

“What Has Easter to Do With Fred?”

Date: April 5, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Mark 16:1-16

Occasion: Easter, Year B

Theme: new life, abundant life

So let me ask you a couple of questions: *Who* is the Gospel about? Yes, of course, Jesus. Now, who is the Gospel *for*? You, and me.... And Fred. Who's Fred? Let me introduce you to Fred.

Fred is a man whose character was as drab as his life. Fred shuffled paper in a low-level government job, retiring after 40 years on the payroll. He lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment, yet he showed little sign of regretting his solitary existence.

He argued for no great causes; he gave in quickly in an argument, and he was described by those who knew him as an *agreeable* fellow. In fact, that was the word that came quickest to anyone's mind in describing Fred. He was *agreeable*.

As far as anyone remembered, Fred never said a bad word about anybody. But then, nobody ever said a bad word about him. Or a good word, for that matter. Or any word. He paid his bills on time, drove a modest car and bought a government bond whenever he saved a little extra money.

If people loved him, or even enjoyed his company, they didn't declare themselves by showing up at his funeral. His casket was carried by two men who dropped by from his office and four men recruited by the funeral director. In the eulogy, nobody recalled a mongrel mutt or a Persian cat that he stroked at night. He had no enemies, but he also had no friends, either.

Death, when it came, tiptoed quietly into his life, meaning that he suffered neither long nor heroically. One night he simply closed his eyes, and the next morning he neglected to open them.

When one thinks of the millions of years of biological and social development that led to his making, Fred did little to justify the effort. The forward progress of humankind lost ground with Fred, or at best, stood still.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “If there is no cause for which a man is prepared to put his life on the line, no truth that he struggles a lifetime to understand, no love that makes him reach beyond his selfish inclination to give, then the mere stopping of his heart is but a belated announcement of a death that has long since taken place.”

That pretty much describes Fred’s tragedy. The tragedy is not that he died, but that he lived so little. So, what does Easter have to do with Fred?

Put it another way: “If resurrection from the tomb is nothing more than an endless extension of the life we have already been living, who is to say that Fred would want it? Or that any of us would want it for him?”

The question that concerns me today is not “Can anyone survive death?” But rather, “Are the Freds of the world transformable? Can God make something out of Fred, on *either* side of the grave?

To which I say: “If God can bring Jesus from the tomb, then I believe God can bring *anybody* from the tomb..... even Fred.” And by now you probably get the idea that when I say *out of the tomb*, I mean something more than the grave that holds us in death. I also mean the graves that hold us all – even before we physically die.

Beloved, the resurrection of Jesus is not offered as a one-time, one-shot, magical and miraculous display of God's power. The resurrection of Jesus is meant to show us that life does not have to be defeated, destroyed, demeaned or deadened in any one of us, even if we jump into holes that we dig ourselves, or seal ourselves in self-dug grave-plots.

I mean, why would God stop with rolling one stone away, when the Almighty God could roll *every* stone away – including the stones that we ourselves have rolled into place, the better that we might hide from our future and our Maker.

Easter declares God's *eternal* concern for each one of us. And hear this – God's concern is not simply that we survive, but that we become what we have within us to become. We are not meant to just exist, but to live into the potential that God has placed inside each one of us. It's not going to be easy.

Which is why, it will take *God* to pull it off. Giving birth to a baby – that's hard work, and I understand it's quite painful. But changing moral and spiritual "blobs" into whole and loving human beings, living an abundant life – that's a God job!

But God can do it. God can pull it off. God can change people, even if it takes longer than it looks, even when the experts tell us it can't be done. Because, God is God, and we are not. God is still on the throne, and God is in the business of transforming lives.

God is still at work in the world, breaking people free from the prison or the tombs of their lives, people like Fred. God is hammering and chiseling away at the rock that blocks the entrance to the tomb, breaking it open and setting lives free.

I've seen it in my own life: the alcoholic who gets sober. The student who was failing, who turns it around and graduates with honors and who goes on to serve their country in the armed forces.

The marriage that was failing, years of fighting and screaming, transformed into a beautiful relationship of love and renewed intimacy: God is at work breaking open the cemetery vault and bringing forth new life.

The person who is just like Fred, living from day to day with no real purpose, just getting up and doing it again another day. Life isn't exciting or meaningful or purposeful; it's just one damn thing after another.

Suddenly, God breaks into her life and she finds a reason and a purpose for getting up in the morning. She started volunteering to help a group of children. She stopped living only for herself and discovers the joy of helping and serving others.

Or, consider the man who lived only to make more money so that he could have nice things. He worked over-time, rarely spent time with his family, climbed the corporate ladder, but had a heart attack at the age of 35. As he was recuperating, a friend talked to him about God, and about his priorities in life.

He makes a decision to invite God into his life, to change his priorities and to spend more time with his family. They begin going to church and he gets involved in the mission team. He has to take a cut in pay because he's not putting in the hours that he used to.

But he reports that he's never been happier. God, and not the dollar, is directing his life. He says, "I feel like I'm really living now, and not just putting in the hours, hoping for the day I retire to enjoy it."

When Jesus came forth from the tomb on Easter, Jesus not only rose to new life, but so do we. New life is possible, even for people like us – who find it so terribly hard to change, to start over, to begin anew. As Christians celebrating the resurrection of Christ, we declare that not only is Jesus raised from the dead, but so are we.

Therefore, we are not permitted to give up on ourselves. Young people about to be confirmed: God has a purpose and a plan for your life. And you are not allowed to give up on yourselves, because God refuses to give up on any of us.

Do not despair of your ability to be the sort of people you would like to be, because God has not given up, and never will give up on you. Easter is God's great defeat of defeat.

God will continue to hammer away at rock, until every last stone is rolled away. Not just the stone that entombed Jesus, but ours as well. So keep your ears close to the ground, listening for subterranean thunder.

What is it? It's the jack-hammer of God, at work even now, breaking open another tomb.

Christ is risen, and so are we! Amen? Amen!