

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 12, 2020
Easter Sunday**

AN EASTER LIKE NO OTHER

Luke 24: 1-12

A TRADITION LIKE NO OTHER

In more normal circumstances, they would be playing the final round of The Masters Golf Tournament today at the Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia. But these are not normal days, and The Masters is not immune to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic that has brought so much of “normal life” to a halt. Unlike so many events that have been canceled, so far The Masters has only been postponed. Its organizers hope it can be played in November. Whether you’re a fan of golf or not, we can all hope the crisis caused by the coronavirus will have passed by then and that life will have returned to something more resembling normal.

The Masters Championship, which is the most prestigious golf tournament in America, rivaled only by the US Open, has been around since 1934. It is usually played during the second weekend of April, which sometimes coincides with Easter weekend. The inaugural Masters in 1934 was won by my cousin Horton Smith. (He’s not really my cousin, as far as I know, but I figure I’m related in one way or another to everyone named Smith 😊.) Cousin Horton won again in 1936. Over the years, the golfers who have won the most Masters titles are Jack Nicklaus, with six; and Tiger Woods, with five, including last year.

You may know that the winner of The Masters is given a green jacket as a symbol of his victory. Of course, there is prize money, too. In 1934, cousin Horton received a whopping \$1,500 for his victory. Last year Tiger Woods won \$2,070,000.

I don’t think you tuned in today to hear me talk about The Masters. But here is something interesting. The tag line used to promote The Masters is this: *A Tradition Like No Other*.

AN EASTER LIKE NO OTHER

Doesn’t it seem like this year we are experiencing *An Easter Like No Other* ... at least, an Easter like no other in recent memory, like no other in the lifetimes of the vast majority of us? If you were alive during World War 2, you may recall circumstances or measures that made your Easter celebration different or more restrained than at other times. A hundred years ago, when the Spanish Flu gripped the world, infecting as many as 500 million people worldwide (about a quarter of the world’s population at the time), and resulting in as many as 50 million deaths, the observance of Easter, while surrounded by illness and death, must have been muted to some degree, while at the same time bringing into sharper relief the Easter message of triumph over death through our risen Savior and living Lord Jesus Christ.

We are always surrounded by death and dying, pandemic or not. Only the numbers and the cause of so many deaths are different now. As of this morning, there are more than 525,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the US, with over 20,000 deaths, and more than 108,000 deaths from the virus worldwide. In Virginia, there are more than 5,000 confirmed cases and 130 deaths so far. If the latest projections prove to be accurate and (only) 60,000 Americans die from this virus – every one a person created and loved by God – that is more than the number of names on the wall of the Viet Nam Memorial on the National Mall – more than all the Americans who died in the Viet Nam War. It is more than the entire population of Altoona, PA, the city where my family used to live, which had a population of about 50,000 when we lived there.

In these unusual times, one constant remains. As the Bible tells us: “Death is the destiny of every person” (Ecclesiastes 7:2). Unless Jesus comes back first – “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20) – we will all have an appointment with death (Hebrews 9:27). The good news is that death – whether due to COVID-19, cancer, war, tragedy, or any other cause – is not the end of the story. Powerful as it is, death does not have the last word. *Jesus* does! It is *His* triumph over death and Satan and all the powers of evil that we celebrate today.

In some senses, this really is an Easter like no other. Ordinarily, our church would be bustling with activity, with the sounds of laughter and praise and joyful singing, not to mention conversations over coffee and Evan Duncan’s shortbread and other good stuff. The pews would be filled with members of our church family and guests who would join us. But our church building is strangely silent and empty today. Like the tomb on Easter morning, the church is empty today. Or almost empty. Along with Mike and me, our musicians and technical team are here today, all of us trying to keep appropriate distance from one another. That’s it.

I want you all to know that we miss you. *I miss you!* How I wish we could all be together in person, not just in spirit through the tools of modern technology.

Because of the way we are “meeting together” for worship, this *is* an Easter like no other. Because of our present circumstances, what is happening today across America is being called the largest digital event ever in the history of the Christian church. Did you know that? You are part of something today that is historic, something people may talk about for the rest of their lives.

