

Jesus Has Left The Building

Texts: Luke 24: 1-12; Matthew 28: 1-10; Mark 16:1-8

Date: 04/12/20 Easter Sermon

I spent the summer of 1992 learning advanced Latin with Reginald Foster, the papal Latinist in Rome, at a school not far from the Vatican.

One of my fellow students was a young woman named Julia whose father had been a writer for the tv show TJ Hooker and whose fiancé was a huge Michael Jackson fan. She was looking for someone to go down to the Stadio Flaminio on the Fourth of July to try to buy Michael Jackson tickets from scalpers with her, since she didn't want to go alone.

I said I would go. Well, we got down there and found that tickets were available, but at \$2000 dollars each, they were a little pricey for us poor students.

It was a very hot day and Julia took ill from dehydration, so we got some bottled water, and sat down in the shade of a highway on ramp. We noticed that the concert was starting... and we could hear it perfectly from where we were sitting!

We just sat there listening to the crowd roar as Michael Jackson started to sing each new song of his Dangerous Tour. Mostly, from the pitch of the screams, it was young girls who were in attendance at the concert, and that bore out my impression from our scalping adventure.

Every time the bass on the huge speakers in the stadium boomed, the earth shook and all the car alarms in the neighborhood went off.

As the concert wound down, the fans called for encore after encore, and they got a few. But then, with the crowd still chanting, a booming voice came over the PA system: Michael Jackson has left the building.

With that, there was no point to being there anymore, and the fans quickly quieted down and started streaming out of the Stadium.

Now, we were outside by the only road exit, and no one had passed us. Despite what the PA announcer had said, unless he left on foot, Michael Jackson had *not* left the building. He was still there!

I was thinking about that time in Rome recently because while I was there I visited the Santa Scala. These are the steps that led to Pontius Pilate's Praetorium in Jerusalem, and they were taken down in Jerusalem and brought to Rome in the 4th century by Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, the first Christian Emperor.

Jesus walked up these 28 steps during his Passion on Good Friday to face Pontius Pilate for his trial before his execution. It is traditional for pilgrims to Rome to go up the steps on their knees, praying on each step.

It was into a Roman world that Jesus was born, during the time of the census of Caesar Augustus, and it was in a Roman world that he lived and in a Roman world that he died.

The Romans had conquered Israel in 64 BC, so had been in charge of the Holy Land for almost a hundred years by the time of Jesus' execution.

The Romans didn't believe in resurrection. Some hoped for a shadowy existence in the underworld, but most didn't think there was much to look forward to.

A very common abbreviation on Roman tombs was the seemingly cryptic NFFNSNC, which stood for: non fui, fui, non sum, non curo.

For those of you whose Latin is a little rusty, that means: I was not, then I was, now I am no longer. I don't care.

What the Roman was saying is this: the world existed for a long time before I came into it, and that doesn't bother me, I don't care about all the time that took place before I was born when I wasn't alive.

Then I was born and for a while I was in the world, I was here. That was great.

But now I'm dead and the world is going on without me in it, just as it had for eons before I was born.

Why should I care about this time of the world going on without me after my death any more than I cared for the time it went on without me before I was born?

Sometimes they'd add, nescio non ad me pertinet: I know nothing anymore, and it has nothing to do with me.

It's Stoic, and it's brave, but it's not very hopeful.

And this was the best philosophical answer to facing death in a world without resurrection that the Romans could come up with, at least judging by its frequency on their tombstones.

As for the Jewish people, there were two groups of thought: the Sadducees, who denied that there was any resurrection, and so had no hope, and the Pharisees, who thought there would be a general resurrection for everyone at the end of time, but didn't think it pertained to individual salvation so much as an accountability for everything before God.

So those are the two worlds, Roman and Jewish, in which Jesus lived, and died, and was resurrected.

Our reading from Matthew today brings those two worlds together, with the Jewish Sabbath and the Roman guards at Jesus' tomb reminding us of the two worlds into which the resurrection burst.

