

“Christ is Risen!”

Jeremiah 30:1-6; John 20:1-8

Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023

Many years ago, a friend told me that his young son was a great fan of both Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. The boy faithfully watched both of their television shows, and one day it was announced that Mister Rogers would be paying a visit to the Captain Kangaroo show. The boy was ecstatic. Both of his heroes, together on the same show! Every morning the boy would ask, "Is it today that Mister Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo?" Finally, the great day arrived, and the whole family gathered around the television. There they were, Mister Rogers and Captain Kangaroo together. The boy watched for a minute, but then, surprisingly, the boy got up and wandered from the room. Puzzled, his father followed him and asked, "What is it, son? Is anything wrong?" "It's too good," the boy replied. "It's just too good."

On today of all days, I think we know the feeling. It's just too good we think, this Easter thing. After all, Easter tells us so much about our God that is good that we can hardly believe it.

Sin is defeated. That means that by the power of the Holy Spirit we are no longer shackled to our sins. Death is overcome. We need not fear the undiscovered country which lies beyond our graves for we know, Jesus is victorious over all things, including death itself. Maybe that's it. Maybe the news of the empty tomb, the news of the resurrection, the news of Jesus' victory over death is just too good to believe, too good to assimilate all at once. And while the totality of the Resurrection may be too much for us to take in at one time, the fact of the matter is that it does provide us with three very good things that we should never overlook. That is to say that what was unleashed today so many years ago, as Jesus broke the bonds of death forever, gives us power. It's power we oftentimes forget as we travel through this world.

Sometimes our faith means very little to us. It's okay, that's just our fickle sin-nature. But, in reality, our faith makes possible amazing power in this world. So, whether you're down over a family situation or a medical illness or you're simply grieving the loss of someone you'd desperately like to be with you this Easter Morning, hear the good news. Christ's emergence from the tomb is more than just a cause to celebrate on Easter Sunday. No, it's a source of amazing power. Power that can free your life of unnecessary encumbrances. Power that can free you from the shackles of fear or insecurity. Jesus' resurrection brings a power the likes of which we humans seldom realize except under the most dire of circumstances. My hope for you, for us all, today is that we would embrace the power of Easter and unleash it unto this world, broken by human sin.

The first thing that the Resurrection brings us is the power of HOPE! I know a thing or two about hopelessness having struggled mightily at times in my adult life. There have been times in my life where I didn't want to see the next day, believing that it could only get worse. Those were lonely and desperate times and I did what lonely and desperate people do – they hurt people. Not that you mean to, mind you. But when you're hopeless, there just isn't much you can do to overcome much and so other people become collateral damage in your sad life. I remember one time very vividly when a congregant died very suddenly how it impacted his family. The wife, a wonderful woman, began immediately cleaning her house with vigor. Not that it needed it mind you, rather it was just something to do as her hopelessness crashed in all around her. Thankfully, the woman had a robust faith and was able to work through the passing of her husband, primarily because of her faith in Jesus Christ. But for a while there, things were very bleak in her heart and in her household. When hopelessness comes, you never know quite how you'll respond.

Case in point, look at Mary Magdalene in our reading this morning. She comes to the tomb early in the morning. There were duties and obligations one had to a dead friend, they body still needed to be prepared for their final rest, just like it is in our day. Can you imagine how she must've felt. Think of the hope she'd experienced with Jesus. His love and forgiveness had propelled her into a new state of existence. No longer just on the margins of society, with Jesus, she had a prominent place in his movement. But beyond that, maybe for the first time in her life, there was hope. There was widespread hopelessness in Jerusalem on that Passover many years ago. The Romans had been in town for more than a generation and didn't look to be going anywhere. The people were held under the lash of Roman rule. Romans who didn't understand their ways or their practices. It was an awful time. In fact, rebellions often blew around, causing great upheaval because, you know what, the Romans always won.

Prior to Jesus Christ, no less than seven men had claimed themselves to be the Jewish Messiah. Seven times hopes were raised. Seven times people could believe that their nation's long nightmare would soon come to an end. But, as we all know, these seven men met violent, crucified ends.

