



**“Sneak Preview”**

**Scripture – Matthew 27:33-36, 45-54, 28:1-7**

**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016**

Have you ever been enticed by a sneak preview? Ever caught a glimpse of something that is coming that piqued your curiosity?

With the current wacky and unhinged spectacle that is also known as the campaign for the presidency, you may have missed the sneak preview delivered by two astronomers in January. You remember that a few years ago, Pluto, the ninth planet, was unceremoniously dropped from the list of planets in our solar system. However, a few weeks ago, while the presidential candidates were hurling insults at one another, encouraging prejudice, and ramping up people’s outrage at immigrants, two scientists at Caltech, predicted that there actually IS a ninth planet. They set out what other scientists are calling a very persuasive case for a 9<sup>th</sup> planet; one much larger than Earth. No one has actually observed it because it is *way* out there, but now that many are searching, the news could come any day.

It may sound a bit far-fetched to say that scientists have predicted a planet without seeing it, but that was the case with Neptune. Scientists forecasted its existence more than 60 years before anyone actually spotted it. They conjectured its presence by observing the unexpected behavior of the planet Uranus. Scientists believed that the reason for its irregular motion was the gravitational pull of another planet they could not see. Thus, they concluded that there was another planet beyond observation and they turned out to be exactly right. That is basically the same method recently used by the Caltech astronomers who believe there is a ninth planet.<sup>1</sup> They believe they are giving us a sneak preview of something that will be confirmed in the future.

Today’s gospel reading from Matthew includes a sneak preview of what is to come. For three years, the followers of Jesus lived an exhilarating existence as they absorbed his wisdom, witnessed his healing power, and were inspired by his courage. For three years, Jesus had filled them with such joy, such confidence, and such lofty expectations. Then they arrived in Jerusalem and all of it very swiftly unraveled. Jesus had nasty confrontations with the scribes and chief priests, he was betrayed by one of his closest friends, and he was handed over to the Romans who executed him as an enemy of the empire.

Today’s text begins not with the startling news of the first Easter morning, but with the grisly account of the Friday that preceded it. Matthew says that Roman soldiers tormented Jesus, and then led him to Golgotha where they crucified him. From noon on, darkness covered the land and at three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Shortly thereafter, Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

Only a handful of days earlier, his followers had hailed him as king. They had visions of justice, dreams of freedom, and high hopes for a new world order. But in one brutal act, their future was annihilated.

There is a story about Ernest Hemingway and a group of writers dining in a hotel in New York. It will come as no surprise to you that the men were not sipping tea. As the drinks went down, they became boisterous as they shared stories with one another. At one point, Hemingway bragged “I’ll bet you ten dollars that I can write a story with only six words. A story with real pathos.” The other men quickly grabbed their wallets and each slapped down his ten dollars on the table. Hemingway pulled out his pen and wrote six words on a napkin. He passed it to the man sitting next to him, who passed it to the next and around the table went the napkin. As each man read what Hemingway had written, he pushed his ten dollars to him. What did he write? “For sale; baby shoes; never worn.”<sup>2</sup> Devastating words; hopes have been crushed.

The same feelings must have gripped the followers of Jesus when he was crucified. For sale. Gold crown. Never worn.

Their wise and charismatic leader was killed in a very public and humiliating way which robbed them of purpose and flooded them with fear. There was a good chance the authorities would hunt them down, so they huddled behind locked doors uncertain of their next move.

Far too often, our world seems frozen on that dark Friday, doesn’t it? Grim news constantly surfaces. A young soldier returns home after having his legs amputated. A doctor must deliver a dreadful pathology report. A couple travels to Brussels to identify their daughter.

Matthew’s description of Friday paints a bleak picture. However, in the midst of the gloom, he slips in a sneak preview of the surprise that is coming. After reporting that Jesus cried out in a loud voice and took his last breath, Matthew writes, “The earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection, they came out of the tombs.” (Matthew 27:50-52)

Matthew’s words are confusing because he says the tombs were opened on Friday, and people were raised, but then he says *after* the resurrection of Jesus, they came out of their tomb.

Commenting on these verses, a colleague writes, “While other gospel writers are preoccupied with other details, Matthew spills the beans early. Other gospel writers wait until Easter to talk about resurrection, but Matthew gives us a sneak preview of things to come, not just for Jesus, but also for those who are in him.”<sup>3</sup>

After providing an advanced glimpse of glory, Matthew returns to the details of Jesus’ death. He reports that a wealthy man from Arimathea named Joseph, who was a follower of Jesus, went to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. After receiving Pilate’s consent, he wrapped the body of Jesus in linen cloth and laid it in a tomb which he had hewn in the rock. Then a great stone was rolled across the entrance. The end of a beautiful, but tragic life – or so it appeared.

Yet, moving to Sunday morning, Matthew informs us that women went to the tomb as the day was dawning. They found the stone no longer covering the opening. It had been rolled away and a messenger from God said, “I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has been raised. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead,’ and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

Precisely what happened during those first few days after Jesus was crucified is not altogether clear. But what we do know is this: Something extraordinary occurred. Something jolted all of the disciples, and it was so powerful

that it transformed them from frightened men cowering behind locked doors, into courageous believers eager to stake their lives on Jesus' resurrection. Despairing disciples were suddenly filled with hope and joy.

