

Mission Accomplished

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Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

Easter
Holy Communion
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Isaiah 65:17-25; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12

Text: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." -- 1 Corinthians 15:26

Some of you may remember Garrison Keillor's definition of a good Easter sermon that he got from a pastor in Lake Wobegon some years back. The pastor said a good Easter sermon should have a short beginning and a short ending and the two should be as close together as possible.

That's the best I can do for a short beginning, and the short ending remains to be seen, and how close I can get those two only time will tell, but in the few minutes that I have your attention I want to say a few words about Easter. And I will try to keep those words relatively few, since I read, and may have passed on to you, what one minister's wife replied when he asked what he should do with his sermon on Easter morning: "Try not to get in the way."

I will try not to get in the way of Easter this morning. I will try not to get in the way of that wonderful account of Easter morning from Luke that I read for you a few minutes ago. I will try not to get in the way of the hymns and the prayers and the flowers and your thoughts about Easter dinner and the folks with whom you will spend the rest of this day.

And I particularly will do my best not to get in the way of that reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians from which this morning's text is taken: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. . . . For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

Now there's quite a lot packed into those few verses – Paul tends to do that in his letters – and it would be easy to think that a sermon based on them would be about death. And it would be tempting to preach such a sermon.

But a sermon about death on Easter day would be a misdirected sermon, because Easter is not, in the last analysis, about death. It's about life – new life, different life, resurrection life, life as you do not and cannot experience it without faith.

This is an Easter sermon; it's not a Kiwanis talk. It's a sermon for people of faith, not for skeptics wanting me to prove that the resurrection really happened. It's a sermon for Christians, not for those who've never heard of Jesus Christ, because the folks who've never heard of Jesus aren't sitting where you are. They didn't wander in here this morning. And neither did any of you. None of you wandered in to church simply because you had nothing better to do with the first Sunday morning in April. You came here, perhaps at considerable trouble and with considerable effort, because you sensed, however dimly and inchoately, that this is where you're supposed to be and this is the time you're supposed to be here. Some of you are like the swallows that used to return

to Capistrano every year: it's Easter and you should be in church and you know it and you've done it and we're glad you have.

You've come here looking for something, hoping for something, expecting something, and it's my job to deliver the goods.

Now if it was an explanation of the resurrection you were hoping to get, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint, and it's not because I'm afraid of taking on the resurrection – I'm going to do that shortly – but rather because if you came looking for an explanation, you're interested in history – all explanations of events are about history, about what “really happened” -- and the resurrection isn't principally about history. The resurrection isn't about what happened to Jesus back then and over there; it's about what happens to you right here and right now and tomorrow and the day after that.

The resurrection is about Jesus, to be sure, but it's not very much about the other players in that first Easter pageant: Mary Magdalene or Peter or John or Thomas or any of the rest of them. It's about you. Yes, for once, it **is** all about you. Easter has your name on it. It's about your life and your purpose and your destiny and your calling and your mission. It's about finding meaning where you can find it, and making meaning where you can't. It's about drawing victory out of defeat, joy out of sorrow, life out of death. Easter is about you and the relationships you have with Jesus Christ and with God and with yourself and with this world and with any world to come. That's what Easter is all about.

But knowing our culture as I do, I'm sure there are at least a few of you, and perhaps quite a few of you, who have heard what I just said and are settling in for a nice comfy sermon about how to be happy in this world. How to be prosperous. How to win friends and influence people. How to live happily, as the fairy tales say, ever after.

And I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you, as well. This is an Easter sermon and I'm a Christian preacher; it's not a motivational talk and I'm not Wayne Dyer. Or Dr. Phil or Dr. Ruth.

I'm Dr. Gene, and I don't talk motivationally, I preach, and I preach what I hope is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is neither self-help feel-goodism, nor pious escapism, but a clear-eyed, hard-headed, sharp-as-a-two-edged-sword confrontation with the powers of sin, death, and hell that keep us all from living the life in Christ that God has promised us right here and right now, and Easter, of all Sundays in the church year, is the day I am bound and delighted to preach to you that message.

Easter **is** about you, but probably not the way you think or want it to be about you. It's not about a happier you. It's not about a more successful you. It's not about a svelter, wealthier you. It's not about any you that you can buy in a box or rent on a DVD, discover at an overpriced weekend workshop, or get in touch with by thinking real hard.

The you that Easter is about is the you that you are not today and were not yesterday and will never, in this life, fully be. It is the you entirely freed from the bonds of sin and death and history, the you that shares in Christ's victory over death, a victory that has begun and is underway but is not yet complete.

