

“Death Does Not Have the Last Word”

Date: April 12, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 28:1-10; John 20:1-19

Occasion: Easter Sunday, year A

Themes: Hope

Several years ago, the Saturday Evening Post ran a cartoon showing a man about to be rescued after he had spent a long time ship-wrecked on a tiny desert island. The sailor in charge of the rescue team stepped onto the beach and handed the man a stack of newspapers.

“Compliments of the Captain,” the sailor said. “He would like you to glance at the headlines - to see if you’d still like to be rescued!”

Sometimes the headlines do scare us, don’t they? Especially now! Sometimes we feel that evil is winning, or that death will have the last word. But then along comes Easter to remind us that there is no grave deep enough, no seal imposing enough, no stone heavy enough, to keep Christ in the grave. Amen? Amen!

Death does not have the last word. Christ is victorious. Hope replaces despair. Love conquers evil. Life wins out over death. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! You may not be here in front of me to shout along with me, but I will still get excited about this Easter message. God wins, not death!

Laurel Mathewson is a pastor on staff at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in San Diego. In a recent edition of Christian Century she wrote an article about the Easter faith. She began her thoughts by telling this story.

“The choir director at the church where I serve has unusual credentials. She used to lead a large choir in the refugee camp in Tanzania. She grew up there herself; her family had fled from violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and then spent almost 25 years in Tanzania before resettlement in San Diego in 2016.

I met Matrida that fall when she arrived at St. Luke's with her two young children and her voice, that moved people to tears whether they understood Swahili or not. One night, Matrida held a concert in our church, sung by Congolese Christians. It was truly inspiring: the singing; dancing.

The next day, a white congregant in his seventies said he couldn't stop wondering about the concert. What kind of faith gets you through 25 years in a refugee camp singing God's praises? What kind of faith has you dancing and writing new songs when you're barely able to pay the rent? What kind of faith is this?

Easter is more than an idea to these Congolese believers. It is the very breath of life which keeps them going. Despite the hardships they faced in their home country or since coming to America, they still celebrate – deep in their souls – the risen Christ.

Pastor Laurel goes on to proclaim, "To celebrate Easter is to celebrate a new epoch of history in relationship to God, not just an event that gives hope for a new day in our lives, though it can do that that. It is much more: God is on the move in the world, making all new things new."

Friends, if we don't share that enthusiasm we need to listen again as the angel in Matthew's gospel account foretells this exciting dynamic of the Christian faith. Hear it again: "Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed is going ahead of you to Galilee; *there* you will see him.'" (Matthew 28:7)

We must try to catch up and witness what God is doing in Christ, "alive and at large in the world." You see, my friends, Easter is not an event that happened 2,000 years ago. Easter is an unfolding of God's plan to make all things new. Christ is victorious and history is an unfolding of God's work in the world. Sin, death, evil: all are being vanquished in his name.

Listen, none of us are happy with the current state of affairs in the world. We're all tired of sheltering-in-place. We're all tired of hearing the bad news about how many new cases have been diagnosed and how many people have died. Our fear is real. Our sadness is real. Our frustration is real.

But we do not hope in vain. Why? Because of Easter! All of those feelings I just listed were the exact same feelings the disciples felt after Good Friday. Their Savior had been humiliated, killed, and laid in a tomb. They had no hope. They didn't *have* the New Testament to encourage them – the rest of the story hadn't happened yet. They *were* where many of you *are* in this time: scared, sad, frustrated, frightened, and despondent.

But then came the good news. "He is no longer in the tomb. He has risen, just as he said he would." And their sadness turned to joy; their fear into courage; and their despair into hope; all because Christ is risen. Hear this: death does not have the last word. The last word belongs to God, and that word is life, abundant life, even eternal life. Alleluia! Amen!

Jurgen Moltmann expresses in a single sentence the great span from Good Friday to Easter. It is, in fact, a summary of human history, past, present and future: Listen to this: "God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him." Isn't that a beautiful thought?

Listen, it is always darkest, so the saying goes, just before dawn. It was certainly dark on that morning of the first Easter. Shortly after 3am, when the light of dawn had not yet dispersed night's darkness, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. Since she went early, she could not see everything clearly.

But she could see that the stone had been rolled away and the body was no longer in the tomb. Flabbergasted, she ran and told Peter and the

other disciple that they had taken the body of Jesus somewhere. They ran to the tomb, and then they knew. Jesus had risen!

Friends, to truly understand the tremendous nature of our Easter faith, we *must* take the awful reality of darkness into account. Easter is the pilgrimage from defeat to victory. But we can only know the full wonder of it all *if* we enter into the mood and spirit of the people involved that first Easter. Simply put, that mood was one of defeat and despair.

Certainly you can understand their feelings. Jesus had been arrested, tried, convicted and crucified. His body put in the tomb and a great stone was placed over the entrance. It looked as though the movement initiated by Jesus had come to an end.

And Jesus' followers did not understand what was happening either. They had no doubt that God had decisively entered history. But now, with the crucifixion and death, it was all over. They were sad and defeated.

If we can understand this mood of Mary Magdalene, Peter and John, we can more fully appreciate the amazing glory of Easter. And since we know something of what it means to have hopes and dreams destroyed, we too can travel from despair to victory. Amen

This journey from defeat to victory must be the ground of our lives. The Easter message is not only for future existence, as wonderful as the promise of Heaven is. The Easter message is intended to transform our daily lives. And in the midst of a pandemic, our Easter faith is needed now more than ever.

Resurrection is God's triumph over death. And by faith, we share in his victory. Jesus rose from the dead, and in his resurrection Christ dealt a knock-out punch to the forces of evil, sin and death. Christ became the victor. And with his victory, all of humankind is offered the opportunity to

join forces with him – to be set free from the power of sin and death, and to live lives of hope, freedom and love.

The power of Easter can be summed up in one word: Hope. Hope is the sense that things *will* work out, in spite of difficult circumstances. Hope says, “Something good is just around the corner.” Frederick Buechner said it well: “Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.” I love that phrase, let me repeat it: **“Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.”**

Knowing that Jesus will have the final word gives us the courage to face whatever problems we encounter – including the Coronavirus. You could also name problems like world hunger, cancer, poverty, terrorism. Those things are all real, but knowing that Jesus will have the final word allows us to face them with courage.

We don’t have to bury our heads in the sand, nor do we have to hide from the world – though we *are* encouraged to shelter-in-place until we are told it’s safe to come out again. But the Easter message, the hope of resurrection, enables us to face all of our problems and all of our fears with hope and great courage.

Remember, Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing. Let me conclude by sharing the words of this poem, written by Phillips Brooks:

Tomb, though shalt not hold him longer;
Death is strong, but life is stronger.
Stronger than the dark, the light;
Stronger than the wrong, the right;
Faith and hope triumphant say,
Christ will rise on Easter day.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Live victoriously! Amen!