Simply wishing that Jesus was alive could not have had such a profound impact on the disciples. Simply hearing rumors that Jesus had risen could not have made them brave enough to die for their faith, which is what most of them did. They experienced the risen Jesus and it changed the course of their lives. And, it changed the course of history.

Did you catch what the messenger told the women when they found the tomb empty? In addition to the shocking declaration that Jesus had been raised from the dead, he said, Jesus "is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." We would expect the message to be, "After you die, he will meet you in heaven." Why is it: "He will meet you in Galilee?"

Because Galilee was the home of the disciples. It is where they lived, where they worked and where their families and friends were. Galilee represents our day-to-day lives. It is the real world where we live. Matthew declares that it is here, in the ordinary, that we encounter the risen Christ. He will not only meet us on Easter, he will not only meet us on Christmas and Thanksgiving, he will also meet us on the grim Fridays and the September 11s of our lives.

In the resurrection of Jesus, God overcame betrayal and intimidation and fear and violence and death – with LIFE! And God urges us – no, God pleads with us and challenges us – to become partners in bringing new life to places of darkness and death. It could be rekindling confidence in someone overcome with doubt. It could be helping someone in prison learn to read. It could be providing a safe haven for a refugee. It could be helping someone navigate the rough waters of grief. Partner with God to bring new life to dark places.

Like the yet unseen ninth planet, it might seem a bit far-fetched to believe in life after death, but something happened to those first followers of Jesus to make them swear – even when they were put to death for their faith – that there is life beyond the grave. And not only life after death, but life *before* death. The resurrection of Jesus is a sneak preview of what will be confirmed for us after we die. It is also a call to live a new life now.

You may know that before he was president, Woodrow Wilson was the governor of New Jersey. Shortly after receiving the news that one of the state senators had died unexpectedly, Wilson got a phone call from another state politician. "Governor," the man declared, "I would like to take the senator's place." "It's perfectly agreeable to me," Wilson replied, "if it's agreeable to the undertaker."<sup>4</sup>

One day we will all take our place with the undertaker, but because of the resurrection, that is not where we will stay.

Easter proclaims that hope has been let loose in the world. Death tries its best to snuff out hope; death makes a mighty attempt to smother joy, but the God of resurrection wins the day. And that means in the end, love will conquer hate, peace will conquer violence and life will conquer death.

## NOTES

1. Inspired by Shawnthea Monroe's piece, "Reflections on the Lectionary," in *Christian Century*, March 16, 2016, I gleaned this information from Alan Burdick "Discovering Planet Nine," *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2016 and Thomas Levenson, "A New Planet or a Red Herring?" *The Atlantic*, January 25, 2016.
2. Scott Black Johnson, "Bare Words: The Practice of Celebration," April 5, 2015.
3. Marc Nelesen, "A Matter of Life in Death," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2016, p.33.
4. John E. Morgan, "Then He Appeared," April 5, 2015.

## Easter Prayer ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

During our time of prayer, I invite you to respond to the words, “Christ is risen,” by saying: “He is risen indeed!”

“Christ is risen!”  
“**He is risen indeed!**”

Let us pray:

God of Life – On this Easter morning, we join our voices with all creation to sing: “Alleluia!” For you have turned our mourning into dancing; you wipe away our tears and clothe us in joy. We rejoice that the grave could not hold your son, for you have defeated death and opened the way to eternal life. So we praise you; with glad hearts and joyful voices, we cry out:

“Christ is risen!”  
“**He is risen indeed!**”

No matter how many times we hear the familiar story – of stone rolled away, of grave clothes cast aside – we cannot quite fathom the angel’s words: “He is not here; for he has been raised.” It is hard to believe such joyous news when all around us we hear cries of lament and shouts of rage. The headlines, the sound bites, the phone calls in the middle of the night all tell us we live in a ‘Good Friday’ world – a world where darkness gathers as hope hangs on a cross. The brokenness weighs heavy on our hearts, O God. We mourn with the people of Belgium, and with all whose lands and lives have been torn apart by violence. We lift before you those oppressed by injustice, or entombed by despair; those suffering from illness, or held captive to fear. We remember those near and far who are shrouded in darkness, who wonder if death really has won the victory. And yet we pray with confidence that suffering and death do *not* have the final word. Today we stand at the empty tomb and shout: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?”

For – “Christ is risen!”  
“**He is risen indeed!**”

God of Life – We know that Easter is not the end of the story. Christ goes before us still, leading us into a world that is desperate for good news. You beckon us to follow, calling us to run and tell all we meet: “We have seen the Lord!” So breathe your Spirit upon us again this day that we might live as a resurrection people. As disciples of the crucified and risen Lord, give us compassion in the face of suffering, courage in the face of injustice, and hope in the face of despair. Send us out, filled with joy and eager to share the good news.

For – “Christ is risen!”  
“**He is risen indeed!**”

We lift this prayer in the name of our Risen Lord, the one who gave us words to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.”