

Sermon – “Surprised by Joy”

Scripture Readings – Isaiah 25:6-9, John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Isaiah, chapter 25, verses 6 through 9. In this passage, Isaiah announces God's victory in the final events of history. The celebration of God's victory over death includes a lavish, ritual meal to which all peoples are invited to eat together in harmony. The hope of Isaiah is at the heart of Easter and makes a fitting reading for Holy week. Hear now, the word of God:

*6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. 7 And God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; 8 God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of God's people God will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. 9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for God, so that God might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation. Amen.*

And now, let us open the scriptures to the reading of the events that took place on that first Easter morning as they are recorded by “the other disciple” in the Gospel of John, chapter 20. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" Ra BONE' E (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "Surprised by Joy"

*The text: Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher)." John 20:15*

Let us pray. Surprising and Loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

The last time April Fool's Day fell on Easter Sunday was 1956. The Reverend Dr. Edward Ziegler preached in Westminster's pulpit serving as the 14<sup>th</sup> pastor to this congregation, founded by abolitionists. His Easter devotional that year referenced Eugene O'Neill's 1925 play "Lazarus Laughed." 1956 was the year I was born—an unexpected pregnancy that surprised my mother! 1956 was the year the Reverend Margaret Towner surprised the traditional leadership of the Presbyterian Church as the first woman to be ordained a pastor.

1956 was the year the United States Supreme Court surprised the status quo with the decision to end segregation on public buses. The empty buses of the boycott in Montgomery, Alabama inspired by Rosa Parks and led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave rise to a new day in our country. This change did not come easily ...it did not come without great personal sacrifice by those who were willing to walk their own Via Delarosa, the way of sorrow (to and from work) in order to gain a stunning victory over debilitating segregation. Our country was astonished as one small success over oppression was won through resourceful resistance and peaceful protest.

As we commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King this week on April 4, we honor a man who was willing to sacrifice his life for what he believed and who refused to return evil for evil. We are grateful for the resolve of his faith, the gift of his insight, and the ingenuity of the movement he led with guile and compassion. We remember Dr. King with deep respect and affection.

It turns out the impetus of April Fool's Day has more to do with ingenuity, cleverness and surprise than practical jokes. Many scholars believe that its genesis comes from a reference to one of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in the fourteenth century. In the Nun's Priest Tale, set on March 32<sup>nd</sup>, the cunning fox entices the vain rooster to close his eyes, to stretch out his neck, and to crow to his heart's content. As he does so, the fox snatches the rooster in his mouth. The cunning rooster then invites the vain fox to brag to all who can hear about his breakfast catch. As he does so, the rooster falls out of the fox's mouth, ultimately gaining his freedom in a battle of wits.

Ralph Ellison in his 1952 novel The Invisible Man portrays how color can render one invisible and addresses many of the social and intellectual issues facing African-Americans in the early twentieth century. A poignant quote from the protagonist's grandfather is reminiscent of Chaucer's Tale and a reminder to the oppressed to remain buoyant and resourceful in the midst of peril. *As you Live with your head in the lion's mouth... I want you to overcome 'em with yeses and undermine 'em with grins.*

The week that Jesus died he found himself with his head in the lion's mouth, having preached a new kingdom of justice and peace which likewise surprised the status quo. During the years of his ministry leading up to this week, Christ astounded his followers and detractors alike with

insightful and sometimes perplexing responses to profound and difficult questions. However, this week was different and he knew it. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus overcame his persecutors with resourceful resistance and peaceful protest by saying yes to a crucifixion he did not deserve. Jesus undermined the sin and cruelty of this world by grinning in the face of injustice and embracing his death with dignity and determination.

Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor wrote in his 1958 best-selling book Man's Search for Meaning: *The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance.*

Christ chose to respond in love to the circumstances of his life and death. The unforeseen twists and turns of Christ's Via Delarosa from the triumphant entry on Palm Sunday to the commandment to love on Maundy Thursday to the undeserved crucifixion on Good Friday led his followers from the height of celebration to the pinnacle of call to the depth of despair.

And this is where we meet Mary that first Easter morning weeping at the tomb. Not only does Mary weep for the loss of her friend and advocate but also for the loss of his body. The absence of the body is the subtle manifestation of the resurrection but Mary does not know that yet. At first Mary mistakes Christ for the Gardener, and then she hears her name spoken with tenderness and love by the One who created her in her mother's womb, by the One who taught her to believe in herself when others doubted her, and by the One who opened her heart to love, to serve, and to treat all with dignity. When she heard her name spoken, she knew that her Redeemer liveth and was surprised by joy in the astonishing reality of the resurrection.

Today we commemorate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we proclaim with Christians around the world that death is not the last word, that the love of God could not be contained in the tomb. The final surprise is that our Creator God, who joined us in our humanity, overcame evil and brought hope for everlasting life through death on a cross. Today we join Mary outside the tomb, surprised by joy, proclaiming the day of resurrection. Halleluiah, Amen!