



Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

April 16, 2017

New Testament Lesson

1 Corinthians 15: 1-11

Gospel Lesson

Mark 16: 1-8

Easter

The other day I was reading about a Church school teacher covering the topic of Easter Sunday. “What did Jesus do on this day?” she asked. There was no response, so she gave her students a hint: “It starts with the letter R.” One boy blurted, “Recycle!”

Well, that boy wasn't right of course – we know we are here celebrating the resurrection. However, if recycling is about giving something new life – then maybe that boy was on the right track. For this morning we come to hear again about the new life offered to us.

Of course, this is not at all what was going through the minds of the women who were journeying to Jesus' tomb – early on that Sunday morning, when it was still dark, with only a hint of light from the rising sun

You see, it had been a dark time for three days now since Friday. Dark with Peter's denial. Dark with the Judas' betrayal. Dark with Pilate's cowardice. Dark with Christ's anguish. The only light is that of the women coming to the tomb that early morning. But they didn't know this was the first Easter, they were not expecting the tomb to be empty. No, they were going to the tomb out of duty. Jesus' body had to be prepared.

As they slowly make their way to the tomb that early Sunday morning they wondered aloud, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” But this question is quickly answered what they arrive and find not only the stone rolled away but the tomb empty except for a man in white who proclaims, “*Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.*”

All of sudden. The darkness is gone. The sun is up. The Son of Man is out. Just when the road gets too dark, when the way gets too rough. God moves the stone away. God gives to us new life. The promise of Easter we cherish this day is

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

that the tomb is empty and that God is still doing remarkable things. That our second day will become a third day - a new day, a new beginning, a new hope – for the angel told the women the best news of new life and hope - “Jesus has gone ahead of you.”

Do you realize what this means? Hope is not gone. Hate has not won. Love has not been defeated. And death is not the final word. And with hope a new day dawns, a new beginning is possible even in the worst of times.

Once there was a couple who had known each other as fellow church members for many years. Somewhere along the line, love blossomed and grew between them, and the whole church rejoiced when they announced their wedding plans.

A couple years later, the church rejoiced again when this couple announced they were pregnant. They had been older when they'd married, and had had difficulty conceiving. Finally, after fertility treatments, they learned they were expecting twins. That was a double joy, because the doctor told them that, because of their age, this was probably their only chance at having children of their own.

Sadly, the babies were born many weeks premature. Despite the doctors' best efforts, they lived only a few hours -- just long enough for the parents to hold them and bestow upon them the names they had chosen from the start: Abraham Joseph and Sarah Mary, names that, according to their faith, express the fulfillment of God's promise.

And so it happened that, when this couple should have been talking with their pastor about baptisms, they were talking with him about a funeral. Together the three of them planned the service, and when the question of music came up, the parents asked if someone could play the song, "What a Wonderful World." That struck the pastor as a bit unusual, but under the circumstances, of course he said yes.

The service was emotional for everyone. As the pastor pronounced the benediction at the end, he could see the grief reflected in every face. Then, as had been previously planned, someone punched a button on a CD player, and into the church floated the gravelly voice of Louis Armstrong, singing "What a Wonderful World."

What happened next, no one expected. The husband rose to his feet and

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

opened his arms. His wife stood, too, and drew herself close to him. And then, arm in arm, they danced.

The two of them danced a dance of life, a dance of hope clear across the front of that church: for they knew, beyond a doubt, that, when suffering comes, it is not the last word. They knew that life is sometimes ambiguous, filled with contradictions. They knew that sometimes things happen that no one can explain. Yet they also knew, the two of them, that nothing -- no heartache, no grief, no loss -- could ever separate them, nor their children, from the love and hope of God found in the risen Christ. For Jesus has gone ahead of us -- to be there to hold us up and whisper our name offering us a way forward when the way seems so dark.

For the message of the empty tomb is that sorrow is transformed to joy and fear is transformed to courage and peace. The resurrection confirms the promises of hope that Jesus spoke to his disciples. Because the resurrection means that the worst things are never the last things. Resurrection means that death is never God's last word. Resurrection means that God can transform any situation, no matter how dire. In this moment, facing the empty tomb we come to realize that light has pushed back the darkness, love conquered hate, hope has come from despair.

Like those faithful women, we too realize that the cross was not the end -- that the pain and suffering and loss and regret and anger and hurt -- all that Jesus took and endured on that cross was transformed through the resurrection. It is like being caught up in storm on the waves of a great sea, lost and alone and then suddenly on the shore is a great and powerful light guiding the way, pointing to the safety of a harbor -- this is what the cross does -- as we get battered on the sea of life -- we look up to see the cross as a beacon on the shoreline shining a light of joy onto the empty tomb -- pointing us in the way we need to go -- pointing us to the way to love and life -- the way of grace and hope -- the way to our salvation.

