**First Presbyterian Church Tucumcari**

**Worship 11:00AM**

**Sunday, April 22, 2018, 4th Sunday of Easter**

**"Belief must be something different from a mixture of opinions about God and the world, and of precepts for one life or for two. Piety cannot be an instinct craving for a mess of metaphysical and ethical crumbs." - Friedrich Schleiermacher**

**Call to Worship (please see bulletin)**

**Prayer of the Day**

We give our hearts to you, Good Shepherd.

We come, to lie down by your living water and drink of it

To feast on your nourishing word today.

We come in need,

And in our praise,

We ask that you fill us again.

Thank you for your guidance, for your staff

For your constant walk beside us.

Speak tenderly and firmly once again

Your words of joy and belonging.

In your name Jesus the Christ, Amen.

**Call to Confession**

**Prayer of Confession (please see bulletin)**

(silence)

**Assurance of Pardon**

Friends, Believe the Good News of Jesus Christ.

**In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!**

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

**Psalm 23 (please see bulletin)**

**Prayers of the People**

On the lonely paths through life,  
you are smoothing the way for us.  
In the barren soil where we till our souls,  
you are nurturing us with love.  
Wherever we are, we find you,  
Crafter of Creation.

When we go to fill the emptiness  
of a hungry world,  
you are handing us the bags of food.  
When we see children struggling  
to get past the potholes of poverty,  
you are waiting with the gifts  
we can use to smooth their way.  
Wherever we are, we find you,  
Shepherd of  God’s little ones.

At the corner where anger  
intersects with judgment,  
you are handing out bottles  
filled from peace’s spring.  
At every opportunity we have  
to share goodness and mercy,  
we find our pockets stuffed  
with simple acts of kindness.  
Wherever we are, we find you,  
Shepherd’s Spirit.

Wherever we are, we find you,  
God in Community, Holy in One,  
even as we pray as Jesus has taught us, saying,  
Our Father . . .

**Time out for Teaching: The Easter Effect III**

“The way they thought about worship and its temporal rhythms changed. For the Jews who were the first members of the Jesus movement, nothing was more sacrosanct than the Sabbath, the seventh day of rest and worship. The Sabbath was enshrined in creation, for God himself had rested on the seventh day. The Sabbath’s importance as a key behavioral marker of the People of God had been reaffirmed in the Ten Commandments. Yet these first Christians, all Jews, quickly fixed Sunday as the “Lord’s Day,” because Easter had been a Sunday. Benedict XVI draws out the crucial point here:

“’Only an event that marked souls indelibly could bring about such a profound realignment of the religious culture of the week. Mere theological speculations could not have achieved this... [The] celebration of the Lord’s day, which was characteristic of the Christian community from the outset, is one of the most convincing proofs that something extraordinary happened [at Easter]—the discovery of the empty tomb and the encounter with the Risen Lord.’”

Here is why we still have Sunday worship, when we celebrate the sacraments, when we do so many other things to mark changes and transitions in the church. Because the church formed in response to the Easter Revelation. Our weeks are circular, for we come here to worship, from wherever we’ve been this past week and we are here in order to drink again from that living water that is the renewal we find in worshiping the living God, facing God and with one another. What does worship do for you?

**Prayer for Illumination**

As we read the words of scripture,  
we are pointed to your living Word who walked among us;  
and we are surrounded by your Spirit,  
who whispers words within our hearts and minds.  
Inspire us in our hearing and reflecting,  
that we may move beyond your words  
into life-changing acts of grace, love, hope, and peace.  
Amen.

**Acts 4:5-12**

5The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” 8Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, 9if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, 10let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 11This Jesus is   
     ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;   
          it has become the cornerstone.’   
12There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

**John 10:11-18**

11“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away — and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

**1 John 3:16-24**

16We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

18Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

23And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

**Sermon: Person-to-Person**

It’s been about 7 years since I came here. The Exercise Eat and Pray group was bigger. I can remember Marcia Blea spreading peanut butter on crackers for Blevins, the rest of us would watch, amused, as we talked about everything from politics to our favorite foods. Mickey Page however, just couldn’t sit still. She’d hop up from her chair, check on the Rummage Sale room, clean out the fridge, reorganize the kitchen cabinets, throwing things out. Before Mickey, we had Mae. Before Mae, we probably had other Mickeys and Maes.

