

# Jesus Came to Live — Abundantly

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

Holy Week ends with the silence and waiting of Saturday. Christians call it Holy Saturday. For faithful Jews, it's the Sabbath. Jesus was executed on Friday, and there was only enough time to take his lifeless body from the cross and place it in a temporary tomb.

Early Sunday morning, the stories say, several women came to the tomb to prepare the body of their friend with spices so they could bury him permanently. But when they came to the tomb, the women were shocked because the body was no longer there. The grief which had permeated their Sabbath was compounded now by panic and confusion.

It took a while, but after reflection and discernment, the early church came to trust that Jesus was alive. Death could not hold him. With a sense of the awesome mystery of the moment, early followers began to experience that Jesus remained present with them. That sense gave them the growing confidence so they could proclaim the message that Jesus was vital with the new life given by God.

This new life also permeated the life of the early church. God's new life was active among them and had transformed their lives. God's new life energized and animated those early followers so that they shared the story of God's powerful and transforming love with anyone who would listen. It was a story of life, of grace, of compassion, of love.

That's why Easter became the principal festival of the Christian church. Death does not have the last word. The last word is always a word of life and love and hope.

God's new life gave birth to the church. Easter is not the celebration of a resuscitated corpse. That is too literal a reading. Rather, Easter celebrates the powerful love of God which animates life, which enkindles the light of hope, which rejuvenates our passion to make life more whole and more just. Easter reawakens the conviction that life can be whole and good for all people, for all creatures, for all the earth.

It makes me sad when I hear other Christians say that "Jesus was born to die." This is a common way to think about the gospel. Five months ago, I saw a church sign online which read, "Christmas is the story of a baby born to die." Wherever you go, conservative evangelical Christians will tell you that the main story about Jesus is that he died for our sins.

I disagree. Jesus was not born to die. Jesus was born to live, and to live abundantly.

Too many Christians look at Jesus and see only the cross. For some reason, they conclude that the truth of the gospel ends on the Friday of death.

For me, however, the truth of the gospel begins on the Sunday of new life.

We don't remember Jesus because he died. Thousands of crosses littered the roads of ancient Judea under the brutal rule of imperial Rome. Millions of people have been murdered by despots.

We remember Jesus because of the potential of new life. We follow Jesus because of his teaching, his compassion, his love. We worship the God of life whom Christians see in the life and the new life of Jesus.

It's not just Jesus who came to new life. The gospels understand that Jesus' life revives us as well. He didn't come to die. He came to proclaim the message of God's compassion and love which revives all people. In John 10, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." And at his trial in front of Pilate, Jesus responds, "For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." (John 18)

Throughout his life, Jesus taught that people could experience God's love in this world. Jesus dedicated his whole life to embracing, healing, loving people and treating all of God's people with grace and compassion.

Pastor S. M. Lockridge of San Diego's Calvary Baptist Church preached a famous sermon many years ago which used the refrain, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming." He wove the story of Jesus with the stories of the lives of his African American parishioners and ended each part of the sermon with that refrain: "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming." He ends by proclaiming that we all live in our own Fridays, but Sunday's coming.

This is the kind of faith which gives me hope to carry on. Jesus lives, and our lives are made whole, renewed by God's love and passion. This kind of faith empowers my own actions to make the world a better place to live.

It's Friday when reproductive rights are being stripped by politicians and judges, old white men who think they have the right to legislate a woman's choice. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday when the racist Legislature of Tennessee expels two black men for standing with students who are protesting the gun culture in the USA. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday when politicians legislate what students may learn and what they may not learn about history, and when they skew the curriculum to teach only white privilege and white nationalism. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday when we live with the shameful legacy of Indian Residential Schools. But the process of Truth and Reconciliation shows that Sunday's coming.

It's Friday when political partisanship means that our leaders can't even talk to each other in civil ways for the good of our country. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday when peaceful protests turn into violent campaigns. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday when homeless people are rousted from their tents because our society is not willing to provide adequate housing and care for the disadvantaged among us. But Sunday's coming.

Jesus did not come to die. Jesus came to live, and to live abundantly. He wasn't starting a new religion. Rather, he taught the spiritual practice of radical kindness and trust in God. He came to live.