

When Easter Comes Late, Part 2

2/2 Series

Matthew 28:1-10

Easter Sunday

04 24 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Scripture: Matthew 28

When Easter Comes

Let's begin with a word association game today. Match the following dates to their corresponding holidays:

- January 1 New Year's Day
- February 14 Valentines Day
- July 4 Independence Day
- December 25 Christmas Day

Here's the bonus question: What holiday occurs on the first Sunday after the Paschal full moon—give or take two days—based upon *The Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Ephemeris and American Ephemeris and Nautical Calendar*? The correct answer—it's Easter, of course!

Last week we heard how the date of Easter is determined by the lunisolar calendar. It can occur on 35 possible dates from March 22 to April 25 inclusive. The complex calculations are based upon mathematical algorithms developed by Christopher Clavius in the 16th century. The calendar equation is so complex that one mathematician determined the exact cycle of Easter dates only repeats itself every 5,700,000 years!

And all of this information is based upon the Gregorian calendar in the Western Church. Other traditions within the Christian faith date Easter by different systems—believe me, you don't want to know!

The bottom line is that Easter came very late this year. It caught many folk off-guard, but God's work often shocks and amazes us. You never know when Easter is going to come. The Resurrection is always a surprise.

Crucified, Dead, and Buried

Of course, this is nothing new—it's been that way since the very **first Easter** Sunday morning. The Gospel accounts agree that no one was expecting Easter to come when it did. Actually, they didn't expect it to come at all. Everyone was surprised.

The disciples SHOULD have known better. After all, Jesus told them repeatedly ahead of time. He warned them that the journey to Jerusalem would result in his suffering, crucifixion, and death; but Christ also promised that on the third day God would raise him back to life. On their final night together at the Last Supper, Jesus reminded his friends yet again what was about to take place.

The disciples should have paid attention—maybe even taken notes. However, they did not hear—or at least understand—Jesus' words. Despite Christ's advance warning, they were totally unprepared for the events that followed.

In the hours to come, their world was shattered. Each of the **disciples betrayed, denied, or deserted** their Master. Jesus stood alone before Pontius Pilate when the Roman governor sentenced him to death. He carried the cross to a hill outside the Jerusalem gates; and there . . . they crucified him.

The disciples watched most of these events from a distance, although some of the women did dare to gather at the foot of the cross. They saw the life flow out of Jesus' body heard his final cry. The women watched in horror as the Roman centurion thrust his spear into their Master's dead body. Then they followed the burial party to the cave where Jesus was buried. A large stone was rolled into place to seal the tomb.

Jesus of Nazareth was "**crucified, dead, and buried**". Good Friday came to a close as the Jewish Sabbath began, and the sun set on the disciples' hopes and dreams. They had forgotten Christ's promise about what the third day would bring.

They didn't even remember to wait.

When Easter Comes Late

We understand all too well the disciples' Good Friday experience. We experience the heartache, grief, and pain of this fallen world. The past is littered with broken relationships, shattered dreams, and unfulfilled hopes.

We are haunted by the words, "If only . . ." We have grieved at the graves of our loved ones. We have lost jobs. We have sought after errant children and cared for parents who once cared for us. We have known the dark depths of depression and despair.

Last week I talked about Easter occurring on **April 24** this year—just one day short of the latest possible date. Easter is very late this year—I've heard and said this statement countless times over the past weeks. The thought stuck in my head while planning worship this spring. It eventually became a two part sermon series I started last week that is entitled *When Easter Comes Late*.

There are moments not only in the church calendar but also the Christian life when Easter comes late. We experience Good Friday and forget all about Easter Sunday.

In *The Apostles Creed*, a semicolon is placed between the phrases "*crucified, dead, and buried*" and "*on the third day.*" Those of you who remained awake in English grammar recall that a semicolon signals there is still more left to say. However, we often put a period where God places a semicolon. We think it's over, but the Lord is just getting started. An ending turns out to be a new beginning.

However, sometimes we don't even remember to wait.

On the Third Day

Saturday came and went. Early on Sunday morning, some of the women decided to visit the tomb. They walked through the predawn darkness, carrying spices and ointments to belatedly anoint Jesus' body for burial. However, they were worried about the Roman soldiers guarding the grave and the large stone sealing the tomb.

Suddenly the ground shook beneath their feet. With a flash of lightning and a crack of thunder, the stone was rolled away. The Roman soldiers fainted like dead men. An angel in dazzling raiment blinded the women's eyes.

As they fell to their knees, the angel asked, “*Why do you seek the living among the dead? Jesus is not here—he has risen just as he said! Go tell the others that he is risen!*”

You never know when Easter is going to come. The Resurrection is always a surprise. The women were certainly shocked. They did not go expecting to stumble across the Resurrection. They were going to visit Jesus’ grave. Imagine their amazement when they encountered the Lord of Life!

During my childhood, my father loved to tell the same joke whenever we passed a cemetery. He would ask, “Do you know how many dead people are in that graveyard?” Then he would provide the answer, “All of them!”

