



Sermon Transcript  
Easter Sunday  
April 21, 2019

Finding God in the Hard Place  
Celebrating Easter While Stuck in Good Friday  
John 19:38 - 20:31

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on April 21, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**John 19:38-20:29**

<sup>38</sup> After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. <sup>39</sup> Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. <sup>40</sup> So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. <sup>41</sup> Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. <sup>42</sup> So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there

20:1 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. <sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." <sup>3</sup> So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples went back to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. <sup>12</sup> And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup> Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your

Father, to my God and your God.”<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”<sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”<sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.

<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”<sup>26</sup> Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

## **Introduction**

How can you celebrate Easter when life seems stuck in Good Friday? Do you get the point of the question?

There is no Sunday like Easter Sunday. Understandably so, it is a joyful day. Why so? What is the cause of our joy this morning? Core to our faith is the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He was crucified on a cross to atone for our sin. But three days later he rose from the dead. This is more than just an event that took place in real time and real space. It is an event full of meaning.

For starters, the resurrection of Jesus tells us something about Jesus. It tells us that Jesus is who he claimed to be. He is the eternal Son of God. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead also declares to us that the death of Jesus did indeed atone for our sin. There is now a way for you and me to be made right with God. And furthermore, the resurrection of Jesus assures us that our final enemy has been delivered a fatal blow and someday will be fully defeated. That enemy is death. That is why Paul taunts death at the end of his long teaching on the resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15 saying, “*O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*”

Do you know what is behind our joy this morning? Do you know what it is that fuels our celebration this morning? It is hope. Because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we have real hope. This week the trailer for the ninth episode of Star Wars was released. One of the people involved in this project was asked to sum up the upcoming movie with one word. Her word for the movie was “hope.” The notion behind the word “hope” was that the movie portrays the idea of good overcoming evil. The reason such a story is attractive is because that is a longing of the human heart. We long for hope. We long for good to overcome evil. But good is not a force. The ultimate good that overcomes evil in this world is found in a person. That is why Peter describes our hope as a “*living hope*.” That is what he says in 1 Peter 1:3, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*” We have a *living hope* because Jesus lives.

We firmly believe this to be true. In fact, Paul reminds us that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, we might as well pack our bags and go home. He says in 1 Corinthians 15:19, “*If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most pitied.*” If there is no resurrection, then there is no hope beyond the grave. If that were the case, Paul recommends closing the doors of the church and going home. He says, “*If the dead are not raised, Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.*” But that is not the case. Paul writes at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15, “*For I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins . . . that he was buried . . . that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*” Peter saw him. About five hundred people saw him. The apostles saw him. Paul saw him. And so we greet each other with this hopeful greeting, “Christ has risen! He has risen indeed!”

This is what we celebrate on Easter morning. *Christus Victor*: Christ the Victor. And yet, we live in a world that aches. We too ache. Perhaps for you, this hour of Easter celebration feels like a temporary reprieve from what you left when you came through

these doors. But when we dismiss you this morning and send you out, you step right back into whatever it is that causes you to ache. So, how can you celebrate Easter when life seems to be stuck in Good Friday?

### **Stuck in Good Friday**

Our passage begins with the sober reminder of what took place on what we call “Good Friday.” We gathered here this past Friday to remember the death of Jesus on the cross. We began with an invitation to “Come and see.”

Come and see, come and see  
Come and see the King of love  
See the purple robe and crown of thorns he wears  
Soldiers mock, rulers sneer as he lifts the cruel cross  
Lone and friendless now he climbs towards the hill

Our passage begins by completing the events that took place on Good Friday by telling us that the lifeless body of Jesus was buried. Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy and “secret” follower of Jesus and Nicodemus—a lawyer who first came to Jesus under the cover of night—now show their allegiance to Jesus by taking his lifeless body and placing it in the tomb. It is part of the creed that gets lost in the shuffle of our confession: “I believe in Jesus Christ . . . crucified, dead and buried . . . and on the third day he rose again from the dead.” We move from the crucifixion to the resurrection rather quickly, but we should pause this morning and reflect on the fact that Jesus was “dead and buried.”

