

Welcome

Welcome to Easter Sunday! We're gathered today, outside, in person and virtually, to celebrate Jesus' victory over death. I hope you're ready to celebrate!

I grew up in Kansas City, and our family had an interesting Easter tradition: we would wake up really early - like 5 am. I still remember my parents scooping us out of bed in our PJs, packing us into the car and driving to a cemetery somewhere in KC. A church there - not ours, but some other church - held a sunrise reenactment of the resurrection, complete with costumes and everything.

I always remember it being packed, and us not really being able to see anything and it was all happening in a cemetery, and we drove at least 30 minutes each way to get there, plus parking and walking forever to get to the spot, and all for maybe a 10 minute service.

Then the long walk back, navigating the traffic, the long drive home, only to be rushed into baths and exchange our pjs for our brand new Easter clothes and off to our church for the Easter worship.

Strange, I know, but there's something about Easter that compels us outside. It's a day that, yes, invites us to dress up, but it's also one that calls us from our beds in the predawn light, insisting we come out, come out to witness something new, something impossible. Something beautiful and somehow more true than we could have imagined.

We're going to talk about the geography of the resurrection today. Because it matters that Jesus wasn't raised to life in the Temple or at a Palace. The where and the when and the who of today tells us a great deal about who we are as a people gathered to celebrate today.

Message

Today is Easter Sunday. We're gathered here to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. As you may have noticed, we're outside today. Now, that's mainly because we're still not quite ready to move back into our building yet, but it's also because our new series is called Church in the Wild.

Hip hop fans will recognize that as a play on the song by Kanye West and Jay-Z, from their album Watch the Throne. On that song, they meditate

*Human beings in a mob
What's a mob to a king?
What's a king to a god?
What's a god to a non-believer
Who don't believe in anything?*

Will he make it out alive?

No church in the wild.

My friend and hip hop scholar Dr. Daniel White Hodge observes that there's a progression in this verse: human beings who want to exercise power will often form mobs. But what does a king care about a mob? In his palace, far above the concerns of the streets, the mob is nothing to a king.

At the same time, what is a king to a god? On his throne in heaven, far above the earth, what could a god possibly care about a king and his earthly concerns?

You can sense in those three short bars the progression of power. A single human is nothing compared to a mob is nothing compared to a king is nothing compared to a god.

But then they ask the game-breaking question: what's even a god to a non-believer?

Does any of this matter to the person who just refuses to play by the rules? Does any of this affect the unbeliever who refuses to try to climb the ladder of success?

Kanye and Jay-Z call that space "the wild". The place outside the status quo. What we might call "out of bounds". The opposite of "wild" is "civilization". Where the streets are paved and the streetlights stay on. Where fences keep out the bad.

Their non-believer is the person who lives outside the fence, the person who rejects the safety of civilization for the freedom of the wild.

And they insist there's no church in the wild.

Now, it's hard, on the surface, to disagree with them. After all, aren't churches meant to be places that make us feel safe and secure? Haven't most of us grown up with the ideal image of a church being the center of the neighborhood? A place where faith is a civilizing force that helps us be good neighbors?

Isn't The Wild the opposite of church?

Except... well except for Jesus.

Just a couple of days ago, on Good Friday, we remembered Jesus' betrayal, trial and execution. He was tried by the religious leaders of his day and found to be a danger. And he was executed by Rome as a traitor. In other words, they all thought Jesus was too wild to be left alive.

Will he make it out alive? Not if the kings and gods of our world have anything to say about it.

Jesus was a threat to the status quo. He was too revolutionary to be left alone.

Did you know that the Romans called the early Christians atheists? Because they didn't believe in the Roman gods. They were a threat to the fabric of Roman culture. They were a threat to the Roman way of life.

And here's the thing: they were. Because the Roman kings, the caesars, were built on that same hierarchy of power Kanye and Jay-Z outlined.

That question they ask hits harder in that light. Can our unbeliever - the one who rejects the unjust way of the day - make it out alive?

Can our wild revolutionary survive?

On Good Friday, it seemed like the answer was no. Jesus was crushed in the gears of Jerusalem's politics. The Temple leaders and the palace royals conspired to have him killed.

But then, on Sunday morning, we bore witness to a miracle. Let's listen to Mark's account of Jesus' female disciples who seek out his grave:

Saturday evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went out and purchased burial spices so they could anoint Jesus' body. Very early on Sunday morning, just at sunrise, they went to the tomb. On the way they were asking each other, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" But as they arrived, they looked up and saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled aside.

