

“Opening the Shutters” based on Psalm 72 and Matthew 28:1-10

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We celebrate the triumph of love over death and the beginning of a new creation. We celebrate the cornerstone of our faith – that the very Word of God, fully God, shared in our humanity, to live within our human limits, born a helpless baby.

He was betrayed and abandoned by those closest to him. The Messiah, or Christ, anointed King, though he was, his people rejected him. They handed him over to the Roman occupying forces, who hanged him on a cross, meant to shame him, as a failed usurper of Rome’s authority. They hanged him to end his movement.

But today, nearly 2,000 years later, that movement is still alive in us, empowered by his Spirit, and we celebrate on this, the third day, that he rose from the grave and is alive. He is risen. He is risen, indeed, we say. The grave could not hold him. We proclaim Christ has risen from the dead, trampling death by death, and upon those who are in tombs, he has freely given life!

Indeed, his resurrection has begun a renewal of creation, and this new creation every moment bursts through a broken world. It does so through the people who know his love, and share it with the world, charged with being part of reconciling all people through him, until he comes again to make all things new.

But if we’re honest, we know that in our celebration, this world is still very broken. Sure, we have plenty to distract us. We live in an affluent age and have all the comforts. But sin and death remain always on the horizon and often we give in to their powers. Even when we don’t, when we try to follow the commands of Christ, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and when we truly try, and achieve, love for our neighbors, the road we walk is not always easy – we suffer. We are tempted to turn away from our God and turn to those worldly comforts.

We opened our service today with the lights off and the shutters closed. Our prelude was a song that adapted Psalm 77 to the experience of the disciples. Psalm 77 is a song for the burdened, who struggle with faith, especially amid turmoil. It is a beautiful piece of Hebrew poetry, so then every translation renders it differently. But in each translation what comes through is a frustration with God, and the decision by the psalmist, despite a failing faith, to remember the faithfulness of God in the past and to trust the mystery of God in the present.

In the third verse, which was not explicitly used in the song, or read in our reading today, the Psalmist says, “I remembered God, and I was troubled,” or literally, “and I growled.” When a loved one is ill, and it seems as if no amount of prayer can heal them, or when we see division threaten our way of life, even our security, or when we see injustice in our streets, and innocence stolen, it is easy to feel like God has become distant, to growl at God. It is as if to warn: “you’ve left me to this, don’t bother.” The writer’s soul, or whole being, refuses, to be comforted in the day of trouble, or literally, the day of the straits, like when we feel confined, and life is narrowed in.

Attributed to Asaph, David’s chief musician, the writer complains God holds his eyes open, and that he is pushed through, troubled, or perhaps pierced, or pushed forward before a judge, and

he cannot speak, and he questions if he has been rejected by God. He wonders if the favor of God is gone, if the merciful love of God has gone away, if grace has been withdrawn, and God's people are forgotten. Is God only angry now? Is there no compassion?

For three years, the disciples followed Jesus, they learned from him and witnessed his works. They saw him heal the blind, free people from demons, restore the ability to walk, cure skin conditions and bleeding that kept people from worship and gathering with others. He even raised people from the dead – including his friend Lazarus. But on Holy Saturday, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, he was gone – crucified and buried, laying in a tomb, dead.

It's not hard to imagine that Psalm 77 might have been a comfort to them, as it should be to us. The feelings of the disciples that Sabbath night and the coming morning were not unique. It was the great King David's chief musician who penned this hymn, and surely it was sung before David with his approval, because he felt it too. The man after God's own heart, identified with their struggle, when the one they saw as David's promised Son, the Messiah, was no longer with them, murdered by Rome, and it was possible, they would be killed too.

But when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb at dawn, they went just to look at it. They came just to see the place where he lay, as we do today, going to gravestones to remember our loved ones. Matthew says there was a great shaking of the ground, often translated as an earthquake, as an angel of the Lord rolled away the stone at the entrance of the tomb, and sat on it, glowing like lightning, in shimmering white linen. Unlike the other gospel writers, Matthew focuses on the tomb, and the image of Jesus shaking the earth by his death. He shows life emerging from the dark grave.

