one who was supposed to be glorified by his people's worship was now potentially getting in the way of their absolute power so this new rising, religious fervor just had to go.
- Jesus knew exactly who he was—God's long promised Messiah of Israel. He knew his sovereign role as the true LORD of God's people and all the earth. When he proclaimed this truth in parables and then openly, He knew what he was facing and He faced it courageously.
- Later as he was praying alone in the *Garden of Gethsemane*, it seems that somehow Jesus did not have all the details. I still don't quite understand how this was the case. However, this didn't matter.
- On the back of that donkey, it was not as if he thought he might accidentally, or even willfully, be making a misstep by publically riding into the heart of the enemy camp both secular and religious in the bright light of day.

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- Jesus of Nazareth knew, without doubt, the Father had a plan. That plan included his life being offered as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. The Father was in charge. There would be no missteps.
- ***"Never the less, Father, they will be done,"*** is what the Jesus prayed the night before he died on the cross. Some might think it was a *"strange will to be done"* for a loving father but you and I know what this says about the gracious heart of that loving father.
- On the day we celebrate as ***"Good Friday,"*** Jesus did indeed die by capital punishment on a Roman cross, labeled as an *insurrectionist* by the Romans and a *blasphemer of God* by the Jews.
- As always eventually happens, given enough time, secular and religious powers find a common enemy and join together to destroy that "usurper" with their in-common motivation of holding on to their power.
- However, today, let's consider the time—the historical setting—the context in which all this was taking place—when Jesus walked upon this earth, and for three years, at the end of his earthly life, openly and boldly *preached and taught, healed and blessed, comforted and debated, saved and cursed*. For three years, he spoke absolute truth and revealed convicting and cleansing ***light*** without compromise.
- *Still, in his historical context, there was no internet, no Facebook (struggling now?), no Twitter, no Snapchat, no digital social media at all to spread the news and the message of a simple man from Nazareth of Galilee claiming to speak the truth of God—the truth of the LORD YHWH for the Israelites.*
- Over the three years, the news did spread about Jesus. Enough people in Jerusalem knew about him that a bit of a crowd gathered for both his *triumphal entry* and his *crucifixion exit*.

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- He certainly caused a stir that week that some call "*holy week*" in Jerusalem among both the Roman and the Jewish leaders.
- Of course, for we who are believers in Jesus today, now looking back on these events, we can only feel that that week was ***the most monumental week in all of human history.***
- ***But, in that day was it much of a big deal to very many people in the world? What do we think? Do you get what I am saying here?***
- At the time of Jesus birth and throughout his life, Israel and Jerusalem were already crawling with many militant Jewish groups rebelling against the Romans. Rebel leader after rebel leader rose to lead a violent charge against the foreign, pagan, occupiers.
- The Roman historian *Josephus* tells of five very major bloody revolts before, during and after Jesus' life.
- Around the time Jesus was born, Josephus claims there was a citywide riot in Jerusalem when Jews revolted at the punishment of some students who had removed a Roman symbol. By Josephus' count more than 2,000 Jews were killed putting down that riot.
- Josephus also tells of a time some years after Jesus death when a Roman centurion let a group of Jewish pilgrims know what he thought of them and their God in an obvious and rather smelly, unsubtle way. By the time the upset over this blasphemous "gas attack" on things they thought "holy" was put down, Josephus claims 30,000 Jews were dead by the march of the Roman infantry.
- Josephus may not have been a very honest journalist. He may have reported based on an agenda. That is not a new problem with journalist and authors. However, we can get a bit of the flavor of the day. There were rebellions, riots, and reprisals happening all the time. Very big riots. Very bloody rebellions. Very ugly punishments.

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- In terms of what the Jewish people of the day were hoping for from this new "*Jesus-of-Nazareth*" uprising it turned out to be a small, failed rebellion fomented by a weak, now-dead leader and his, untrained men. As a rebellion for their emancipation from Rome, Jesus' rebellion was over and gone and mostly forgotten in no time.
- Then, if you ALSO consider that in those days—that historical context—there were so many so-called "***messiahs***"—many ***saviors***—self-proclaimed ***deliverers*** of all types, one could easily wonder how Jesus of Nazareth got even the size of audience he did attract for his sermons and for that week in Jerusalem—surprised at how, in any normal way, he received the attention we read about in God's Word.
- Even the Caesar, that died just after Jesus birth, started the tradition that Roman Caesars were "*sons of god, saviors of the people*" — "*messiahs*," who had come with their *gospels*—their *good news* that "*Rome is here to save you from your pitiful un-Roman lives*," if you will. The Caesars probably had ***bigger PR departments***, by earthly standards, than Jesus did.
- ***Then on the 3rd day, Jesus of Nazareth—rebel, dead by crucifixion—buried in a borrowed tomb, rose from the dead.***
- It is here in this sermon that you might expect me to start booming out in triumphant song, "*Up from the grave he arose!*"
- It is here that you might expect me to proclaim that it was news of the resurrection—a man coming back from the dead—Jesus of Nazareth alive again that took over and shook the world at its foundations.
- There is some truth in that but I think it depends on what we mean when we say it. What was the power here? How did it change things?