The Easter angel asked the women, “*Why do you seek the living among the dead?*” The answer was obvious: they were in a cemetery! That’s where you expect to find dead people. However, the women discovered otherwise that first Easter Sunday morning. The Lord of life had conquered death once and for all. Paul wrote:

*Death has been swallowed up in victory,
“Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”
The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God!
He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!
(1 Corinthians 15:54-57)*

There is a story that I love to tell each Easter. For five years, I served the First United Methodist Church of West Point. The town is on the Georgia state line next to Lanett, Alabama. Going down Cherry Drive, the Lanett City Cemetery is on the left. There are two service roads into the graveyard with signs that declare “*No thru way*” and “*No exit!*” On Easter morning, we declare, “*Not any more!*”

With trembling legs, the women sped away from the tomb. The darkness was banished by the growing dawn. An irresistible joy began to bubble up within their hearts. Abandoning the needless burial ointments on the ground, they ran to tell the news that echoes in our ears this Easter morning: “*Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!*”

We have gathered in worship on this Easter Sunday to celebrate the good news of the Jesus Christ’s Resurrection. Death has been swallowed up in victory!

AND we come today looking for the Resurrection’s power in our own lives. We seek to claim it both for ourselves and our loved ones. You never know when Easter is going to come. The Resurrection is always a surprise. On today of all days, however, we claim and proclaim that the good news of the empty tomb!

Resurrection Stories

In her book, *The Preaching Life*, **Barbara Brown Taylor** told about her monthly visit to a community nursing home. She would talk with the residents and then serve them Holy Communion. She wrote:

“Once a month, nurses roll ten or fifteen of them into the sun room and park them in a semicircle around a small table. Some of them complain as I prepare the elements—‘Get me out of here! Take me back to my room right now!’—while others doze or stare or drool.”

One Monday she visited the home later in the afternoon. They warned her at the door that the residents’ medications were wearing off. It turned out to a livelier group than normal with random shouts and songs.

The Reverend Taylor asked, “What shall I read from the Bible this afternoon? What part would you like to hear?” One older woman’s voice broke through the noise as she said, “**Tell us a resurrection story!**”

The words were like oil calming disturbed waters. The room quieted as one after another repeated the words, “Yes, tell us a resurrection story.”

Tell us a resurrection story! We’ve already heard THE Resurrection Story of Jesus Christ. And we recognize that we too are an Easter people. Christ was the firstborn among the dead, and we are his brothers and sisters of the Resurrection. God’s life-giving power breaks into our lives in powerful and unexpected ways.

- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! A lifetime smoker finally kicks the habit when her grandchildren beg her to.
- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! A recovering alcoholic says “NO” to the bottle one day at a time in search of a better life.
- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! A church member faced life-threatening surgery for a cyst in her kidney. On a visit prior to surgery, the doctor performed a final ultrasound. They could not find the cyst—it was gone.
- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! A teenager attends a youth worship service in our community. During an altar call, he accepts Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.
- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! A woman lies in an ICU bed, facing death. She holds her pastor’s hands and with tears in both of their eyes, the woman of faith says: “It is well with my soul.”
- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! A past friendship has been torn apart by conflict, disagreement, and disappointment. Slowly two men learn to trust each other again as brothers in Christ.
- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! During the mid-eighties this congregation struggled. Some wondered if it might have to close its doors; but God wasn’t done with Sam Jones yet. A quarter century later this church is stronger than it’s ever been.
- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! It occurs every time the words, “I love you” and “I forgive you” are spoken.”
- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! At the beginning of a funeral service, the pastor dares to proclaim: “*Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life!’*”
- ❖ Tell us a resurrection story! It’s the story of Peter, Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Sam Jones. It is your story and mine. We are an Easter people marked by the power of new life. We ARE the resurrection story.

You never know when Easter is going to come. The Resurrection is always a surprise. Sometimes it comes sooner and other times later. Sometimes it comes in this

world and other times in the world to come; but Easter is coming. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, it is bursting into life all about us.

The Budding Cross

During the past weeks, we have watched as trees seemingly dead from the cold have budded into life in the warmth. In the midst of winter storms, it seemed as if spring would never arrive. Now we live in the midst of new birth. In addition to the calendar mandates, it is quite appropriate that our Easter celebration occurs in the spring.

One of the symbols used in Christian worship is **the budding cross**. As the name suggest, the cross has buds at each end of the crossbars. The symbol recognizes the twin realities of Christ's death and resurrection. The cross is a reminder of Jesus' crucifixion; however, the wooden cross is budding into new life as a reminder of Christ's resurrection.

Our Lenten worship series was entitled *Cross Walk*. We focused on Christ's call to discipleship: "*If anyone would follow me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*" We explored how to take up our cross in obedience to Christ's command.

Today we are reminded that the cross we bear is a budding cross. Suffering and death, grief and pain never have the final word. God does! And God's final word is spoken on this Easter Sunday morning. *Christ is risen, Christ is risen, indeed!* And we are raised with him.

Conclusion

Today is the first Sunday after the Paschal full moon—give or take two days—based upon *The Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Ephemeris and American Ephemeris and Nautical Calendar*. It's Easter, of course!

Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, dead, and buried; on the third day, he rose from the dead! Why do we still seek the living among the dead? The angelic proclamation continues to echo down through the centuries in our ears this morning, "*Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!*"

You never know when Easter is going to come. The Resurrection is always a surprise. Easter might have come late this year, but Easter has finally arrived. Glory to God!

Amen.