Last week, in Matthew's account of the crucifixion, there was a shaking, an earthquake, and that when he died, the bodies of many saints came to life, so that after he rose, they would come out to walk the streets of Jerusalem. Matthew's emphasis is that the death of Jesus, death itself is defeated. And so we said in our call to worship, "upon those in the tombs, He has freely given life." This is an ancient Greek Orthodox prayer we included.

It draws on what Matthew illustrates, that the cross that was meant for death, has been transformed by Jesus into a new tree of life. This is not about just claiming one amazing miracle that happened the moment he died, but the ongoing miracle that happens every day, metaphorically, when someone like Asaph, or like the disciples, or like us, struggle but choose to remember the faithfulness of God. We remember what was reported by God's people, and for us, this is when we recognize God's love, through the cross and the resurrection, so that we might emerge from our tombs.

The angel, and later Jesus, tell Mary to tell all the disciples that he is risen, and to go to Galilee. He tells them to go home, and there is where he will come to meet them. This is how it is for us as well, when we live in the tombs of this life, Jesus wants us to go home and meet him there. When we're focused on sin and death, either by our choice to turn away from God, or by our recognizing that a world turning from God threatens us in our security, we must remember that the risen Jesus pursues us in love, and will go before us, and meet us, where we are, and where we're headed.

The Psalmist chooses to remember God's faithfulness, and the story of God told by his people: How God delivered the Israelites from the seemingly unconquerable power of Egypt. Perhaps the disciples did the same, as our opening song said in their voice, "Then as now." Perhaps they brought their experience into the experience of their people, God's chosen. This restores the writer's hope, not only in God's direct power, but in those flawed servants like Moses and Aaron and all on the road to the promised land, walking by faith with them,

My sisters and brothers, today we celebrate the resurrection, and we rejoice in love's triumph over death! We do not celebrate because we treat this glorious event as a distraction, as just another way to look away from the challenges of our life, or this world. No, we celebrate because in spite of all that is still in disorder around us, we are bonded with Christians for the past 2,000 years by this story, and with the people of Israel, for the millennium before, we remember the faithfulness of God and we trust.

The world will try to distract us. Plenty will try to dismiss these stories as myths, or untrue, and try to turn us back to the things of this world. But let's be honest, those things only offer us a fleeting comfort. When we do this, we can close the shutters and hide, ignoring the world. If I don't see what's going on it can't hurt me, we might say. Or we can go out and think that it is up to us to save the world on our own, saying it's my effort, my work.

But the message of the resurrection says to open the shutters, to emerge from the tomb with Jesus, yes, with Jesus, to engage this world, and proclaim the love of God for all people to all people, and be resurrected people now, in this world, bringing the love and life of God with us, by loving our neighbors as ourselves and turning to the God who is life.

We opened the shutters to emerge from the tomb with Jesus this morning to illustrate, that though we may be discouraged, stressed, and challenged in our lives, we are not alone – Jesus Christ is risen today! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! The same Holy Spirit that raised the body of Jesus, now lives in us and among us as the church which has the purpose to reconcile the world to him.

My sisters and brothers, no matter what you are going through, know that God loves you. No matter what you have done, know that God loves you and pursues you with grace. No matter what has happened to you, God loves you and longs to restore you.

Open the shutters and let the light of Christ in, for he opens our tombs, and desires us to walk out, in the light, to be his light with him, sharing his love, so that all might know him by our love. In our struggles, it is important for us to remember the faith and experience of our ancestors, and remember those times God has been near, when we have felt a blessing ourselves – something to bring us near to God in our lives.

The God of Israel – who is the God revealed in and through Jesus Christ, the God who is the eternal Father and Source of all things, the eternal Son and creative Word of God who shared in our flesh, and the Holy Spirit that binds the Father and Son in love, and breathes life, bringing us into the life of God – this is the God who is faithful, loving, and true. This God longs for you to open the shutters, to step out with him. This God will meet you where you are. Amen.