And just like at the Michael Jackson concert, the reading contains the shaking of the earth as the angel comes down from heaven and rolls back the stone. Presumably there were no chariot alarms going off.

And just like at the Michael Jackson concert, there was a whole lot of fainting going on, this time not of young girls, but of seasoned Roman soldiers who were so terrified at the sight of the angel that they fainted dead away.

And then came the announcement: Jesus has left the building! He is not here, he has risen!

Unlike at the Michael Jackson concert, this time the announcement happened to be true. Jesus was not in the building anymore, the tomb was empty.

As if to confirm his words, the angel invites the women to come into the tomb and see what's going on backstage, to see that Jesus is not in the tomb anymore, that it is empty.

The Romans ought to have written on this tomb, "He was not in the world, and then he was, and then he was not, but now he is again. I do care, and it has everything to do with me." But, of course, they did not.

The Sadducees ought to have been convinced and have given up their denial of resurrection, but, of course, they were not and they did not.

And the Pharisees ought to have rejoiced that they had been proven right, in this one case, at least, but, of course, they did not.

But on Easter morning, we Christians ought to give a roar of celebration like the crowd at the Stadio Flaminio gave in 1992 at the appearance of Michael Jackson to sing his songs.

And we do, every time we join in singing the songs of resurrection, as we have been doing this morning. We do, every time we make the proclamation: he is risen and give the response: he is risen indeed!

We do, because when we really get our heads around what has happened here on Easter morning, our hearts leap in our chests in excitement.

When we realize that Jesus was dead, but now he is alive again.

When we come to grips with the fact that this means his promises were true, and that the reality is, we, as his disciples will live again, too, that we, too, shall conquer death and that one day, our tombs, too will be empty.

That's enough to get a roar of celebration out of anybody, and it is what brings us together as a church today to celebrate, to echo the ancient call, to sing the songs and hear the story and live it all again anew.

Jesus is risen; he is risen indeed. That's what we proclaim today and what Christians have been proclaiming every Easter morning without ceasing for almost two millennia.

Now we're not saying this like it was some ancient Roman myth about someone somewhere some time long ago that we heard had come back to life.

No, no, far from that, the Christian proclamation is that it is Jesus, here and now, or at least there and then when the gospel was first written, who had come back to life after the most brutal death then imaginable.

The Christian proclamation is not that this happened to someone somewhere, but that it happened to a very specific person in a specific place and time, namely to one Jesus of Nazareth, with whom the first Christians ate and drank and lived.

And the proclamation isn't that this happened in a corner, but that it happened in the middle of Jerusalem during the Passover when the streets were thronging with people.

From the very beginning, there has been a constant stream of witnesses within the church who repeat the announcement year after year, the older ones teaching the younger ones, that Jesus is risen. This is no old tale just dug up, but has been the living reality of the church since that first Sunday morning, has been its constant proclamation.

Now, my wife Kate's parents, Larry and Judy, went on a trip to Jerusalem a few years ago.

They were looking for the places Jesus had been during Holy Week and they might have been looking for the Santa Scala, the 28 steps Jesus had climbed up outside Pontius Pilate's Praetorium on the day of his trial, but they weren't there anymore. Apparently, they said someone had moved them. Remember Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena?

But Larry and Judy definitely did find the tomb of Jesus, and they looked inside, and they brought us back a picture.

And the picture shows that even today, almost two thousand years later, the tomb is still empty. The announcement, the proclamation is still true: Jesus has indeed left the building, and that building is his tomb, and he has never gone back, his tomb is still empty.

If time goes on for another thousand years or hundred thousand years, or more, on Easter morning the church will still be around, saying something very old: He is not here! He is risen.

I can be certain that when I get to the pearly gates, and my judgment day has come and gone, and the angels let me in to my eternal heavenly home with God, one of them is bound to say, "You know, you are only here because Christ is risen!" And I will say, "I know, but he is risen indeed!"

Friends, rejoice this Easter morning, for Christ's tomb is empty. He is not here, just as the angel said. Rejoice, my friends, for Jesus truly has left the building.

Amen