

Sermon: It Would Look Like This

Year C, Easter

[Isaiah 65:17-25](#); [Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#); [Acts 10:34-43](#); [John 20:1-18](#)

Offered March 27, 2016 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

Life on God's holy mountain sounds good. No more shall the sound of weeping be heard, or the cry of distress (Isaiah 65:19). They'll be houses to live in and vineyards with fruit to enjoy (Isaiah 65:21). No one will labor in vain, no one's children will be born for calamity (Isaiah 65:23). We'll all live long lives, easily over 100 (Isaiah 65:20). While it doesn't specifically mention iPhones, chocolate, or golden retrievers, they must be there, if we read between the lines. We are at least assured that no one will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain (Isaiah 65:25). It doesn't just sound good, it sounds like God is really talking about new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17).

Isaiah prophesied to those in exile in Babylon. They were hundreds of miles from their homes, their country and livelihoods lost. If you had asked them to imagine what the opposite of new heavens and a new earth looked like, they would probably just gesture around them, "It would look like this." Small wonder that what Isaiah described sounded good to them. It must have been what they were dreaming of.

We are in exile too. When we ask each other what the opposite of heaven would be like, it's too easy to imagine. We point to the major disasters of history, to the tragedies that are occurring right now. We can point to famine and refugees. We can point to addictions that are stealing the lives of our children, to economic realities that are leading families to doubt that their children will do better than they did. We are in exile too, from where we hope to be, at least some of the time. So we hear words written thousands of years ago for other people separated from the lives they hoped to live and we can agree with them. Life on God's Holy Mountain sounds pretty good.

It had to sound pretty good to Jesus' followers as well. That's what they wanted and that's what was simply not possible in Roman occupied Palestine. Taxes and oppression were taking families off the land. Once you were off the land, the only way you had to live was to sell your animal strength. You worked when you had work and you starved when you didn't. Adults lived three to five years after they lost their land; children died much sooner.

So for the followers of Jesus, his description of loving God and loving your neighbors as yourself had to sound good and right and true. It had to evoke the image that Isaiah shared of God's Holy Mountain. There had to be a sense that finally a corner was going to be turned. The Messiah they had waited for for so long was here. He would bring in all the changes they were longing for, like a flood wave scouring the river bed clean of all the snares and debris. His teaching and preaching were already causing things to change in this world. If you asked them what the very earliest glimpses of new heavens and a new earth would look like, they would have said, "It would look like this."

Because we are in exile, because we too long for life on God's Holy Mountain, we can imagine at least a bit of how they felt when it all fell apart. The crowds shouting "Hosanna" when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem had shouted "Crucify". The authorities who had been challenging Jesus all along, and yet had allowed him to continue teaching, had suddenly reversed course. He was killed as a common criminal between common criminals. Everything that had been changing

stopped. Jesus had been bringing the new heavens and the new earth to pass. All the good things they thought were coming for them and their children because Jesus was changing the world had ended.

When he rose from the dead, then, early on that first Easter morning, they must have been stunned, like we are stunned. Because if Jesus rises from the dead, that is so much more than one single wrong put right. God is reaching into the flow of human history and changing its course. This world with all its brutality and oppression is not all that there is. Jesus is there, alive, so we know that death itself will die. Jesus will ascend, not just his Father but our Father, not just his God but our God. Jesus is simply the first. Jesus goes there ahead of us.

Jesus' resurrection re-writes the story the disciples were hearing. If Jesus is just the first, then we can continue to follow in his footsteps. If Jesus is just the first, then the changes that we are all longing for are the changes that he began but we continue. If God is about to create new heavens and a new earth, we share in that creation like Jesus did. Jesus' resurrection turns the story from an "he" story to a "we" story. We don't wait for one man to change the course of human history; we follow that one man in changing the course of human history.

If we are longing for life on God's Holy Mountain, longing to live in joy and delight (Isaiah 65:18), longing to live as long as the trees that surround us (Isaiah 65:22), longing to hear God's answer before we even call (Isaiah 65:24), then we know what we have to do. We have to continue the work Jesus began. Jesus never did that work alone. He was always with a group of followers, always working in community. Jesus knew full well that no one person has everything it takes to change the course of history, so he gathered more and more around him, so some might rest while others labored, so all the skills, talents and resources would be there when they were needed. If we are to follow him, we will be in good company, not working alone, but together. Jesus' resurrection has given us the incomparable reassurance that he was just the first and all that he did, he did for us.

On this Easter morning, as the day breaks in the valley below Musket Mountain, if you wonder what life on God's Holy Mountain would look like, it would look like this.