



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE HEART OF THE MATTER: EASTER ENCOUNTERS”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 24:1-12

This sermon was preached by Dr. Joseph S. Harvard III on Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Gracious and eternal God, with millions of your children around the world we come to worship you this morning because we have heard you have done a new thing as you promised in ancient scripture. We come because we've heard that a resurrection has happened and yet we're not sure how to receive this amazing news. We come because we finally heard that death has been defeated, that in the midst of all of the pain and suffering, all the violence, there is a reality that has been let loose in the world that is more powerful than death or suffering or violence. So we come this morning to hear about it again, to embrace it, to hold it, to be a part of it. Startle us, O God, as you startled Jesus' friends and disciples long ago, with the power of your everlasting and trustworthy love, made known to us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. In his name we pray, Amen.

Preaching an Easter sermon is a big challenge. You may have already figured that out. I've done it for almost 40 years, and it never gets any easier. I think it's a matter of expectations. How do you give expression to a reality that is beyond our comprehension? Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining. It may sound like it, maybe trying to lower your expectations. I love the occasion: the rites, the trumpet, the music, but I feel the pressure because today, we are standing at the very heart of the matter, the story without which the Christian community can exist. The story without which there would be no hope.

I am reminded of a story that I shared with some of you before. Many years ago, a friend told me that his young son was a great fan of Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. Some of you will remember Captain Kangaroo and Mr. Rogers: two favorite TV characters of many for many years. The boy faithfully watched both of these 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 he would ask his dad "Is it today that Mister Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo? It doesn't get any better than that!" Finally the great day arrived, and father and son gathered in the den around the television set. The boy watched for a few minutes, but then, surprisingly, got up and wandered off into the next room. Puzzled by his behavior, his father followed him and asked, "What is it, son? Is anything wrong? Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers are on in the next room." The young boy looked at his dad and said, "Dad, it's just too good."

Maybe this good news is just too good, for all we have to lay before you this morning is a story that began on Thursday in an upper room when the disciples gathered and then went out into a garden to pray. And then there was the arrest, the mock trial on Friday when Pilate washed his hands of the whole matter in a cowardly act, and he gave up Jesus to the crowd, who cried, "Crucify him!" These were some of the same folks who had welcomed him with "Hosanna!" With his death by crucifixion—a slow, suffocating death—it appeared that the light that had come into the world in Jesus Christ had gone out.

Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body so he could bury it. The women who had followed Jesus came and saw how his body was laid. They then did their funereal thing to anoint his body.

On the first day of the week, they went to the tomb with spices they had prepared, but the stone had been rolled away, and Jesus was not there. Two messengers asked them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not dead; he is not here, but he has risen!”

When I first arrived in Durham over 30 years ago, I was riding down the street, and I saw a bumper sticker that said, “He is not here!” I thought, “That must be a kind of religious group in town.” I asked one of my colleagues, who said, “Joe, settle down. That is the advertisement of a bar in Chapel Hill.”

The messenger said, “He is not here; he is risen.” The women remembered his words. And then they went to tell the others. That is the first Easter sermon preached by women who ran to tell the others. They didn’t get a very good response. “It’s an idle tale.” You see, women were not allowed to give witness in court. Their witness was not considered reliable. So think about it. If you are going to make up a story about a man rising from the dead, and you want people to believe it, who would you have as your first witnesses? Not women. There is something authentic about the fact that these women, these first preachers of the Christian message, were greeted with a resounding bad review—“An Idle Tale.” It goes against conventional wisdom. But we keep on telling the story.

Here are some lines from my favorite Easter poem, “Seven Stanzas at Easter” by John Updike that I always found important and helpful:

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making of the event a parable,
a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages . . .
Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty . . .
Instead, let us walk through the door.
(*Collected Poems: 1953–1993*)

Let us walk through the door of this event, this story, this new reality, this new thing God has done in our world, has opened up for us. Whether we come early or late to faith, it is the encounters with this new reality that God has let loose in the world in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that leads to faith.

There is an interesting argument that Paul puts forth in Corinthians. Paul says:

- If there is no resurrection, Christ has not been raised.
- If Christ has not been raised, your preaching is in vain.
- If your preaching is in vain, your faith is in vain.

It is about this time that some of those early Christians said, “Wait a minute! Our faith is not in vain!” And then the whole argument unravels, and Paul reaches that marvelous conclusion: “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor. 15:20).

There is no proof of the resurrection. The proof is in the Easter encounters when the living Christ encounters us in our lives and struggles. Let me share some of those with you this morning:

One is about a woman named Ruth. Her minister named her a “grandmother type.” He said that he’d never had a conversation with her that she didn’t express some joy and gratitude. As he knew her better he learned her story.

Ruth had been married to an avid sailor. Her husband had taught their boys to sail, and they knew their way around the family boat and ocean by the time they were in middle school. “Their son Phillip had just graduated from college, and he and some buddies took the boat and headed out to sea” – out into the Atlantic off Charleston, South Carolina. The storm came out of nowhere. They never did find the boys.

After hearing her story, the pastor asked, “‘Ruth, how do you do it? How did you ever get over that?’ She just smiled and said, ‘Mothers don’t get over that. But I learned something when I was in the valley of the shadow of death. You can trust God. You can trust God’s promises. Nothing can separate us from God’s love. I found that out and in the midst of my grief and sadness every day, I am aware of God’s presence of Christ walking with me through the valley of the shadow of death.’

One of the outstanding witnesses to the resurrection in recent times is a Catholic priest named Henry Nouwen. He had inspiring writings, and teachings. His life was a real witness. He had a distinguished professorship at Yale. He left it to work in a Boy’s Home for mentally and physically challenged young boys.

Early in his life he had a transforming experience. He had the opportunity to travel with the Flying Rodleighs, a troupe of trapeze artists, who traveled around Germany and around the world, performing dazzling acts, flying through the air. Letting go of the trapeze and being caught, Nouwen asked them, “How do you do what you do?” In the end they told him, “It comes down to this...a flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch. And the flyer must trust the outstretched arms of the catcher. You must trust that the catcher will be there.”

The resurrection doesn’t answer any of our questions about life after death. But it tells us you can trust the catcher. You can trust the God who has promised nothing will separate us from His love.

Shirley Guthrie, the great theologian, put it this way, “One thing we can be sure of is that our lives are in God’s hands now and throughout eternity.” That empowers us. That encounter with the living Christ empowers us to live as God’s faithful people.

One more witness comes from a story told by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who was a well-known physician in Chicago. She has written about care for the dying. She was doing research on effective treatment, and reduction of pain. She found one group of patients seemed more at peace with their illness. She checked all the variables. One of the nurses said, “You need to talk to Savannah Jones.” She was an African American woman, a nurses’ aide – that interacted with these patients. “What are you doing with these patients?” “Nothing,” the woman said, “I am just taking care of them.” “No, I sense they are at peace,” the doctor responded. The woman replied: “Sometimes at night when they can’t sleep, I sing songs from church like ‘Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand,’ and then I tell them I’ve had two of my own children die on my lap. It broke my heart. Even then God did not abandon me. Jesus has been with me in the hardest places and you don’t have to be afraid. That is what I tell them.”

Friends, let us not tell Savannah that Jesus has not risen from the dead. Her faith is not in vain. Was she a nurses’ aid or the risen Lord? I invite you to walk through the door to the reality of God’s amazing love let

loose in the world in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. And you will continue to encounter that love for it still happens today in our lives, in our world. Yes, indeed. The Lord is risen! Risen indeed! Amen.