That is what Paul means by saying that Christ is the first fruits of them that sleep, and we are part of that tree. The tree of life – the tree of real life, that one in the Garden of Eden that always gets eclipsed by that other tree of the knowledge of good and evil – the tree of life that God has planted in this world has begun to sprout and bear fruit, of which Christ is the first, and it is the root and trunk of that tree that supports us and nourishes us and gives us life if we will simply accept it for ourselves.

Easter is the trumpet blast of our engagement with the world – of our engagement under the leadership, in the words of the great Easter hymn, of “our exalted head”-- with all those forces that are death's vanguard in this world: fear, intimidation, oppression,

violence, injustice, pain, suffering. Easter is the day when we proclaim to the world that the death of which all of those are parts and signs and tokens has been overcome by God's love in Jesus Christ.

And they are not overcome by a self-absorbed fixation with personal mortality in this life or personal immortality in any other. Some years ago, Murray Haar, a Jewish convert to Christianity who became a Lutheran pastor, wrote an article in a theological journal about the American Christianity he had been observing since his conversion about twenty years earlier. And he said, rather damningly, that American Christianity "suffers from a rampant, individualistic, self-serving redemptionism." We Americans like Jesus because of what he has done or will do for us as individuals: he has saved me from hell, he will get me into heaven, he has made my truth *the* truth. Jesus for Protestant Christians, Haar contends, poses no challenges, makes no demands, requires no real sacrifice. Ours is a feel-good religion of no serious obligations and no real problems. And no real consequences. Jesus died for me on Good Friday; he rose for me on Easter; he's coming back for me someday. That's the basic pattern of American evangelical Christianity, and as one of my preacher friends describes it, "it's all so self-serving and self-centered, and self-contained; and it is wrong: dead wrong."

Jesus' resurrection is not about your life *after* your death, it's about life *before* death, and not just life for you and yours, but life for all of God's creation. As Haar puts it, "The resurrection of Jesus declares that the cross will not have the last word. Indeed, the life, teachings, and resurrection of Jesus mark all believers and propel them to stand with those in pain, and to do what they can to ease the suffering of others."

And how does Murray Haar know all of this? Because he's read the story, that's how. And I encourage all of you to do the same. And if you do, you'll discover, as Haar has discovered and as I have discovered and as many others have discovered, that the story of Easter has not a single word about Jesus' experience with death, and every word about our experience of life with him. That's the point of Easter.

The most amazing thing about the resurrection stories is not that God raised Jesus from death – Elijah had done that to the widow's son back in the Old Testament, and Jesus had done it more than once in the New Testament – so raising people from death in the Bible is no great shakes. The amazing thing about Easter is that after his resurrection, Jesus was still on speaking terms with the cowards, liars, misfits, and traitors who'd had the nerve to call themselves his disciples. That's the amazing part of Easter.

The amazing part of Easter is that God didn't abandon us to our own devices after we tried our best to do our worst. God was there on Maundy Thursday when everyone else ran away, God suffered and died on Good Friday when everything came to a tragic head, and God was there on Easter morning to redeem through undying love what we had sought to destroy through ignorance, cowardice, violence, and hate.

If Easter were simply and only about God's getting Jesus' physical remains out of the garden tomb – what Bishop David Jenkins suggested would have been nothing more than a "conjuring trick with bones" – if the resurrection were about nothing but flesh and blood and bones, then all of those post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his followers would have been post-resurrection confrontations with his tormentors and killers.

Think about it. If God were really trying to make a point about life after death to a skeptical world, then Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin, and the Praetorian Guard would have been the audience to win over.

But God wasn't trying to impress Jesus' opponents; God was trying to transform Jesus' friends – transform not the lives they may have hoped to live someday, but the lives they were living *that* day. The message of Easter is that the power of God to transform lives cannot be destroyed no matter how hard or how creatively we try – that is

the message of Easter.

Easter, my dear Easter Christians, is not about what God is going to do **for** you or **to** you someday. Easter is also not about what God did to and for Jesus long ago and far away. Easter is about what God can do for you *today*, about the kind of life God has shown us it is possible to live, on this earth, in our time and in our place, through the Holy Spirit of the risen Jesus Christ.

Easter says even our worst is not able to overcome God's best. Easter says that life is the mess we know it to be, but that the mess does not define the rest. Easter says that what marks the Christian is not crucifixion, but resurrection. Easter says that the last word is God's, and that word is joy.

May you have the joy of that new life in Christ this Easter day, my friends, and may you have it tomorrow and the day after that and all the days of your earthly life. Stop dying, my dear Easter Christians, and start living – for God's sake and for yours. Start living, because it's Easter!