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- When you read the Gospel accounts of that powerful resurrection, how much of an immediate splash was made in that moment—that time—that context—that nation—even in that city, Jerusalem?
- Some women visited the tomb. A couple of his disciples ran there because, after all, who trusts the testimony of a woman about such things, *right*?
- Eventually some 100 plus followers witness the resurrected Lord alive and well—actually “even well-er” than ever!
- But, there were no pictures to put up for click-bait—no videos to watch after a short advertisement for miracle “beet pills.”
- *Do you see what I am saying?* We tend to assume that it was just the simple news of the resurrection happening that changed things in Jerusalem and Israel and the world. However, we can’t even imagine the mechanism for immediately getting out the news of the miracle.
- The people of that day and place were used to hearing miracle stories of disappointing, failed messiahs. They were likely as skeptical as we can be about the news stories they heard in their day.
- *So, Raleigh, on Easter Sunday, 22023 have you finally gone over completely to the dark side of preachers who don’t believe?* On a beautiful Easter Sunday as we have gathered and eaten a special breakfast together with hearts together ready to celebrate the resurrection, are you telling us the resurrection was somehow “*no big deal?*” If you know me at all, you know that is probably not what I am saying.
- What I am asking us to do is to dig just a bit more deeply into what God’s Word says about the *resurrection of Jesus and its power*.
- What did the resurrection do if the news of its reality—of its actually happening—couldn’t immediately spread around the world?

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- Let me go to one unlikely text and explain what the powerful resurrection of Jesus accomplished and explain how we can sometimes undersell its profound power in the world.
- That text is Paul's introduction in his letter to the churches in Rome, which was still the home base of the *world's* power in that day. We sometimes don't see it, but the "*Epistle to the Romans*" is often about power. It is about where true power comes from and what amazing things true power can do in us and this world versus the power of human entities even those like the Roman Empire.
- Please look at **Romans 1:1-4** **READ Romans 1:1-4**
- The Apostle begins this wonderful letter with clear explanation of where his authority to talk like this to the Roman church comes from.
- He is but a lowly *servant*. He actually believes that. It is not mere rhetoric. He has been *called* or *commissioned* by the master to serve an *apostolic* function. *Apostles* were those who were sent with their master's authority to speak the words of the master on his behalf.
- The words of the master, for Paul are the *master's Gospel*. There were many so-called "gospels" including the Roman Emperor's. Paul's *good news* is supported as being the good news of God himself the word of this powerful master through prophets and Scriptures.
- Paul's commissioned good news concerns God's Son—the real God's son not Caesar as the "son of a false god." The good news recognizes this Son as a human king through the lineage of King David and recognizes that through the Holy Spirit of God this son is indeed the unique Son of the real God.

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- The resurrection, our focus for today, is there in verse 4. My NIV reads: "**...and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.**"
- When we think of the resurrection today and we read the verse we realize what a powerful thing the resurrection was. AND, yes, it was! Caesar, and for that matter no earthly power leader could *truthfully* claim they had been dead and now were alive again like Jesus.
- So we may conclude just the *mere fact* of the resurrection of Jesus is what Paul has in mind when he connects it with **power** here.
- But, my NIV has some little tiny letters and some footnotes about how this is being translated. When I see those, little markings and notes, I know I probably better stop and see what the confusion might be or what the ways of reading this might be.
- Sometimes we need help to work that out. That's OK. That's why God put us in communities called churches.
- Sometimes this verse is read as if saying "*it was the resurrection of Jesus that finally clearly marked Jesus as "the Son of God."*" The resurrection was the final proof to people.
- And, then we conclude it must have been the simple telling the story of this final event that was the ultimate proof that convinced people all around the world to believe in Jesus.
- But, then there are those little *superscript* letters and their related footnotes that suggest it is possible *Paul wasn't saying exactly that about the reason the resurrection was a powerful thing*—that the resurrection was powerful because it was the final proof that Jesus must really be the Son of God.
- Can the resurrection of Jesus say that? Yes. Does the resurrection say that according to Paul here? He has a different point in mind.

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- The apostle says that his message as an appointed spokesman for God and God's good news specifically importantly includes the fact that Jesus is now designated, instead of the humble lowly failed rebel from Galilee crushed so easily by the Roman powers—no designated as the Son of God **possessing POWER!**
- **Uh huh??? OK????** On this on Sunday when I just came to celebrate **the fact** of the resurrection that proves Jesus was telling the truth—as it did, what is the difference, Raleigh? Are you telling me the real meaning of Easter is different than the one on which we sometimes focus?
- Well, I'm not saying we are wrong. I am saying we don't go where Paul goes with it and that can take away some of the real power of the resurrection—**of Easter.**
- Easter has always told me that someday, even if I die I can live again. That is true and that is great. I don't ever want to have to face my death or the death of anyone I love *without* the promise of that reality of my resurrection someday.
- *But here it is in a nutshell...* Easter is not simply the name of an insurance policy of new life after physical death. **Easter is the name of the resurrection power that was now in Jesus**—the power Jesus possessed and **the power for living he right now shares with us when we trust him instead of trusting our own dying flesh.**
- Look, is this the Christian Message of salvation—the good news the Apostle Paul was commissioned as God's servant to proclaim????
- Did Paul preach: *"Life in this fallen world can be a big mess. It can even be very painful and unjust. However, don't worry if you believe in Jesus for everlasting life, one day you'll escape it all by death but don't let death scare you because someday later God will resurrect you to life again to go to a place usually called "heaven."*