Even though I can’t see you, I’m pretty sure that some of you have “come to church” in your PJs today. Or maybe you got dressed up because it’s Easter Sunday. Some of you are probably sipping coffee or eating breakfast while you worship. Some of you are in your favorite chair or lounging on your sofa. You may even be watching this service in bed. It’s all good, though it is more difficult to worship in some postures than in others. Just sayin’ ☺. Some of you probably had an Easter egg hunt at your house this morning. When our kids were small, we always made arrangements to have the Easter bunny visit our house on Saturday, because Sunday morning just didn’t work well for us.

Lanah Hamrick (Happy Easter, Lanah!) sent me a *New Hymn for This Easter* written for the tune of “The Church’s One Foundation” by a woman named Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. Don’t worry, I won’t sing it, but I want you to hear the words:

This Easter celebration is not like ones we’ve known.
 We pray in isolation, we sing the hymns alone.
 We’re distant from our neighbors – from worship leaders, too.
 No flowers to grace the chancel to set a festive mood.
 (Well, we have a few! But not like it usually is on Easter.)

No gathered choirs are singing; no banners lead the way.
 O God of love and promise, where’s joy this Easter Day?
 With sanctuaries empty, may home become the place
 We ponder resurrection and celebrate Your grace.

Our joy won’t come from worship that’s in a crowded room
 But from the news of women who saw the empty tomb.
 Our joy comes from disciples who ran with haste to see –
 Who heard that Christ is risen, and then, by grace, believed.

In all the grief and suffering, may we remember well:
 Christ suffered crucifixion and faced the powers of hell.
 Each Easter bears the promise: Christ rose that glorious day!
 Now nothing in creation can keep Your love away.

We thank You that on Easter, Your church is blessed to be
 A scattered, faithful body that’s doing ministry.
 In homes and in the places of help and healing, too,
 We live the Easter message by gladly serving You.

(© 2020 by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. ARR.)

THE FIRST EASTER

All in all, this is an Easter like no other we have ever experienced. But the Easter I most want to focus on, the Easter that was truly like no other ever, was the first Easter, the one that took place on the Sunday morning following Jesus’ crucifixion and burial on Good Friday.

I mentioned last Sunday that when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the “Hosannas” and “Hallelujahs” of the crowds, He knew that He had less than a week to live. He knew the time had come for Him to suffer and die for the sins of the world. He knew the cross was His destiny. He knew.

THURSDAY

The Gospels give us glimpses of what Jesus did and said during the final week of His life. On Thursday, with the hour of His crucifixion fast approaching, Jesus ate the last supper with His disciples in the upper room. There He instituted the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and gave His disciples a "new command" to "love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). It was on Thursday that Jesus prayed His heart-wrenching prayer of surrender to the Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was there in Gethsemane that Judas betrayed Him into the hands of the authorities, and He was arrested by the temple police.

FRIDAY

Then Friday came. You know what happened on Friday. Early in the morning, Jesus was condemned to death by the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council) on the charge of blasphemy. They took Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, to seek the death penalty, since only Rome had the power to execute a criminal.

Pilate tried to release Jesus. He knew Jesus had been railroaded. But he gave in to the pressure from the Jewish leaders and to the demands of the Passover crowd they had whipped into a frenzy, calling for Jesus to be crucified. After washing his hands of responsibility (he thought), Pilate turned Jesus over to the Roman soldiers to be put to death.

They took Him to a place called Golgotha, also known as Calvary, where He was nailed to a cross between two criminals.

The crucifixion took place around 9:00 AM. For three hours, from about noon to 3 PM, the sun went into hiding and darkness covered the land. Around 3 PM, having completed His mission to save us from our sins, Jesus cried out: "*Tetelestai*. It is finished" (John 19:30). He then took His last breath and died.

With Pilate's permission, a man named Joseph (from Arimathea), who had become a secret follower of Jesus, took the body of Jesus, wrapped it in traditional burial cloths, placed the body in a tomb cut out of rock, and rolled a huge stone in front of the entrance. Mary Magdalene and another Mary (Matthew 27:61) were there as Joseph laid the body in the tomb. So they knew where the body of Jesus was buried.

That was Friday. We call it "Good Friday." What happened to Jesus was *not* good. But what God accomplished for us through the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross *was* and *is* good. To those who cared about Jesus, what happened that day seemed anything but good. To His family and friends and followers, it was a horrible day. The worst day ever.

