

1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5 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. 6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12 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. -**New Revised Standard Translation**

In all the times I've heard the Easter story, the story of an empty tomb, and confused or even downright terrified disciples, it took me years to notice what just might be the most important word in it; a simple, three letter word- But. It's the very first word in Luke's telling of the story (at least in the translation we read today!) and it shows up three more times in just 12 verses. The women saw Jesus' body laid in the tomb, BUT on the first day of the week they went back to the tomb. They thought they'd find Jesus' body where it had been laid BUT they did not find the body. They told the other disciples what they had seen BUT they weren't believed BUT Peter ran to check it out for himself.

This little word says "Wait, there's more..." Let's just admit up front that for the kids among us and for the kids in each of us, taking this word out of context is a cause for giggling. Kevin and I sure had a good giggle thinking up sermon titles for this one... "God's great big but"... Go ahead and giggle. This is the joyous day and season of Easter afterall! BUT... let's not let our silliness distract us from the power of this three letter word.

When I think about this word I immediately hear a stern mother's voice saying, "No ifs, ands, or buts about it, young lady, you will clean your room" And I realize that that's a voice that lives in a lot of our heads. And it's this voice that makes it hard for us to hear, and believe, the good news of Easter. We survey this messy world, far

messier than a child's room even on the worst days, and we think that that's all there is. It's a great big mess. Period. Some of us even think, convinced as we are that the story ends there, that we have to clean it up, all by ourselves, "No ifs, ands, or buts about it." And this is a burdensome drag no matter how you look at it.

The women who went to the tomb early on that first day of the week thought the story was over too. They watched from a distance as Jesus bled and died on the cross. They watched his broken body being laid in a tomb. They knew the story was over. The story had ended where every human story ends, with death. They knew that death had won. They returned to the tomb not expecting any miracles, not expecting the story of their beloved teacher would continue. They returned to the tomb prepared for death. They couldn't bring Jesus back to life again, but they could sweeten his dead body by anointing it with spices. They couldn't clean up the mess completely, but they'd do what they could. They couldn't imagine that there would be a but... that the story would go on.

But it did. By God's power and grace, it did. Because of God's love, a power beyond our imagining, it did. The story did go on. The story was not finished when Jesus took his last breath. The story was not finished when Joseph of Arimathea wrapped his body in linen cloths and laid it in his new tomb. The story was not finished when someone rolled a stone across the entrance to that tomb. It sure seemed that it was, BUT there was a but... God made sure of it. God raised Jesus from the dead, allowed him to walk out of that tomb, allowed him to live forevermore. They looked for his body, BUT they did not find it. They thought he was dead, BUT he is alive.

This three letter word has the power to change the way we see the world. Driven as we are by that "No ifs, ands, or buts..." voice in our heads, we listen to the news of wrongful deportations and brutal prisons, endless wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and Africa, young people dying and other young people losing hope and making painful choices, devastating poverty all across the globe, countless people dying of dread diseases and we think, "The world is a mess. Period." But the story of Easter, this story at the heart of our faith, begs us to put a comma and a simple three letter word at the end of that sentence, "The world is a mess, but..." I once knew a woman who

Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.

told me often that she and her sister are fond of saying, "God is still on the throne, and all is right with the world." That could be one way to finish the sentence in light of the witness of Easter. There's also that great bumpersticker/refrigerator magnet saying, "It'll be o.k. in the end. If it's not o.k., it's not the end." That could be another way to finish the sentence. There are countless, faithful ways to complete the sentence, so long as we remember that the sentence goes on only because God loves the world enough to let it go on.

If we can look at the mess of this world and see possibility and promise; if we can look even at death and see life; if we can do this... then the burden that weighs so heavily on our shoulders when we survey this messy world can be lifted, then we can realize that God is in the business of cleaning up, of making whole, of bringing life. God is in the saving business. This is what God does. And this is why we can have hope even in the midst of the worst news. And this is why we can find energy to be partners with God, not feeling this mess is all our responsibility, but empowered to work with God on cleaning it up, on making it right, on bringing life.

Whenever we gather for worship we remember that we are part of the ongoing story of Jesus, a story of life that never ends. We remember that we work together to further God's purposes in this world, guiding and nurturing one another, and sharing our gifts for the good of the whole. We remember that there is a but... a great big but... for Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.