

# “On the Third Day”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

Scripture: John 20:1-18 “I have seen the Lord”

given at Christian Community Presbyterian Church on

April 16, 2006

<http://ccpc.bowiemd.org/sermons.htm>

How does one conclude a story when the main character has just been killed off? Sleepy and shell-shocked from the horrible events two days before, the women make their way to the place where they had left Jesus. They are tired. For the Sabbath, the day of rest in Jewish culture, was never restful for the women of the house. Food had to be prepared ahead of time and then served to a houseful of family and Sabbath guests. Children still had to be tended and animals cared for. The women knew they had to get an early start to complete the preservation of Jesus' body. The perfume was to mask the odor of death that would have been present on this, "the third day." (John 20:1-18)

In Joan Chittister's book, *In Search of Belief*, she makes an observation: Scripture identifies thirty defining events - occurrences the result of which our understanding of the ways of God on earth is never the same-that occurred on the third day. On the third day God seals the covenant with Moses; on the third day Esther goes to the king to beg for the safety of the Jews; on the third day Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac; on the third day Jonah is tossed out alive from the belly of the great fish; and on the third day Jesus is resurrected from the dead. Mary Magdalene and two other women who were close to Jesus arrived at the tomb on the third day. What had promised to be a day of draining, dreadful, soul-sucking pain was suddenly transformed by some shocking and miraculous event that forever would change their lives and also dramatically transform history. For on the third day . . . Christ arose!

Every one of you here this morning has experienced "third days" in your lives. People that hate their work look forward to the third day. Wednesday - "over the hump day." Just get through the drudgery and you're halfway home. Start working out, hit the gym hard; then comes the third day when you can barely move. By third days I mean events and experiences - some lasting a few days, but some lasting for years - that **appear to offer us nothing but grief and pain**. Stuff so distasteful that about the best you can do is drag yourself out of bed, put your nose to the grindstone, and tough it out.

Len Sweet says that third days are life's Rubicons. **Watershed times that determine the future course of our lives**. When do you cross the Rubicon? When one way of life dies and another is born. Rubicons can be the most frightening - end of your rope, quicksand under your feet - times of your life. But if you trust God - really trust in the grace and power of God - these third days can be for you a resurrection moment - a day of incredible, unexpected good news.

What is or was your third day? The day your marriage partner told you, "I never loved you?" The day someone arrived at your door and told you that your child was dead? The day your supervisor called you into her office and told you that the company was going through hard times and that they just had to let you go? The day you were so overwhelmed by debt that you went to your attorney's office to declare bankruptcy? The

day you were arrested for DWI? The day your doctor told you he had some "troubling news" to share about that tumor?

What about the third day when the harsh and painful reality was that hope was crucified and it wasn't just a bad dream? When Mary Magdalene and the other two women who were close friends and followers of Jesus were startled to find the tomb empty? At first Mary was horrified. As she told Peter and John, you could sense the panic in her voice. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him."

Eventually the shock became too much for Mary and she broke down in tears by the door of the now empty tomb. When she sees a couple of angels, she is not even impressed. She just tells them, "**They have taken the Lord.**" Then a man who Mary assumed to be the gardener asks why she is weeping. She tells him that **she just wants Jesus' dead body back.** Finally, the gardener, who is really the risen Jesus, calls her by name. Stunned, Mary can only say, "Rabboni" (teacher). Then, out of incredible joy, she longs to embrace him. But to her dismay, and perhaps our own, the risen Christ says, "Do not hold onto me." What did He mean? If you discovered someone you believed was dead walking around and talking to you, you would expect an emotion-gripping hug - an emotionally charged clinging to one another. And then a release and Jesus saying, "Mary, go tell the others to come. We're getting out of this depressing city and going home." But Jesus instead says, "Don't cling to me." Why?

First, **what is dead, what we miss and beg God to bring back, is dead.** Easter does not change that. So we cannot cling to Jesus and hope that he will take us back to the way it was before the hopeless, soul sucking, tragic third day is upon us. **Easter is not a cruel April Fool's Day stunt.** "I fooled you! You just thought your dreams were shattered! April Fool!" Jesus said on Easter, "I'm alive but don't cling to the old me. Life is not a do-over! What is dead stays dead and is not coming back the way it was."

Second, **the only way out of darkness is by moving ahead and the only person who can lead the way is Jesus.** The disciples had to discover this. The resurrected Jesus was no longer Rabboni - the teacher, the master they once knew. He is dead and gone. Until they were able to discover a new vision of the Savior, a Savior who had risen out of deep disappointments, they were not able to understand the significance of the cross and Easter Resurrection is about new life and moving onward. What is dead remains dead - so leave it in the tomb. Jesus is leading you to something entirely different.

Third, **Easter gives us a reason to be hopeful.** The late Victor Frankl, great psychologist and Nazi concentration camp survivor, wrote that you, "**Cannot make someone happy.**" Have you ever tried to visit someone after a tragic third day has happened and say, "Cheer up; it's not that bad." You cannot command happiness, although in America we are good at putting on false smiles, keeping a stiff upper lip and singing, "**Don't worry, be happy.**" **One must have a reason to be hopeful.**

Easter gives a strong "yes" to the question: Can life retain its potential meaning in spite of its tragic aspects? How do we arrive at meaning in life? Some seek it in their work. Sadly, many only seek it in their work. Others find meaning in an experience of deep

love and caring. The resurrection is the **external event** - an experience of great love and power that believers **must internalize** as the event that provides meaning and purpose to their living. The resurrection is the reason we have hope that life can have meaning and purpose even after those external things that we cling to no longer exist.

There are a lot of books on various spiritualities today that attempt to help people find hope and purpose in life. Most problems, from addiction to depression to alarming rates of teen suicide, have their roots in a sense that life is meaningless. You have heard people say, "It doesn't matter . . . my work is disconnected from my soul. I am just a cog in a relentless economic machine." The common thread running through all those books and seen in all the other major religions in the modern world is this: What you do, how you perform, how you constantly improve your track record - that is the ticket for improving your life and being happy. **Do all you can do, be all you can be - give it your best and let the chips fall where they may!**

**Now enter the message of Jesus and his followers.** Let me summarize for you the basic message Jesus spoke. **"It's not what you do; it's who you know."** It is in encountering God and knowing of His love and power, and living with that experience that enables us to discover meaning.

**After the resurrection, things did not return to normal.** After seeing a risen Jesus, they saw there was no normal. Christ is alive - new possibilities that had previously been bounded by human limitations have been expanded. The boundaries are larger - the dreams are bigger. Jesus was not in a tomb but was out in the world - loose. And the great thing is: **Jesus is out in our world and he knows our names.**

Leave here and go out to look for something new! Go knowing that Jesus will not prevent you from encountering those dreaded and sometimes horrifying "third days." Following Jesus is a never-ending process of losing him the moment we have captured him, only to discover him again and anew in an even more unmanageable form.

We try to entomb him - but Jesus won't stay there. He is our reason for hope - the evidence that the old ways are gone, but even brighter tomorrows are out there.

Amen.