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- As somebody I read said, "We're used to emphasizing the importance of the Resurrection for our justification. But what about our sanctification?" ***That is what I am asking this Easter morning!***
- In theological terms, that is saying what Paul is saying. The power of the resurrection of Jesus doesn't lie mostly in its being a *proof text* that Jesus wasn't lying.
- ***The power of the resurrection is the power Jesus possessed coming forth from the tomb changing him and potentially changing our lives now, not just someday when we die.***
- Easter is at least as much a celebration of the reality that ***we can be sanctified now*** as it is the proof that someday we too will live again in heaven.
- When Paul wrote to another church about the resurrection of Jesus, the church of *Corinth*, he offered a long argument of the importance of the resurrection.
- That importance turned out NOT to be simply that someday we will be resurrected, In **1 Corinthians 15:17**, the Apostle argues: "***And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; WHY? BECAUSE 'if Christ has not been raised, you are still in your sins.'***"
- The apostle is not discussing how to go to heaven here with the Corinthians—just as he was not discussing that with the Romans. The apostle is discussing the power the resurrected Jesus Christ possessed that would make believers new creations—the power that sets us free ***NOW, in this life***, from the absolute tyranny of our sins against God.
- This Easter truth is the one that the Apostle always emphasizes as truth about Easter. It is the truth that the resurrection-power possessing Jesus lives in us. It can change our lives for God's glory today! For some of us this truth may be more difficult to believe than

the idea that a dead man came out of a tomb near Jerusalem thousands of years ago. ***But it is this truth that Paul says is the power of the resurrection Jesus possessed. Believers set free!***

- ***At the age I am now, I don't always feel very powerful.*** Sometimes ***I*** even feel weak and tired. Sometimes it seems ***I*** am too weak to deal with the sin in my life. Sometimes ***I*** feel trapped in my sin.
- Of course, that is Because... ***I...*** am not powerful in this realm of living a new life—***I*** never was powerful over sin even at 18 or 28...
- But I don't care if I am, ***or you*** are, 8—18—48—68—or 88 the power that Jesus possessed in the resurrection is the conquering power that is there for us to live for God now if we will live by faith in Him rather than by faith in our flesh! ***This is the power that reached around the world!***
- You know what Paul is saying in Romans 1? It wasn't that the news that some man from Galilee came back from the dead went viral and convinced everyone to believe.
- It was that Jesus came from the tomb possessing resurrection power and he shares that power in his people, setting them free from the power of sin and changing them to look like him—to look like images of God as they were meant to look.
- ***Changed people—people like you and me—were the evidence of the power of the Gospel Paul preached. That was the Easter power as much as the fact that God could make one dead man alive again.***
- I do not in any way want to minimize the resurrection power we celebrate today! I want us to celebrate it as much more powerful ***now***—not just someday, than we sometimes do on Easter Sunday!
- Writing to yet another church, the church in *Philippi*, Paul told them it wasn't any problem for him to repeat himself as an appointed messenger of the ***powerful good news of God.***

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- He wrote them again that some were teaching them to live their lives as Christians by doing things ***in their own power***—the power of their "***flesh***" as he called it. He told them as clearly as he could that they should "***Put no confidence in their flesh.***"
- Instead they should put their confidence—not just to go to heaven someday, but to live life for God now—daily, put their confidence in righteousness of Jesus Christ ***and the power he possessed at his resurrection that was not at work in them.***
- He finishes that admonition with a verse that some used to teach exactly the opposite of what he was teaching. He tells them that if he, Paul, can be like Jesus in his death and resurrection, then he can "***somehow attain to the resurrection from the dead.***"
- As I say, Paul is not doubting his salvation here or wondering if he will be able to persevere and finally be resurrected to heaven someday as some teach. No! Paul was certain of his eternal destiny.
- What he remains uncertain about is if he will live a life ***now*** that relies on the righteousness and resurrection power of Christ ***now*** to be resurrected ***now*** in his new way of living resurrected now out from the dead mass of humanity that is still trapped in sin.
- Paul has no doubt that Jesus came forth from the tomb with the incredible power to resurrect him, Paul, ***now*** from a dead life ***now***.
- The question is, will Paul trust Jesus and this Easter power ***OR*** like the rest of the walking-dead humans among whom Paul lives, will he trust himself—his flesh when he wakes up to life each day.
- Easter is more than a stamp of approval on Jesus. Easter is the celebration of the reality that Jesus is alive with the power to set us free from sin ***NOW!***
- As I said, this may be the more difficult message of Easter for some of us to believe and to rely upon each day of life right ***NOW.***