When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side. The women were shocked, but the angel said, "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died." -- Mark 16:1-7 NLT

I want to return to the fact that Jesus is headed to Galilee in a minute. But for the moment, I want to invite you to celebrate again. Because Kanye and Jay-Z have warned us that it's dangerous to live in the wild. It's dangerous to question the way things are, to call out the powers that be. Revolutions often claim the lives of the revolutionaries.

But here we have an unequivocal statement from God: Jesus was right. His way is the way to life. We don't find life in the way of Rome, in the hierarchy of kings and gods, but in the wild. With the revolutionary.

When we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, this is what we are celebrating: that by raising Jesus from the dead, God is affirming that Jesus' way, the wild way, the revolutionary way, is where we find life and hope.

[dance break]

What, exactly, was this revolutionary way Jesus embodied? For that, I want to take us to the book of Hebrews. This is a sermon preached in the early church to a congregation of Jewish Christians who are struggling with their new, wild identity. They're feeling a lot of social pressure to go back to conforming, to come in from the wild of the Jesus way and rejoin the safety of the structures they'd left.

So Hebrews is a long sermon encouraging them to stay the course. There's a lot of conversation in Hebrews about the sacrificial rites of the established religion and how Jesus' death and resurrection did away with them (seriously, if you're a theology nerd it doesn't get much better than Hebrews). So just a little bit of background to help us hear the good news in this sermon the way those first Christians would have.

The sort of religion Jesus' followers used to practice before him was ancient - it extended back for over a thousand years. And while it took a number of different forms (just like church - our worship hasn't looked the same over the years either!), the core idea was the same.

It all started after Mt. Sinai and the 10 commandments. God told them how to build a portable temple where they could perform sacrifices. This was their way to remain in relationship with God - to accomplish the forgiveness of sin. The Tabernacle was the center of their world - literally and figuratively. Their whole camp was organized around the Tabernacle. But since it was where God's physical presence on Earth lived, it was also the center of the universe, as far as they were concerned.

Everything radiated out from the Tabernacle in layers. The very center of the Tabernacle was the holiest place - it's where the Ark of the Covenant and God's physical presence lived. Outside of that was the Holy Place - only the priests could go in there, the holy religious leaders. Next was the inner courts - only Jewish men could enter there.

The outer court was for Jewish women, and then was the rest of the camp.

And then there was outside the camp.

What Jay-Z would call the Wild. That's where the rest of the world lived. The people who weren't chosen. The people who weren't holy.

The animals that were sacrificed represented the sins of the people. And when the sacrifices had been completed, the priests had to dispose of the remains. They burned them. Wanna guess where? Of course: outside the camp.

This remained the practice even after God's people had transitioned from nomadic to settled. Once they built a permanent Temple instead of a portable Tabernacle.

The city, the camp, is civilized. It's safe. It's life. Outside the walls, outside the camp, is sin. Death. Danger.

The wild.

Now, you're probably asking what any of that has to do with Easter, right?

Well, let's let the preacher of Hebrews tell us:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So do not be attracted by strange, new ideas. Your strength comes from God's grace, not from rules about food, which don't help those who follow them.

We have an altar from which the priests in the Tabernacle have no right to eat. Under the old system, the high priest brought the blood of animals into the Holy Place as a sacrifice for sin, and the bodies of the animals were burned outside the camp. So also Jesus suffered and died outside the city gates to make his people holy by means of his own blood. So let us go out to him, outside the camp, and bear the disgrace he bore. For this world is not our permanent home; we are looking forward to a home yet to come.

Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name. And don't forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God. -- Hebrews 13:8–16 NLT

The preacher observes that Jesus was crucified outside the city - of course he was. Rome wanted to illustrate that the barbarian, the savage, the failed revolutionary, died in the Wild, outside the protection Rome offered.

But the preacher observes that this is good news because it's a whole new kind of religion. It's a faith that's made for the wild.

Because the dark truth of Rome's way is that a system that's concerned with who's in and who's out is always drawing lines. Between good and evil. Safe and dangerous. White and Black. Sacred and profane. Civilized and wild. And sooner or later, they're going to draw a line that puts you on the outside, too.

Jesus came to turn the whole thing over. Jesus came for the people who already live in the Wild, the people who don't fit in, who refuse to conform to unjust systems.

During this series, we're going to explore how the Church thrives in the Wild, how the Church challenges the status quo.

Because Jesus was crucified outside the city. He was raised to life in the wild. For the wild. And for all of us wild ones.

And the resurrection proves to us all that Jesus' revolution wins the day. All the forces of evil and injustice cannot defeat the God who raises the dead.

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to a revolution as simple as the meals we eat.

1. When in the last week has Jesus invited me to risk?
2. When in the last week have I chosen to play it safe?
3. When in the next week is Jesus inviting me to step out?
4. How can I act in faith this week?