



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Easter Day (A)

April 5, 2026

[RCL] Acts 10:34-43 or Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4 or Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18 or Matthew 28:1-10

### I Have Seen the Lord

It is early on Sunday morning, now the third day since Jesus's unimaginably cruel death on a Roman cross. Dawn has yet to break.

Jesus's disciples had scattered on Thursday night for fear of arrest. Then came the news on Friday of Jesus's trial, torture, and death. By Saturday, the first followers of Jesus were hiding in the upper room in Jerusalem where they had celebrated the Passover with their rabbi just Thursday evening. They are terrified of the might of the Roman Empire, which brutally crushed their hopes in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, who had come to live among us. During those interminably long hours, lost in grief, the shock of the reality caught up with them. This was no nightmare from which they could awaken. Jesus was truly dead.

There are well-established facts that ground our Easter celebration in history. We know that there was a man named Jesus who developed a surprisingly persistent following as well as we know that Caesar Augustus ruled the Roman Empire when Jesus was born and that Tiberius Caesar was in charge by the time Jesus died. We have texts—by Roman and Jewish historians as well as what we find in the New Testament. We also have archeological evidence attesting to all three of these historic people. And we know Pontius Pilate in the same way: through historical documents that show he was placed in his position as governor by Tiberius.

Pontius Pilate's detachment in Jerusalem had already gotten far too much experience in crucifixion before Jesus of Nazareth entered the city with the crowds shouting "Hosanna." Empowered by an angry mob calling for Jesus's death, Pontius Pilate ordered his soldiers to publicly torture and kill him. Rome was skilled at dealing death to any threat to the way things work. Empires know how to kill, steal, and destroy. The reality we proclaim on Easter is that Jesus really died. As our former presiding bishop Michael Curry succinctly stated it, "The Dude was dead. That's a fact."

That the Jesus Movement persisted for centuries after his death is what is so highly unusual. So here is the bold claim: Just as real as his death and the grave is the fact of Jesus's bodily resurrection. I make this bold

claim for his actually dying and his truly bodily rising in light of the historical evidence that makes this plain.

More can be explored about what we do know and what we don't, but a central fact is that there was this man, Jesus of Nazareth, who was seen by many as the hoped-for Messiah of the Israelites. In this, Jesus was not unique. At various times, in various places, "Messiahs" have arisen. The best example is Simon bar Kokba, who led a revolt against Rome 100 years after Jesus's crucifixion. But there have been many others.

Had Jesus been like any one of the dozens of "Messiahs" hailed and followed faithfully in their lifetimes, but forgotten after their deaths, his name would be a mere footnote in history, known mostly to specialists in the history of Israel and Palestine.

But something happened on that Sunday following Jesus's crucifixion and death. That morning marks the hinge in human history.

John's gospel tells us that on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb of her rabbi, Jesus. Lost in grief, she travels to the place where her Lord had been laid to rest. Finding the stone removed from the entrance, Mary runs to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. The two go with Mary Magdalene to investigate the empty tomb. Seeing Jesus's burial cloths lying on the ground, and the face cloth neatly folded, the beloved disciple sees and believes. The two disciples return to their homes. Mary remains.

She—who will be so misunderstood through church history—has nowhere else to go. Jesus was the ground of her very being. First, he was put to death, and now, even his body has been taken from her. She is weeping inconsolably when angels ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" In her deep loss she finds the words, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

Then Mary turns and sees a man standing there. There is Jesus, standing in front of her, resurrected from the dead, never to die again. Yet Mary feels no joy. She remains lost in her grief. She does not recognize her Lord.

She still cannot grasp the world-changing revelation of Jesus's resurrection, even though he is standing in front of her. Then Jesus says her name. That does it. Hearing her name called by Jesus, the light of the glory of God floods in. Mary Magdalene will become the apostle to the apostles, bringing the Good News that life has conquered death. She went out into the darkness of the night only to return illumined by the risen Jesus. She can confidently proclaim: "I have seen the Lord."

The disciples proclaimed Jesus's resurrection, not because everyone expected this of the Messiah, but because it was so life-changingly unexpected that they couldn't avoid talking about it. It would have been easier if they had just claimed that Jesus's message was still valid, that his teaching should live on. That was good enough for the followers of the Buddha or Muhammed. But that is not what those first followers of Jesus claimed. They, quite inconveniently, said that Jesus was resurrected, never to die again, and that they continued to experience his presence by the power of the Holy Spirit. As they spoke, they created new converts, whose experiences of Jesus matched their own.

Jesus had always been about the work of converting hearts and minds rather than overthrowing an empire. Jesus never tried to establish a kingdom *without*—with an army and a palace, like other would-be Messiahs.

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Jesus was establishing a kingdom *within*. The occupying forces he sought to overtake existed within the human heart. The Jesus Movement still exists because Jesus's followers still feel his presence right here, right now. That was the surprising truth his first followers discovered after Jesus's resurrection and later ascension: He was still with them.

He is still here. Now.

We routinely see how God is *still* touching hearts and minds in that same way today. People's lives continue to be changed for the better by the power of the Holy Spirit in amazing ways one can only call a miracle.

If you have yet to come to that sure and certain knowledge, in your own life, come back to worship again and again. This is a place of resurrection, where love still conquers death.

Here, you can meet Jesus anew in worship, surrounded by people whose lives are just as messy as yours. We have a sure and certain hope built on seeing God show up. Put your whole trust in Jesus and you will come to share in Mary Magdalene's confident assertion: "I have seen the Lord."

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