Because of the empty tomb -- because of the resurrection -- because of this story -- this defining story of joy -- our defining story - we know are not alone and so we reorient our lives to follow him -- to come into the harbor of hope and know because Jesus spoke and still speaks -- there is victory.

There is a story told of Desmond Tutu presiding during the darkest days of apartheid in South Africa. During one of his sermons the South African security

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

police filed into the building with weapons, tape recorders, and cameras. Their mission was to intimidate Tutu so he would not speak boldly against the oppressive and violent apartheid government.

Bishop Tutu stared them down. And said to them, “You are powerful. Very powerful. But I serve a God who will not be mocked.” Then with a dazzling warm smile he said to them, “Since you have already lost, I invite you today to join the winning side.” Immediately the cowering congregation was transformed. They began to play music and they began to dance. They played louder and louder and danced their way into the streets where even more security forces waited to intimidate them. The security forces ended up standing aside and letting the people dance. You see, Archbishop Tutu realized that victory was his because that tomb was empty – he was not alone – his community was not alone – their circumstances may not have changed but their perspective had. They were not powerless – they were an Easter people standing up and standing together letting their light of love, hope, and peace shine forth to make a difference against the hatred, violence, and injustice in our world.

You see, the resurrection changes how we face life. So, if we are struggling this morning with bad health or a relationship issues or with a loved one who is hurting – we will not leave here and our circumstance will change immediately and instantly – but the resurrection does change our perspective- and that change can make all the difference both in how we face and move through life. For Easter is a mission given to each one of us.

That’s why I love how in the Gospel of Mark the story really doesn’t end. It says to us this day: “Jesus has gone on ahead of you” and then ends with the women afraid, or another word in the Greek would be amazed, excited, astonished and then it ends. The most important story of the Christian faith just stops and the end just hangs out there. And we are left waiting, unresolved.

But maybe that’s the whole point. Maybe this story has no end, at least not yet. The story of Mark’s Gospel doesn’t have an end because it isn’t over. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again! Jesus is out of the tomb going on ahead us of us calling us to follow. And we are left with the same decision as those

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

first disciples. Will we follow or desert? Will we be ruled by faith or fear? Will we believe or misunderstand? The choice is ours.

Because Easter isn't about death or defeat or despair – it's about life, new life. [SHOW VIDEO] I love those testimonies – because they speak to hope.

I have a colleague whose ministry is working to bring new life into the lives of inner-city kids who think they have no hope. For most of the young people he works with armies of hate and violence have marched over them. They've been through hell and back. They've seen brothers and sisters reduced to prostitution and drugs. They've known evil in its worst form. And these kids need hope. They need to know that as important as your past may have been, it's not as important as the future. It's the future that matters. It's hope that matters. It's faith that matters.

You see, that's the good news of the resurrection. And that is why my friend spends his days doing this hard work where some days go well and some days are so awful – but he doesn't give up. Because as he says to these kids - We are not prisoners of the past. We are prisoners of hope.

So, what will our response be? I pray it will be to go and tell and live out this endless hope and alleluia of the empty tomb. That we will ask and let God leads us to consider what can we do with our blessings to bring about renewal and new life? To share hope? [Church – family promise – outreach projects – simple ways – drop off meal – write note – give phone call] Because even in a hard place and difficult place that we sometimes find ourselves in – our light shines the brightest – because of the hope of the resurrection.

For we are called this day to share that God is always with us, even in the darkest moments of life. That we are to love God and love neighbor which means we demonstrate mercy and forgiveness and love to all – friends and enemies. That in a divided and broken world, we are to be witnesses to something greater – a greater love, greater hope, greater peace that unites us.

And so I have had people from time to time say to me, “Do you really believe this stuff?” You're a smart guy. Do you really believe that Jesus rose from the dead?” And my response is: I not only believe it; I'm counting on it. I'm counting on the fact that that there is always hope. I'm counting on the fact that God walks with us through the most hurtful, painful times of life right through to

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

other side. I'm counting on that fact that that the worst thing is never the last thing. That God forgives us and gives us the strength to forgive others. That we always have a second, third, fourth how ever many chance we need in life. I'm counting on it, because he lives. Because he lives our faith has power. Our lives are transformed and we have a part in a larger mission. Because he lives heaven and earth have touched and we are called to go forth to bring heaven unto the earth. For Jesus has walked in our footsteps, and he now calls us to walk in his.

The stone is rolled away, the tomb is empty. Christ is risen today! I hope on this glorious Easter morning you will take this message with you and live it every day of your life, as Christ lives in you. The story is not finished because Jesus is still at work in our world. And he is out ahead of us calling us to join him. So let us be filled with joy as we proclaim alleluia, alleluia, "He lives"

Amen.