But Mary Magdalene met Jesus. Who was she? From the New Testament, one can conclude that Mary of Magdala (her hometown, a village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee) was a leading figure among those attracted to Jesus. When the men in that company abandoned him at the hour of mortal danger, Mary of Magdala was one of the women who stayed with him, even to the Crucifixion. That means she would've likely been present when Jesus died. Would've been forced to see him crucified and hanging on the cross. She would've witnessed him breathing labored breaths under the weight of His body on the cross. Needless to say, her hopes of a brighter future would've been dashed, or so it would seem.

But then, perhaps in her hopelessness, she comes to the tomb on Easter morning. Preparing His body is the final duty Mary can perform for her Teacher and friend...or so she thinks. It's there at the tomb, hope arrives with a magnificent flourish. Seeing two angels in white, one inquires – "*Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?*" You can almost hear the frustration in her voice can't you. Questions are hard to handle when you're in grief and shock over the death of a loved one. She answers, "*Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.*" It's then that Jesus calls her name, Mary. She turns and there He is. How can it be. She would've watched Him die. She might've seen Him laid in the tomb just three days past. But yet, here He is. Risen from the grave.

The resurrection of Jesus brings hope to those who feel lost, discouraged, or overwhelmed by life's struggles. In John 20, we see the disciples in a state of despair after Jesus' death on the cross. They were afraid for their own safety and unsure of what the future held. But when they saw the risen Lord, their hope was renewed.

Theologian N.T. Wright writes, "The message of Easter is that God's new world has been unveiled in Jesus Christ and that you're now invited to belong to it." This message of hope is not just for the disciples of Jesus 2000 years ago, but for all of us today. We can have hope in the midst of difficult circumstances, knowing that Jesus has conquered death and that we are invited to be part of His new world.

One real-life story that illustrates this point is that of a woman I know named Emily. Emily struggled with depression for many years. She felt like she was in a dark place and that there was no way out. But one fateful day, she heard the Easter story. Then, just like Mary, she realized that Jesus had triumphed over death, she felt a glimmer of hope. She started attending a church and reading the Bible, and gradually her hope grew stronger. She later said, "The hope that I have in Jesus gives me strength to face each day, no matter what comes my way." Emily is the mother of two teenagers now and quite well adjusted in life. Sure, she has good days and bad days but, for the most part, they're all blessed days. They're blessed because she knows the Lord. Knows that there is life after death. And that gives her hope, even under the worst circumstances.

Point 2: The Resurrection Offers us the power of Forgiveness. Forgiveness is a funny thing, isn't it. Often easy to accept, it can be perniciously difficult to offer, depending on the situation. We all have grudges, from the petty to the large ones that see us awake at night. It's such a difficult burden to live with the weight of so much unforgiveness.

I remember someone once telling me about an assignment a grade school teacher once gave. She arrived with a large sack of potatoes one day and told the kids – For every time they held a grudge against someone, to grab a potato and put it in their bookbags. She also instructed that they could only take it out if they truly forgave the person. The kids reluctantly did so with one child grabbing five, right to begin with. He wouldn't tell anyone who or why, he just kept five in his bookbag. Most of the kids, after a couple days grew tired of the extra weight. They found ways to let go of their hard feelings through forgiving others. The one boy, the one with the five potatoes, did not. He kept carrying them around, long after the assignment ended. What he discovered one day was a rotting bad of potatoes, growing smelly and squishy in his bag. It was only then that he found forgiveness and got rid of the potatoes. How many of us are carrying around a rotten bad of stinky potatoes, I wonder?

It doesn't have to be that way though. Jesus, on Easter, unleashes the power of forgiveness in this world. The resurrection of Jesus offers forgiveness to those who have sinned and fallen short of God's standards. In John 20, we see Jesus appear to His disciples and say, "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*" (John 20:22-23). This shows us that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have the ability to forgive others and to be forgiven ourselves.

Theologian J.I. Packer writes, "The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting Himself for man." This substitution is at the heart of the Easter story, as Jesus

took the punishment for our sins so that we could be forgiven. This forgiveness is not just a one-time event, but an ongoing process as we continue to follow Jesus and seek His forgiveness.

