

Just When Things Couldn't Get Any Worse

The Sunday of the Resurrection, Year C

Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

St. David's Episcopal Church, Bean Blossom, Indiana

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John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

I don't suppose anybody here is familiar with a website called www.RaptureReady.com. They publish a weekly feature called the "Rapture Index," which the author describes as "A Dow Jones Industrial Average of end time activity." He scores forty-five different indicators on a scale from one to five to get an overall index that indicates how fast we're hurtling toward the Rapture. The categories include natural disasters and reports of false messiahs, but also things like the rise of the European Union, ecumenical activity, and liberalism (that last category is at level five since the Democrats took control of Congress).

If anyone is interested, this week's Rapture Index is 159, just off the 2007 high of 163, but well shy of the all-time record of 182 in September of 2001.

Maybe some of you have watched the Jack van Impe program on late night television. Dr. van Impe and his wife, Rexella, make a commentary on the week's news events, interpreting them in terms of Biblical prophecy. They demonstrate how almost everything that happens on the world stage serves to confirm the acceleration of the apocalyptic clock.

We are surrounded by images of the anticipated last act of creation, from the *Left Behind* books to the Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Unstable times encourage people to hope and to worry about how things will end. It seems like it has always been so, from the Y2K fears of a few years ago, back through the various Millennial movements of nineteenth-century North America, back through the anxiety in the Middle Ages around the year

1000, all the way back to the early church, who earnestly expected Christ to return within their lifetimes.

What is maybe not as familiar is the tradition of Apocalypticism, or expectation of the end of this world, that was at a high boil in many segments of Judaism in the century or so before and after Jesus' birth.

The nation of Israel had been conquered and occupied by one foreign empire after another. The worship in the Temple had alternately been suppressed or co-opted by foreign rulers and their foreign Gods. One foreign emperor had gone so far as to erect a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies of the Temple and demand that it be worshipped. Faithful Jews had been martyred and massacred, crushed under the imperial boot.

All this oppression and devastation had convinced some Jewish thinkers that this could not possibly be the way God had intended the world to be. That this could not possibly be what God had in mind for the people of Israel, and that surely God would not let it stand forever.

These Jewish philosophers developed a model of the universe that sounds pretty familiar to us today. They believed that God had created the world good, but had delegated its day-to-day operation to the Devil and his lieutenants – what they referred to as “principalities and powers.” For them, this was the only possible explanation for all the evil they saw in the world.

They believed that things would continue to deteriorate under the Devil's government until things couldn't get any worse. At that point, God would step in, setting things right by utterly destroying the structures of evil and death that the Devil had set up. God would **unveil** the underlying creation as God had intended it: the Basileia.

Basileia is a Greek word that we usually translate “the Kingdom of God.”

The word that we translate as “unveil” or “reveal” is “apokalypso” – from which we get our word “apocalypse” – literally, to pull back a veil or curtain.

In the apocalypse, the unveiling, the curtain of sin and death would be pulled aside, and all God's promises to Israel would be fulfilled – all the promises that God made through Isaiah to people in exile in this morning's reading. God would create a new heaven and a new earth, where there would be no more weeping, no distress, no lives cut short by illness or violence, no homelessness, no oppression. God would rejoice in the people of Israel, and the people would live peacefully in the land and in right relationship with God.

God would not only fulfill the promises to Israel, but to all of creation. Specifically, God would remember the promise to Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through his descendants. The alienation between Jew and Gentile would be reconciled, and God would shower blessings on all of humanity. This would truly be the Basileia, the Kingdom of God, creation as God had intended it.

Many of the Jews living in Jesus' time believed that they were living at the end of the old world of sin and death. As far as they could see, things couldn't get any worse. They were expectantly looking for signs of the Basileia – of the kingdom of God being unveiled. They were looking for signs that the Demonic system of death, of sickness, of violence and oppression was being overcome. They were looking for rips or seams in the curtain of sin, where they might see the Kingdom of God – creation as it was meant to be – peeking through.

Imagine their excitement, then, when they learned about a rabbi who was not only teaching that the Kingdom of God was at hand, but was actually healing the sick, raising the dead, and challenging structures of violence and oppression. This rabbi was not just talking about the Basileia, he was incarnating it, acting it out: He was living it. He had pulled back the curtain and was inviting everyone – Jew and Gentile, sinner and Pharisee – to cross over into the new world on the other side. Surely this was the beginning of the end of the old world. Imagine their excitement.

Imagine their dismay, then, their sense of betrayal, when this man who embodied in himself everything that they expected from the Kingdom of God -- when this man was captured, tortured, and executed by exactly the Principalities and Powers that they believed he had come to defeat. When the sinful structures of empire and oppression humiliated and crushed him, hanging him on a cross to die as a warning to others who might be foolhardy enough to challenge the status quo. It looked as though the Kingdom had been lost; the veil of sin had dropped over the world again. Surely, things couldn't get any worse.

But then. But then Mary the Disciple came to embalm Jesus' body and found the tomb open. But then Peter and John ran to the tomb and found Jesus' body gone, his grave clothes neatly folded and set aside as no grave-robber would have taken the time to do. But then Mary saw Jesus and spoke to him in the garden, and brought the news back to the rest of the fearful community that she had seen the Lord. But then Peter saw the gifts of the Holy Spirit poured out upon gentiles, and understood that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God."

This could only mean one thing. The Kingdom was not lost. The old world of violence and oppression had not triumphed. The curtain had not closed. The sinful powers of the old world had given it everything they had. But just when things couldn't get any worse, God had stepped in, just as advertised, and confirmed the promise of a new world, the basileia, a world of life and abundance and health and peace and shalom. The curtain is ripped in half, and we can see the Kingdom of God revealed. Hallelujah! Christ is Risen!

So why is there still sickness and death? So why are there still violence and oppression and war? Why do the Principalities and Powers of sin still seem to be in charge?

Apocalypse. Unveiling. Revealing.

We live in an in-between time of already but not yet.

The kingdom has been revealed to us. We can see the difference between life under the power of sin and life lived under the Kingdom. But we still have a choice.

We can choose to live in the world of greed and selfishness that we see around us, or we can choose to live in such a way that everybody has the chance to have enough. We can choose to live as though each of us is the center of our own universe, or we can choose to live with one another as brothers and sisters, as children of God. We can choose to worship money or fame or power or the satisfaction of being right, or we can choose to worship the God who created us and gives us being.

The apocalypse, the unveiling, has occurred, the Kingdom of God has been revealed, but we still have to live into it.

Every time we choose to accommodate to this world of sin and death, we strengthen its hold over us. And every time we choose to do what God has called us to do, to love one another, to care for one another, even when it is inconvenient or unpopular or difficult, every time we make that choice to live in the Basileia, we can see a little bit of light peeking through that veil, a little bit of the Kingdom of God breaking through into our world.

In his life, Jesus pulled back the curtain and showed us what a life lived in obedience to the Kingdom of God would look like. In his death, he showed us how far the forces of sin are willing to go to snuff out the Kingdom. In his resurrection, God shows us that no matter how bad they get, even when things can't get any worse, the worst thing is never the last thing.

Hallelujah! Christ Is Risen! The kingdom of God is at hand!