After Mickey died, about three and a half years ago, stuff started to pile up on the kitchen counters. Mysterious objects would appear, with no clear destination. And some of those items would sit there, sometimes for months, seemingly forgotten. I thought of putting up a sign like they have in office breakrooms: “You mother doesn’t work here.” And I thought, I’d better not. It’s too close to the painful truth.

A communal space is just one of many aspects of life together as Jesus’s flock. As you know, this little flock can’t afford to play church politics and become resentful. What’s called “church politics” in a church of 200 people is personal – every time - in a church of 33. For us, the commandment to love one another is personal.

This was also the reality for the church of the first century.

I’m sure it was with some mixed feelings that John’s church welcomed new people into their fold. It was probably exciting to see new people interested in worshiping Jesus. But what worried them was some of these people came with different ideas on what life together should look like. Some of them believed life everlasting was not for everyone but a few entitled people. These new people in John’s church professed a popular view called “Gnosticism.” It was a worldview what scholars call a “mystery religion.” Basically, they labeled the created world and all that’s in it as evil and dirty and professed a belief that only certain persons had the spark of the divine. They believed that divine spark would eventually lead those them out of this terrible world into a future of purity, perfection and holiness. They viewed things in terms opposites: black and white, good versus evil, light versus dark. Their perspective had insinuated itself in John’s church. And certain aspects of this philosophy – especially the escapism part of it - appealed to people.

The basic assumptions of Gnosticism, fly in the face of what God has been saying since Genesis – that God’s creation is good. God’s creation is worth dying for in order to save it. And, our lives of faith in Jesus Christ are not just to get away from it all, to escape this filthy life, but to make this life better, even clean house from time to time. Our lives ARE good, and we can make them better together if we love one another, NOW.

We too fall prey to old Gnostic ways when we start seeing the world in black and white, good and evil, my way or the highway. Should we overlook the grey areas in between, we miss the chance to see forgiveness happen, we miss the ways we can nurture the mysterious growth of love. If we forget and look at each other as “categories” and “affiliations” and “sides…” if we label someone as “the Other” and we risk demonizing a fellow child of God. If we forget how to love others as God loves them, we fail to speak God’s language of love and forbearance.

The language of the Gnostics weaves its way through the letters of John and the Gospel of John when it speaks in terms of dark and light, good and evil, and even Jesus himself when he says things mysterious like, “I am the good shepherd,” “I am the light of the world.” But these writings aren’t Gnostic – they’re crossing over to speak the Gnostic language in order to convey hope and redemption, spoken out of love and truth.

The Frankish Emperor Charles the Great – also known as Charlemagne. To speak another language is to have another soul. He was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in the year 800. Did you know that unlike most warlords and kings of his time, Charlemagne was fluent in speaking and writing several languages. Most kings didn’t bother to learn to read or write; they paid someone to do it. But Charlemagne took seriously the importance of speaking, reading and writing in more than one language. He was also instrumental standardizing classical Latin so that it was no longer just thousands of forms of calligraphy used only by the monks, but a language that could used across the whole empire. “To speak another language is to have another soul.” What this meant was to know someone else’s language helped you to see from another person’s point of view.

When we learn an Other’s language, it can be our first step of loving them as God does. Finding a common language is what unifies us. Maybe this is something we need to work on as a congregation if we want to remain an important part of the fabric of this community. Some of our ministry is outreach as we know it, including reaching out to each other, person to person.

A flock of Christ is only His flock if they follow His voice and speak His language. As Jesus continues providing what we need, it is our work to use his language for unity and fellowship, and this falls especially on the shoulders of those of us “dyed in the wool” Presbyterians. Our hearts will know when we find the right words. John says, “Little children, let us love, not (only) in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Amen.

**Announcements:**

**The Easter Effect and How It Changed the World - The Wall Street Journal**

**The Saturday Essay**

March 30, 2018 By George Weigel

The first Christians were baffled by what they called ‘the Resurrection.’ Their struggle to understand it brought about astonishing success for their faith

In the year 312, just before his victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge won him the undisputed leadership of the Roman Empire, Constantine the Great had a heavenly vision of Christian symbols. That augury led him, a year later, to end all legal sanctions on the public profession of Christianity.

Or so a pious tradition has it.