SATURDAY

Then Saturday came. The Gospels tell us very little about Saturday. From sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, faithful Jews, including the followers of Jesus, observed the Sabbath. Saturday must have been an interminably long day for those who knew and cared about Jesus.

Fear, grief, despair, deflation, and devastation all gripped their hearts. They were in shock. Frightened. And full of unanswered questions:

- How could this have happened?
- What went wrong?
- What does it all mean?
- Now what?

Saturday was a day of waiting. But waiting for what? They weren't expecting a resurrection to take place. It wasn't even on their radar screen even though Jesus had told them on several occasions that He would suffer, die, and then be raised from the dead on the third day. But they didn't get it. Not yet, anyway.

Waiting is one of the absolute hardest things we have to do in life, isn't it? Who likes to wait? Nobody. But waiting is a huge part of life, in things both big and small. Right now, we're all hunkered down as a society waiting for this pandemic to pass. Some, thank God, are on the frontlines of the battle against the virus, or putting themselves at risk to provide the goods and services we need while we wait for a better day to come. For many of us, all we can do is wait. And pray. And love one another by social distancing.

It sure does feel like Saturday here on planet Earth, doesn't it? You may wonder sometimes if Sunday will ever come. Listen: Because Sunday came for Jesus (as He knew it would), because He rose again from the dead, we can have confidence that Jesus will bring us through this. You can be assured that COVID-19 does not have the last word. Death does not have the last word, because Jesus really did rise again from the dead.

Waiting is just an inevitable part of life. So the best thing to do is to make the best of it. In your circumstances of waiting, let waiting do its work in you. Trust God to do *His* work in you as you wait. And remember that God *is* at work, even when it seems like nothing is happening, just as He was at work between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, when the followers of Jesus had pretty much given up all the hope they ever had.

You may not want to hear this, but someone has said that second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness that any of us will ever encounter in this life.

SUNDAY

Saturday was a day of waiting. And wondering. But then Sunday came. It was a day like no other. Ever.

Do you know that none of the Gospels describe the precise moment of the resurrection? There is no eyewitness account of the resurrection of Jesus, because there were no eyewitnesses (no *human* eyewitnesses) to it. No one saw it happen. But there were plenty of eyewitnesses to the resurrection after the fact. There were lots of eyewitnesses who saw the risen Lord Jesus with their own eyes and heard Him speaking to them.

Here is a quick recap of what took place on the first Easter morning, taken mostly from Luke 24: At the crack of dawn on Sunday, several of the women who were among Jesus' most faithful followers hurried to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been laid on Friday. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, another Mary (the mother of James), Salome (Mark 16:1), and at least one other woman, maybe more. What they found when they got there was not what they expected. To their surprise, the huge stone covering the entrance had been rolled away. How, or by whom, they didn't know. So, they went into the tomb. But the body of Jesus wasn't there. The grave clothes in which Jesus had been wrapped were lying there. But no Jesus.

The women were puzzled, wondering what to make of this. There could be several explanations for the almost-empty tomb. Maybe they were confused and went to the wrong tomb. Maybe the body of Jesus had been stolen by His followers to perpetuate a hoax by claiming Jesus had risen from the dead (Matthew 27:62-66). Or perhaps Joseph had come and moved the body to another tomb. Maybe there was another explanation. None of these explanations hold up.

As they were trying to make sense of it, the women were startled by two angels in dazzling apparel, who said to them: "Why in the world are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here; He has risen from the dead. Don't you remember how He told you what would happen, that He would be handed over to sinful men, put to death on a cross, and then raised to life on the third day?" Then, says Luke, "they remembered."

The women left the tomb and ran to tell the 11 disciples (the 12 minus Judas) and the rest of Jesus' followers about the empty tomb and what the angels had told them. But the 11 – Peter, James, John, and the rest – didn't believe a word they said. They thought the women were making it up. It all sounded crazy to them. A resurrection was the last thing they expected when they got out of bed that morning. Peter, not sure what to think, decided to check it out for himself. He ran to the tomb, along with John (John 20:3-9), and found things just as the women said. But they didn't find Jesus.

