

## *RISE UP!*

Matthew 28.16-20

Easter, April 16, 2017

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Good morning. It is so wonderful to have all of you here this morning because all the gospels seem to agree that it takes a crowd to celebrate Holy Week.

Holy Week began last week with Palm Sunday and Matthew tells us that “a very large crowd” gathered as Jesus enters Jerusalem and the crowd cries out (that’s your cue) ... “Hosanna!”

A few days later, Jesus is arrested in a garden where he has been praying. And, Matthew says, “At that hour, Jesus said to the *crowds*, ‘Am I a thief?’” And the crowd takes Jesus to the governor’s residence where they cry out this time (cue again) ... “Crucify him!”

Now maybe we can’t imagine ourselves in *that* crowd.

But I am reminded that the great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died in a Nazi concentration camp, said that every time we practice some form of antisemitism, we crucify Jesus all over again.

And by extension, perhaps every time we practice some form of racial or religious hatred or participate in some form of exclusive nationalism we put ourselves in the crowd that cries out “Crucify!”

At the Good Friday service, Cherry Johnson read her poem “Forsaken,” in which she said: “We have watched ourselves *decompensate*.” I had to go look that up. As a psychological term, it means: “to lose the ability to maintain normal or appropriate psychological defenses, sometimes resulting in depression, anxiety, or delusions.” Sometimes a crowd can break down the usual defenses that keep us from losing ourselves and our sense of values.

So Cherry says:  
*We have watched ourselves decompensate  
Into the type of crowd  
Who would shout  
Crucify —  
Ashamed, yet driven to belong.*

Part of the reason we keep saying that Easter makes no sense without Good Friday is that it's hard to imagine the potential for new life if we aren't willing to admit the part we play in the crowd. If we aren't willing to own up to the ways we surrender our best selves in order to belong. If we aren't willing to see the ways we "decompensate" and lose track of those psychological defenses that keep us from being swept up and manipulated.

I'm glad you are here this morning because, for good or bad, it takes a crowd to celebrate Holy Week.

Now here's the thing: If there is an Easter crowd, it must be an anticipated one because, according to the story itself, it is not an actual one. There are *two* women at the beginning of the Easter story in Matthew 28. And Matthew ends by saying: "Now the *eleven* disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain Jesus had directed them." Eleven. That's it.

After the "very large crowd" of Palm Sunday and the "crowds" that came to arrest Jesus, the Easter crowd in the gospels is a little sparse.

And even at that, they aren't all that convinced about the resurrection. Matthew says: "When the eleven saw him, they worshipped him; but some *doubted*."

I've always been a little surprised that this part of the story doesn't get more play at Easter because, if there is one thing I know for sure about

all the Easter crowds I have been a part of over the years it's that there are always doubters in the house.

In fact, I know you are here because many of you have told me on any number of occasions in no uncertain terms that you have serious doubts about all this.

I don't know why we think it should be any different. According to Matthew, it's been that way from the beginning: "they worshipped; and some doubted."

And, by the way, to the doubters in the crowd: I'm glad you are here. Thank God for you. Your doubts help us not to take hope for granted. Your doubts push us to deeper understanding. Your doubts open us, dare I say, to the potential for real resurrection; by which I mean, your doubts open us up to the possibility of new life out of what we used to call "dead orthodoxy," or "shrink-wrapped religion," or what Jim Segaar said on Friday night was liberation from the mindless and lifeless "we've-always-done-it-that-way" version of tradition.

So I am glad the little Easter band of disciples includes the doubters because sometimes I am one of them.

I've been talking about this book, *Insurrection*, by a young Irish evangelical, Peter Rollins. He has subtitled his book: "To believe is human; to doubt, divine;" that, in other words, it is divine work to pry us away from the security blankets of faith we cling to but which keep us from exposing ourselves to the potential for new life.

In fact, Rollins says that resurrection isn't about what we *believe* anyway. It's about what we *do*.

And I think Rollins may have a point because, in my experience, both worship and doubt can pose the same problem. Both of them can get in the way of us doing anything. Faith and doubt can both be paralyzing.

Easter is a good example that we can spend so much time arguing about what really happened – or didn't happen – 2000 years ago that we lose track of what *is* happening right now.

So, in Matthew 28, Jesus doesn't spend any time sorting out the worshippers and the doubters. He doesn't congratulate the worshippers and scold the doubters. He says to all of them:

*All authority – or all power – in heaven and in earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey – to do – everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.*

Now I don't think we can underestimate the revolutionary nature of all that because when Jesus says "all power belongs to me," he is saying "all power" does not belong to Rome. All power does not belong to Caesar. All power does not belong to the forces that try to control the world by killing people.

Resurrection in Matthew 28 is about allegiance to a different kind of power.

And regardless of what those eleven might have believed or not believed, all of them were being invited into a revolution that would rise up all over the world to resist the powers of death.

"Teach them to do," Jesus says, and that teaching is just a few chapters earlier in Matthew 25: "Imagine all the nations of the earth gathered together and God's beloved one saying:

*'Come, you that are blessed by my Abba, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'*

*<sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup>And the king [this power of a different sort] will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me.'*

Given what Peter Rollins has written, you can probably imagine that he has had to face a lot of accusations about denying the resurrection. And there is an interview where he says:

*Without equivocation or hesitation I fully and completely admit that I deny the resurrection of Christ. This is something that anyone who knows me could tell you, and I am not afraid to say it publicly, no matter what some people may think ... I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, each day that I turn my back on the poor. I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cry of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system.*

*However, Rollins says, there are moments when I affirm the resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees ...*

If people find resurrection hard to believe, I think it's because we have denied it not by what we have said but by what we have not done.

I'm glad you are here this morning because it takes a crowd to celebrate Holy Week. Matthew tells us that there was the Palm Sunday crowd and there was a Good Friday crowd.

But if there is to be an Easter crowd this morning it will be because people right here and all over the world are rising up to pledge allegiance to a different kind of power.

If this is an Easter crowd this morning it is because we are rising up to make sure hungry people are fed and sick people get the care they need.

If this is an Easter crowd this morning it is because we are rising up to welcome strangers and to learn from doubters and to love the lonely.

If this is an Easter crowd this morning it is because we are rising up to stand with those in prison and in detention centers.

If this is an Easter crowd this morning it is because we are rising up to sing with all those who have been beaten down by the system: “We Shall Overcome.”

If this is an Easter crowd this morning it is not because we have finally won an argument about what we believe. It will be because we are, each in our own way, rising up to resist the powers of death.

And if in our rising up there is something to believe, it may be that voice that comes at the very end of Matthew 28: “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

*Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Charles Marsh (Vintage Books, 2014). Cherry Johnson’s poem, “Forsaken,” can be found at [www.seattlefirstbaptist.org](http://www.seattlefirstbaptist.org). Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: To Believe is Human; to Doubt, Divine* (Howard Books, 2011) and his interview can be found on YouTube or in an article by Carl Gregg, “Practice Resurrection: Progressive Christian Theology for Easter,” at [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com).