Why should we pause at the grave this morning? Because this is the ultimate “ache” of our world. Nothing captures more the heartache of our world than the picture of the grave. For those who have been with us for the season that leads up to Easter Sunday—often referred to as Lent—we have been talking about what it is like to “live in the cave.” Often in Scripture, the cave is a picture of the “hard place” of life. It doesn’t get much harder than the grave. In preparing families to say their final good-bye to their loved ones, I often say to them that the hardest part in saying good-bye takes place when we gather at the cemetery to commit the body to the ground.

Erwin Lutzer asks the question: “How many people died in the United States the day before what has become known as simply 9/11?” It is estimated that every year 2.7 million people in the United States die. That means every day, 7,452 people die in our country. That is six people every minute. Lutzer observes, “That means, then, that twice

as many people died in the United States of “natural causes” on September 10, 2001—and again on September 11—as did in the terrorist attacks.”<sup>1</sup> We know that death comes to all of us, rich and poor, famous and unknown. No matter who we are, we cannot escape the fact that we will die.

It was said of Louis XIV of France that he would not allow the word *death* to be mentioned in his presence. He became king of France at that age of four. He reigned over France for seventy-two years. Queen Elizabeth II is giving him a run for his money currently going strong at 65 years as Queen of England. He built the glittering palace of Versailles. But on September 1, 1715, Louis XIV discovered that you cannot wish death out of existence. Lutzer concludes, “There is literally nothing we can do about the fact that someday the bell will toll, and it will toll for us.”<sup>2</sup>

The last several weeks we have repeatedly said that life is hard. We all have the sorrows and fears we wrestle with throughout the course of life. Even in our passage we encounter the sorrow of Mary Magdalene when she comes to the empty tomb and can’t find the body of Jesus. She stood there weeping and distraught outside of the tomb. It would be upsetting to think that someone would come and take the body of a loved one. Then later we find the disciples huddled in a room behind a locked door because they were afraid. Sorrow and fear and death are all part of life that is stuck in Good Friday. These are things that wait for us outside of these doors.

As Christians, we are not immune to the ache of “sorrow and fear and death.” We feel these things and we often feel them strongly. Granted, if I can get ahead of the story a little bit, we have cause to look at death differently because of the resurrection of Jesus. We can actually claim that Jesus turns the enemy of death into a friend. In light of the resurrection of Jesus, R. C. Sproul asks: “So is death now our friend? Or is it still our foe? For believers, death is a friend insofar as it ushers us into the immediate presence of Christ. . . . However, our problem with death is not with death itself but with the process that leads up to it. It is *dying*—suffering— that is still feared by Christians.”<sup>3</sup>

This week, I became aware of an acquaintance of mine who was recently diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. He is a pastor in New England and I casually know him through various gatherings I have been at for pastors in the region. A friend of mine recently visited him and he said this man said to him: “I have been by the bedside of many people who are facing what I am now facing. But until you are on this side of the bed, you really have no idea what it is like.” Death can still terrify us. We don’t grieve as those without hope. But we still grieve. We wrestle with our fears. We experience our

sorrows and our disappointments. So how can you celebrate Easter when life is still stuck in Good Friday?

## **Peace Be With You**

The answer to this question is found in the greeting Jesus gives to the disciples when he appears to them for the first time. He said it two times to the disciples who were huddled behind locked doors. He said it a third time, eight days later, when he greeted Thomas. In each case, Jesus greeted them with these words, "*Peace be with you.*"

We make much of the seven last words of Jesus spoken from the cross. Each statement is filled with meaning and has been carefully dissected and pondered. But what about the first words Jesus spoke after his resurrection? These are the first words the disciples heard Jesus speak to them after the resurrection. Don't forget that these are the very disciples who deserted Jesus at his point of greatest need. And yet, the first words they heard when the resurrected Jesus appeared to them were "*Peace be with you.*"

Granted, the greeting *Peace be with you*, was a common greeting of the day. In Hebrew the word is *Shalom*. It is how they said "hello." Their greeting seems a little more significant than our common "hello" and "good-bye." Actually, did you know that "good-bye" is a contraction of the phrase, "God be with you." That sounds a bit more significant than just saying, "good-bye." So was Jesus just saying "hello" - was he just giving them the common greeting of the day when he appeared before them for the first time and said "*Peace be with you?*" I don't think so.

