

### *What's New?*

**Isaiah 65:17-19, 24-25** For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.<sup>18</sup> But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.<sup>19</sup> I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.<sup>25</sup> The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent-- its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

**Acts 10:34-42** Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality,<sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.<sup>36</sup> You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ-- he is Lord of all.<sup>37</sup> That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:<sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.<sup>39</sup> We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;<sup>40</sup> but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,<sup>41</sup> not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.<sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.

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This morning I have an important announcement to make. It is so important that I'm going to ask you to stand, if you are comfortable doing so, while this announcement is made.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 24:1** But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.<sup>2</sup> They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,<sup>3</sup> but when they went in, they did not find the body.<sup>4</sup> While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.<sup>5</sup> The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.<sup>6</sup> Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,<sup>7</sup> that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."<sup>8</sup> Then they remembered his words,<sup>9</sup> and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.<sup>10</sup> Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.<sup>11</sup> But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.<sup>12</sup> But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Thank you. Please be seated.

It's Easter, so what's new? If you watch old Fred Astaire movies, you'd think that Easter is when you put on new dressy clothes and go for a stroll on Fifth Avenue, where you can show off your new clothes, and admire - or covet - the new Easter bonnet that someone else has. Culturally, we connect Easter with new. There's a new season of the year and new spring flowers, new green growth in our lawns, new birds passing through in the spring migration. Of course, in the southern hemisphere, fall is about to begin and that may not carry such a feeling of newness.

In the Isaiah passage, God says, "I'm about to do a new thing. There will be new heavens and a new earth. Everything will be new, renewed, fresh, and different. Old adversaries will dwell in peace with each other. The hunter and the hunted will eat together, sharing their meal." It's a wonderful image.

You might be saying to yourself, it's a useless and unrealistic dream. If you throw away your rose-colored glasses and see the world clearly, then it's all so depressing - millions suffering from natural disasters, millions more dying from terrorism, war, genocide and ethnic cleansing, and then there's

destitution, starvation, and disease. Faced with the brutal facts, people choose several options. Some live on the hope that they will be saved **from** this world. Others do a bit of charitable work, pulling clothes out of the closet that are no longer wanted or no longer fit - and then dole them out to Goodwill or a thrift shop, offering the occasional Band-Aid for suffering that is so persistent that we never expect it to really change. Others leave it all to God while they wait passively for Jesus to return and fix it. But the ancient prophets, the Gospel writers, and the Apostle Paul reject all three approaches. In today's passage from the Old Testament, Isaiah calls us to move forward from things past to things new, from conflict to compassion, to walk toward what might be rather than wallow in what is. Don't curse the darkness; Light a candle!

What's new? On that first Easter morning, the women were going to do the last act with Jesus. They were going to prepare the body with burial spices. This would put the period - at the end of the last sentence - in the final chapter - of a story gone totally wrong. The time spent with Jesus was mostly wasted time. Hopes had built up around him - but those hopes had been crushed under the sandals of the Roman army. The dream of a new way of life had been stopped cold on a cross. All was lost. All was ended.

The Roman occupation forces had done their job efficiently. Another potential rebellion had been stopped before it could become a real problem. The suck-ups and bootlickers who held positions of power and wealth in the temple and the colonial government breathed a sigh of relief. When there was a threat to the passive acceptance of colonial rule, when the snake of unrest reared its head, you cut off the snake's head. It was a strategy that worked, very well. The Roman soldiers were well trained and well experienced. They had execution down pat. Jesus hadn't fainted. He wasn't in a coma. Jesus was dead. Jesus was, to use the phrase coined by Charles Dickens centuries later, dead as a doornail. Death is final.

And so, this group of women came to the tomb to finish the burial process by applying the traditional spices to the body. But they find an empty tomb, and they're confused and perplexed. Suddenly, two men in dazzling clothes appear. Rather than being reassured, that really scares the women and they cower in the dirt in fear. The message of these two beings is interesting, both for what they say and what they don't say. These messengers, these angels don't talk about ancient predictions that point to this event. They don't quote from the writings of the ancient prophets. Instead, they say, "Remember what Jesus told you. Think back to what he taught you. Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" Rome had shown her power and used her ultimate tool. And God had said, "I'm going to do a new thing!"

These devoted followers of Jesus, these women who had heard Jesus teach on so many occasions, were startled when God did a new thing. When they left and went back and told the other disciples, those students of Jesus didn't believe either. They thought it was an idle tale. All of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection speak of doubt on the part of the disciples. No one was an instantaneous believer. But, over time, more and more disciples came to believe and trust in the resurrection. None of them said, "Of course! This is what the ancient writers predicted. This is exactly what I expected!" No, they found the truth of resurrection in two ways. First, they experienced the risen Christ in an upper room and on the lakeshore. Second, as the angels instructed, they remembered, they recalled what Jesus had taught them. And they no longer looked for him among the dead, but found him living among and within them.

Our God is a creative God. God is always doing something creative, something new. Somehow, we have an extremely hard time understanding this. We want to confine God to what was. We want to assume that what was, will always be. Those disciples were no different from us. Peter had been with Jesus when he talked with a heretical Samaritan woman at a well and offered her living water. Peter was there when Jesus healed the daughter of a Gentile woman. Peter was there when Jesus told a powerful and startling parable about the Samaritan traveler on the road to Jericho was a neighbor and both capable and worthy of love. It was a radical concept. Despite these "teaching moments," Peter didn't completely understand. It wasn't until he had a midday vision of a huge sheet being let down from heaven, a sheet loaded with both ritually clean and unclean animals that the light dawned on Peter. It took a vision for Peter to finally understand that God loved Gentiles as much as he did the chosen people. It was only then that Peter was willing to enter a Gentile home and declare, "At last, I truly understand that God shows no partiality among peoples." It went against Peter's training. It went against Peter's understanding of scripture. It was hard for Peter to accept that God was doing a new thing.

And it's difficult for us. We keep looking for God amidst the dead traditions and habits of the past. We expect things to be like they've always been. We don't expect resurrection. Oh, we nod our heads and say we understand that the seven last words of the church are, "But we've always done it that way." But inertia is a powerful force. The ruts of habit run deep. The familiar is comfortable - and change is unsettling, and hard to embrace.

The world said, "Jesus is dead" and God said, "I'm doing a new thing. Jesus is resurrected" Peter said, "I'm a member of the chosen people" and God said, "I'm doing a new thing. Think again, Peter!" The council met in Jerusalem with Paul and Barnabas and realized that God was doing a new thing. No longer would circumcision and the dietary laws be required to be part of the followers of the one true God.

Over the centuries, we keep trying to wear comfortable ruts into our faith and worship. And God keeps doing new things. We really ought to expect change. We should constantly anticipate resurrection. We should always look for Christ among the living rather than the dead. We're called to live in newness of life, not oldness of habit. Life is change. Life is growth. Life is moving down the pathway of faith, expecting the new, expecting resurrection, expecting God to do a new thing. Happy Easter! The Lord is risen!