One real-life story that illustrates this point is that of a man I know named Michael who struggled with addiction for many years. He hurt his family and friends with his behavior and felt like there was no way to make things right. But when he heard the Easter story and realized that Jesus had died for his sins, he felt a sense of relief. Feeling forgiven of his sins, he started attending a recovery program. As part of that program, he began making amends to those he had hurt. He later said, "The forgiveness that I've received from Jesus and from others has given me a new lease on life. I know that I still have a lot of work to do, but I'm grateful for the second chance that I've been given."

Another story from real life that illustrates the power of forgiveness is the story of Wilma Derksen. In 1984, Wilma's daughter, Candace, went missing on her way home from school. After six weeks of searching, Candace's body was found in a shed not far from their home. She had been murdered. Wilma was devastated by the loss of her daughter and struggled with anger and bitterness towards the person who had taken her life. But over time, Wilma began to realize that holding onto anger and bitterness was only hurting herself. She knew that she needed to forgive the person who had killed her daughter in order to find peace. In an act of incredible courage and compassion, Wilma reached out to the man who had been convicted of Candace's murder and offered him forgiveness. She wrote him a letter saying, "I don't forgive you for what you did, but I forgive you because Jesus forgave me. Forgiveness is giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me." Wilma's act of forgiveness was not only a powerful testimony of her faith in Jesus, but it also brought healing to her own heart. She went on to become a counselor and advocate for victims of crime, sharing her story of forgiveness with others and helping them find healing and hope. Wilma's story reminds us that forgiveness is a powerful force that can bring healing and reconciliation even in the most difficult of circumstances. It requires great courage and compassion, but the rewards are immeasurable. So, let's get rid of those rotten potatoes, okay?

Point 3: The Resurrection Gives Us the power of Purpose. I'll never forget years ago watching Lillian play a soccer game. She must have been around six years old. Well, the game started, Lillian was playing but on the sidelines were three little boys. Asked to sit down and wait to play, the three were sitting cross legged, sulking. You could feel their frustration as their friends were out playing and they were simply forced to watch. It was about that time that another little kid, a team mate of theirs came by. He, however, had an idea. They weren't just sitting on the playing field. They were actually ninjas on a special assignment. Soon, all four boys were up doing karate kicks and punches and having the greatest time ever.

On Easter morning, Jesus unleashes the power of purpose just like that little kid did but on a much grander and more meaningful level. The resurrection of Jesus gives us a purpose in life. In John 20, we see Jesus appear to His disciples and say, "*As the Father has sent Me, so I send you*" (John 20:21). This commissioning shows us that we are called to continue the work that Jesus began, spreading His message of hope and forgiveness to the world.

As theologian Karl Barth writes, "The Easter message tells us that our enemies, sin, the curse, and death, are beaten. Ultimately they can no longer start mischief." This means that we can approach the work of spreading the Gospel with confidence and boldness, knowing that the victory has already been won. One real-life story that illustrates this point is that of a young woman I met at my last church named Sarah. Sarah grew up going to church but, as she said later, for many years, it just didn't connect with her. She said she would come to church and largely not understand what the deal was. But then, one day, bam, the Holy Spirit stirred. It wasn't long thereafter that Sarah started feeling a call to become a missionary. She was hesitant at first, feeling inadequate and unsure of how to go about it. But when she heard the Easter story and realized that Jesus had commissioned His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, she felt a sense of purpose. It was a purpose that had largely been lacking in her life. She said before the call of Jesus came, she was ambling through life, blind to the truly important stuff. It began when she went to see a program on a global mission's group. She started attending a missions training program and eventually went overseas to share the message of Jesus with people who had never heard it before. She was in Nepal once when a mudslide did terrible devastation. But, she said, it was in the midst of that horror that she encountered Jesus in a new and powerful way. She later said, "The purpose that I've found in following Jesus has given me a sense of fulfillment that I never had before. It's not always easy, but it's worth it."

Have you found your purpose in Christ yet? I wonder, are some of us being summoned to do things for Jesus and we're turning a deaf ear to His call? If that's you, hear this as your great call to arms. Take action while ye may! Yes, the Easter morning we rejoice that Jesus is risen from the grave. And we also stand in awe of the power that is now afforded us by the Holy Spirit of God. For we have the power of hope, the power of forgiveness and the power of purpose in our lives.