It is interesting to me that John devotes five chapters—John 13-17—to what Jesus said to his disciples in the Upper Room before he was arrested and went to the cross. Prior to the prayer recorded for us in John 17, Jesus concludes his final words to his disciples by saying, "*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world, you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*" Earlier, that same evening, he said to them in John 14:27, "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*" So like bookends, on either side of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, we hear words of peace spoken. So when Jesus appears before the disciples for the first time after his resurrection and says to them "*Peace be with you;*" Leon Morris concludes, "It is likely, however, that on this occasion we should see more than a conventional greeting."<sup>4</sup> Instead, we find the reason we are able to celebrate Easter even when life seems to be stuck on Good Friday. It is the pronouncement of the peace of God.

Peace Be with You: If this is more than a greeting, what is this peace that Jesus offers? John records for us the first greeting of Jesus in John 20:19-20, *“Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.”* It was the scars in his hands and his side that convinced them that the one who suddenly appeared before them was not a ghost, but the resurrected Lord. They had heard news that the tomb was empty. Peter and John had already been to the empty tomb, but they were yet to see Jesus. Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Jesus and she told the disciples that she had seen the risen Lord. But now, they see for themselves and it is the scars he still bears from the cross that assures them that it is indeed Jesus. And so on one hand, they are glad that Jesus is alive. But their joy runs much deeper than that. It is the meaning behind the scars that brings them real peace.

The prophet Isaiah saw this day coming when he said of the coming Servant, *“But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace . . . and the LORD had laid on him the iniquity of us all.”* Paul picks up this same theme when he says in Colossians 1:20 that Jesus was *“making peace by the blood of the cross.”* We often hear it asked at the end of life, “Have you made peace with God?” The truth of the matter is that Jesus is the only one “who can make peace.” He did so by dying in your place. He took the punishment for your sin and for my sin. He points you this morning to the scars on his hands and the wound in his side and he says to you, *“Peace be with you.”*

This past Friday we came for a Tenebrae service. During this service we mark the death of Christ by dimming the lights and making our way to absolute darkness. You could say we “decrecendo” the light. John Witvleit says that we don’t decrecendo the light so that we can crescendo our guilt. Instead, he writes, “We gather on Good Friday not to wallow in guilt, but to announce that sin and guilt have been atoned for, conquered, healed, addressed, dealt with once and for all, in heaven and on earth through the blood of the cross.”<sup>5</sup> Nor do we decrecendo the light to generate a crescendo of sadness. He adds, “This is not funeral for Jesus. We know how the story turns out. We live in Easter hope 365 days a year, and the story we tell today is worth telling because it is an act in the Easter drama.”<sup>6</sup> Instead the crescendo that should take place under the decrecendo of the diminishing light around the death of Christ is the crescendo of wonder. “On this day, when the sky became dark at noon, when the temple curtain was torn in two, when time on this tired earth nearly stood still—on this day when *God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross*—we stand in a crescendo of wonder and hear once again, *Behold, the lamb of*



*God who takes away the sin of the world.*<sup>7</sup> Or as the Roman centurion confessed standing under the cross, *“Truly this was the Son of God.”*

So when Jesus appears before his disciples in this room, not only does he greet them with *Peace be with you*; but he shows them his scars that bear the marks of his sacrifice for their sin. It is the marks of his sacrifice for sin that transforms their grief into joy. It is the marks of his sacrifice for sin that enable us to celebrate Easter even when life seems stuck in Good Friday. Our sin has been pardoned.

Peace Be with You: Jesus quickly follows up his first greeting of peace with a second. He says to the disciples starting in verse 21, *“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”* And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”* This is John’s version of what we call “the Great Commission.” We have been sent into the world to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior and for those who respond with faith, we have the authority to pronounce that their sins are forgiven. This is such a joyful privilege we have given to us.

Clearly, from our passage this morning, it matters not what your story happens to be. Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy and secret follower, but now he is out in the open. It was to Nicodemus that Jesus said in John 3, *“you must be born again”* to enter the kingdom of heaven. This was a religious man, a student of the Law. Then there was Mary Magdalene, a woman with a checkered past and yet she was the first to see the risen Lord. Then you have impetuous Peter and John, the beloved disciple. Both of them were considered common men. And in a moment we will see Thomas, the one who doubted and needed proof the Jesus rose from the dead. But to all who believe, no matter the story, God gives the right to become children of God.

I love the way Chrysostom puts it in that “most famous” Easter sermon.