But there’s a more mundane explanation for Constantine’s decision: He was a politician who had shrewdly decided to join the winning side. By the early 4th century, Christians likely counted for between a quarter and a half of the population of the Roman Empire, and their exponential growth seemed likely to continue.

How did this happen? How did a ragtag band of nobodies from the far edges of the Mediterranean world become such a dominant force in just two and a half centuries? The historical sociology of this extraordinary phenomenon has been explored by Rodney Stark of Baylor University, who argues that Christianity modeled a nobler way of life than what was on offer elsewhere in the rather brutal society of the day. In Christianity, women were respected as they weren’t in classical culture and played a critical role in bringing men to the faith and attracting converts. In an age of plagues, the readiness of Christians to care for all the sick, not just their own, was a factor, as was the impressive witness to faith of countless martyrs. Christianity also grew from within because Christians had larger families, a byproduct of their faith’s prohibition of contraception, abortion and infanticide.

For theologians who like to think that arguments won the day for the Christian faith, this sort of historical reconstruction is not particularly gratifying, but it makes a lot of human sense. Prof. Stark’s analysis still leaves us with a question, though: How did all that modeling of a compelling, alternative way of life get started? And that, in turn, brings us back to that gaggle of nobodies in the early first century A.D. and what happened to them.

What happened to them was the Easter Effect.

There is no accounting for the rise of Christianity without weighing the revolutionary effect on those nobodies of what they called “the Resurrection”: their encounter with the one whom they embraced as the Risen Lord, whom they first knew as the itinerant Jewish rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, and who died an agonizing and shameful death on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem. As N.T. Wright, one of the Anglosphere’s pre-eminent biblical scholars, makes clear, that first generation answered the question of why they were Christians with a straightforward answer: because Jesus was raised from the dead.

Now that, as some disgruntled listeners once complained about Jesus’ preaching, is “a hard saying.” It was no less challenging two millennia ago than it is today. And one of the most striking things about the New Testament accounts of Easter, and what followed in the days immediately after Easter, is that the Gospel writers and editors carefully preserved the memory of the first Christians’ bafflement, skepticism and even fright about what had happened to their former teacher and what was happening to them.

In Mark’s gospel, Mary Magdalene and other women in Jesus’ entourage find his tomb empty and a young man sitting nearby telling them that “Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified…has risen; he is not here.” But they had no idea what that was all about, “and went out and fled from the tomb…[and] said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Two disciples walking to Emmaus from Jerusalem on Easter afternoon haven’t a clue as to who’s talking with them along their way, interpreting the scriptures and explaining Jesus’ suffering as part of his messianic mission. They don’t even recognize who it is that sits down to supper with them until he breaks bread and asks a blessing: “…and their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” They high-tail it back to Jerusalem to tell the other friends of Jesus, who report that Peter has had a similarly strange experience, but when “Jesus himself stood among them…they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a ghost.”

Some time later, Peter, John and others in Jesus’ core group are fishing on the Sea of Tiberias. “Jesus stood on the beach,” we are told, “yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.” At the very end of these post-Easter accounts, those whom we might expect to have been the first to grasp what was afoot are still skeptical. When that core group of Jesus’ followers goes back to Galilee, they see him, “but some doubted.”

This remarkable and deliberate recording of the first Christians’ incomprehension of what they insisted was the irreducible bottom line of their faith teaches us two things. First, it tells us that the early Christians were confident enough about what they called the Resurrection that (to borrow from Prof. Wright) they were prepared to say something like, “I know this sounds ridiculous, but it’s what happened.” And the second thing it tells us is that it took time for the first Christians to figure out what the events of Easter meant—not only for Jesus but for themselves. As they worked that out, their thinking about a lot of things changed profoundly, as Prof. Wright and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI help us to understand in their biblical commentaries.

The way they thought about time and history changed. During Jesus’ public ministry, many of his followers shared in the Jewish messianic expectations of the time: God would soon work something grand for his people in Israel, liberating them from their oppressors and bringing about a new age in which (as Isaiah had prophesied) the nations would stream to the mountain of the Lord and history would end. The early Christians came to understand that the cataclysmic, world-redeeming act that God had promised had taken place at Easter. God’s Kingdom had come not at the end of time but within time—and that had changed the texture of both time and history. History continued, but those shaped by the Easter Effect became the people who knew how history was going to turn out. Because of that, they could live differently. The Easter Effect impelled them to bring a new standard of equality into the world and to embrace death as martyrs if necessary—because they knew, now, that death did not have the final word in the human story.