At this point, the 11 disciples and the rest of Jesus' followers, both men and women, knew something unusual was going on. But they didn't know exactly what. Not yet. *We know* something neither the women, nor the 11, nor any of the rest of Jesus' followers knew. *We know* the crucifixion of Jesus and His burial is not the end of the story. But they didn't. *We know* there is a resurrection on the third day. *We know* not only *that* the tomb was empty on Easter morning; we also know *why*. *We know* that Jesus has been raised from the dead – *literally, physically, bodily* (not just figuratively or mystically or spiritually). *We know* Jesus is alive. But they didn't. Not yet. From our vantage point 2,000 years after these events took place – and these are real, historical events that really happened – *we know* what they did not yet know.

Soon they will meet the risen Jesus themselves, beginning with Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18) and the other women who came to the tomb (Matthew 28:9-10), then Peter (Luke 24:34), then the two travelers on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), then the disciples – minus

Thomas – as they met behind closed doors on Easter Sunday night (John 20:19-23), then doubting Thomas himself and the rest of the disciples a week later (John 20:24-29), then several of the disciples when they returned from an all-night fishing trip (John 21:1-14). At the beginning of the Book of Acts, Luke says that over a period of 40 days following His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His followers on several occasions and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, giving “many convincing proofs that He was alive” (Acts 1:3). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that on one occasion Jesus appeared to more than 500 of His followers (15:6).

We know all these things happened because we have the testimony of the Bible and the witness of history that these events really did happen. Not to mention the legacy of lives changed through the power of the risen Jesus.

There have always been people, including today, who scoff at the whole notion of the resurrection. They say it is not believable. One of the things that makes the Gospel accounts of the resurrection so totally believable is the fact that even the closest friends and followers of Jesus did not expect it. They were slow to believe it. They didn’t believe until they saw Him with their own eyes. They could never have made it up. If the Gospel writers invented the resurrection, they would never have made women the first eyewitnesses. The testimony of women was inadmissible in both the Roman and Jewish courts. So, if you were making up a story that you wanted people to believe was true, the last thing you would do in the 1st century would be to have women as eyewitnesses. It would undermine the credibility of your story. As Tim Keller says, the only reason the Gospel writers named women as the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus is because they really were! (Sermon by Tim Keller, “Jesus Vindicated”, www.preachingtoday.com/sermons.)

It may seem like a crazy story, but it’s true. It really happened. A famous theologian (Wolfhart Pannenberg) said “the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event.” How’s that for a profound theological statement? “And second, if you believe it happened” – which it did – “you have to change the way you live.”

The first Easter – the one that took place on the third day after Jesus was executed on a cross for crimes He did not commit (for my crimes against God and yours) – was an Easter like no other. There will never be an Easter like it, not until the day when we, and all who belong to Christ, receive from Him our resurrection bodies and live with Him forever.

But, listen: This *can* be an Easter like no other for you, especially if you’ve been on the fence about Jesus and the gospel message of His suffering, death, and resurrection from the dead.

This can be an Easter like no other for you if you will get off the fence, simply take a step of faith, and put your trust in Jesus to save you from your sins, and to give you the hope and promise and reality of eternal life.

If you have an intellectual belief in Jesus and the resurrection – you believe that Jesus was a real person who lived and died and rose again – but you have never stepped across the line in

faith to trust Him with your life, this can be an Easter like no other for you. Believing something in your head is not the same as knowing Jesus as Your Savior and having a personal relationship with the risen and living Lord.

If you're a skeptic, if you have trouble believing the message of Easter, this can be an Easter like no other for you if you will honestly look at the evidence for the resurrection and the reasons why we believe and proclaim joyfully that Jesus really is risen from the dead.

In all the best ways, I pray that this will be an Easter like no other for you. Come to Jesus with all your questions and doubts. He will not turn you away. Come to Him and discover, like the women at the tomb, like the disciples who were slow to get it, that *Jesus is risen* from the dead. And because He lives, we can face tomorrow. We can face all our fears. We can face the troubles and hardships of life. We can face COVID-19 and the havoc – all the pain, suffering, grief, and loss it has brought.

Because He lives. May this be an Easter like no other for you. To the glory and praise of God. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.