For the Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first.  
He gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour,  
as well as to him that toiled from the first.  
Let us all enter into the joy of the Lord!  
First and last alike, receive your reward;  
rich and poor, rejoice together!  
Sober and slothful, celebrate the day!<sup>8</sup>

When we proclaim Jesus to the world, we are telling the world that God is good, he loves giving and Jesus came to prove it. Andrew Wilson asks us to consider the extravagant nature of God's generosity and goodness by seeing how God is portrayed in the parables. The God-figure in the parable is always giving away far more than what he should.

There is the farmer who sows far more seed that most didn't take root.  
There is the king who forgave the debt worth millions of dollars.  
There is the vineyard owner who paid his workers far more than they earned.  
There is the father who gave half of his estate to his rebellious son.  
There is the nobleman who gave three month's wages to all this employees.  
There is the king who gave wedding invitations to every undesirable.<sup>9</sup>

This is all wrapped up in the gift of Jesus. The cross and the resurrection of Jesus is the most astonishing expression of the extravagant nature of the goodness of God. *"For God so loved the world the he gave his one and only Son."* This is the message we are sent to present to the world. And so we read in Romans 8:32, *"He who did not spare his own Son . . . how will he not also graciously give us all things."*

God's forgiveness is not beyond your reach. I can look you in the eyes and pronounce to you that God is able to forgive you of your sin. This is why we can celebrate Easter when life seems stuck on Good Friday. There is no one beyond the reach of God's extravagant love and grace.

Peace Be with You: The final time we hear Jesus say *Peace be with you* is when he says it to Thomas. Thomas is one of the twelve disciples, but he wasn't present when Jesus appeared to the others. When the disciples told Thomas that they had seen Jesus, he still didn't believe. Therefore, he has forever been called, "doubting Thomas." He said to them, *"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."* Eight days later, Jesus shows himself to Thomas. I love the gracious nature of Jesus. He says to Thomas, *"Peace be with you."* Then he said to Thomas, *"Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."* Of course, there was no denying what was standing right in front of him. And so Thomas cried out, what we all need to cry out, *"My Lord and my God!"*

It is at this point that Jesus says something profound that applies to you and to me. He says to Thomas, *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* I wonder if Peter was thinking back on this scene when

he wrote in 1 Peter 1:8, *“Though you have not seen him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”*

That is exactly what is in mind behind the word *“blessed.”* It is what we call a “beatitude.” What does it really mean to be blessed? D. A. Carson says that it means “to be approved.”<sup>10</sup> The one “approved by God” is the one who turns in faith and believes in the crucified and risen Christ. In fact, John tells us that the reason he wrote these things down was *so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* This is my only comfort in life and in death. “I am not my own, but belong body and soul to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

## Conclusion

*“Peace be with you!”* I can’t think of a more appropriate statement to describe why we are able to celebrate Easter, even though many of us are about to be sent back out into “Good Friday.” Because of the resurrection of Jesus, we can be at peace with God. We can know the extravagant love of God. We can know the approval of God.

Lutzer says, “Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more it’s power fades.”<sup>11</sup> He tells the story of Scott and Janet Willis who lost six of nine children in a tragic van accident. A large metal brace had fallen from the truck in front of him while on the expressway and it hit the car in such a way that the rear gas tank exploded. Janet confesses that while her sorrow is great—indescribable at times—the knowledge of the resurrection gives them comfort that someday they will be reunited. For the Christian, death is the grand entry point into heavenly existence. And so why can we celebrate Easter when life seems to be stuck on Good Friday? It is because Jesus has taken from us our fear of the “last enemy.”<sup>12</sup> Do you know this peace? *“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? . . . But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

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<sup>1</sup>Erwin Lutze *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody, 2004) Kindle Reader: Location 42

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., Kindle Reader: Location 63

<sup>3</sup>R. C. Sproul “The Last Enemy” *Table Talk* [www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org) August 1, 2000

<sup>4</sup>Leon Morris *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 745

<sup>5</sup>John Vitvleit “A Crescendo of Wonder” [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) March 31, 2010

<sup>6</sup>Ibid

<sup>7</sup>Ibid

<sup>8</sup>John Chrysostom “The Most Celebrated Easter Sermon” [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com)

<sup>9</sup>Andrew Wilson “Why Jesus, Not Salvation is God’s Greatest Gift to Us”  
[www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) August 22, 2016

<sup>10</sup>D. A. Carson *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978) 16

<sup>11</sup>Lutzer, Kindle Reader, Location 76

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, Kindle Reader, Location 88