The way they thought about “resurrection” changed. Pious Jews taught by the reforming Pharisees of Jesus’ time believed in the resurrection of the dead. Easter taught the first Christians, who were all pious Jews, that this resurrection was not the resuscitation of a corpse, nor did it involve the decomposition of a corpse. Jesus’ tomb was empty, but the Risen Lord appeared to his disciples in a transformed body. Those who first experienced the Easter Effect would not have put it in these terms, but as their understanding of what had happened to Jesus and to themselves grew, they grasped that (as Benedict XVI put it in “Jesus of Nazareth–Holy Week”) there had been an “evolutionary leap” in the human condition. A new way of being had been encountered in the manifestly human but utterly different life of the one they met as the Risen Lord. That insight radically changed all those who embraced it.

Which brings us to the next manifestation of the Easter Effect among the first Christians: The way they thought about their responsibilities changed. What had happened to Jesus, they slowly began to grasp, was not just about their former teacher and friend; it was about all of them. His destiny was their destiny. So not only could they face opposition, scorn and even death with confidence; they could offer to others the truth and the fellowship they had been given. Indeed, they had to do so, to be faithful to what they had experienced. Christian mission is inconceivable without Easter. And that mission would eventually lead these sons and daughters of Abraham to the conviction that the promise that God had made to the People of Israel had been extended to those who were not sons and daughters of Abraham. Because of Easter, the gentiles, too, could be embraced in a relationship—a covenant—with the one God, which was embodied in righteous living.

The way they thought about worship and its temporal rhythms changed. For the Jews who were the first members of the Jesus movement, nothing was more sacrosanct than the Sabbath, the seventh day of rest and worship. The Sabbath was enshrined in creation, for God himself had rested on the seventh day. The Sabbath’s importance as a key behavioral marker of the People of God had been reaffirmed in the Ten Commandments. Yet these first Christians, all Jews, quickly fixed Sunday as the “Lord’s Day,” because Easter had been a Sunday. Benedict XVI draws out the crucial point here:

“Only an event that marked souls indelibly could bring about such a profound realignment of the religious culture of the week. Mere theological speculations could not have achieved this... [The] celebration of the Lord’s day, which was characteristic of the Christian community from the outset, is one of the most convincing proofs that something extraordinary happened [at Easter]—the discovery of the empty tomb and the encounter with the Risen Lord.”

Without the Easter Effect, there is really no explaining why there was a winning side—the Christian side—for Constantine the Great to choose. That effect, as Prof. Wright puts it, begins with, and is incomprehensible without, the first Christians’ conviction that “Jesus of Nazareth was raised bodily to a new sort of life, three days after his execution.” Recognizing that does not, of course, convince everyone. Nor does it end the mystery of Easter. The first Christians, like Christians today, cannot fully comprehend resurrected life: the life depicted in the Gospels of a transphysical body that can eat, drink and be touched but that also appears and disappears, unbothered by obstacles like doors and distance.

Nor does Easter mean that everything is always going to turn out just fine, for there is still work to be done in history. As Benedict XVI put it in his 2010 Easter message: “Easter does not work magic. Just as the Israelites found the desert awaiting them on the far side of the Red Sea, so the Church, after the Resurrection, always finds history filled with joy and hope, grief and anguish. And yet this history is changed…it is truly open to the future.”

Which perhaps offers one final insight into the question with which we began: How did the Jesus movement, beginning on the margins of civilization and led by people of seeming inconsequence, end up being what Constantine regarded as the winning side? However important the role of sociological factors in explaining why Christianity carried the day, there also was that curious and inexplicable joy that marked the early Christians, even as they were being marched off to execution.

Was that joy simply delusion? Denial?

Perhaps it was the Easter Effect: the joy of people who had become convinced that they were witnesses to something inexplicable but nonetheless true. Something that gave a superabundance of meaning to life and that erased the fear of death. Something that had to be shared. Something with which to change the world.

Mr. Weigel is distinguished senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, where he holds the William E. Simon Chair in Catholic Studies.