

April 12, 2020

“Easter 2020”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 20:1, 11-16,18; Luke 24:13-35

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I want to set the tone for today's sermon by telling you about another sermon that preacher Tony Campolo once delivered at his church in Philadelphia. The title was, “It's Friday, but Sunday's Coming.” Now once you know the title, you can probably grasp the theme of the entire sermon. “It's Friday, but Sunday's Coming.” You see, Campolo compared how the world looked on Friday, Good Friday, when the forces of evil won out over the forces of good, when every friend and follower of Jesus fled in fear, and when the Son of God died on the cross: he compared those things with how it looked on Sunday. Easter Sunday, when Christ rose from the grave and life was made new, hope was restored and all was made right with the world again.¹ And that is what we celebrate today! Can I get an “on line”, ‘Amen’ out there! So I can hear it! Amen!

Getting back to Campolo, did you notice that he skipped one day in his sermon. The other two days are etched on the church calendar – Good Friday and Easter Sunday. But Saturday is missing. Saturday is that in between day that might best be described as a day of waiting, or continued darkness, or fear, or despair, or, you name it. And given what is happening in the world today with this pandemic, in a real sense, today is Saturday. Yes, it's still only Saturday. Because typically on Easter Sunday, I'm up here beginning our worship service by shouting out loud, “Hallelujah, Christ has risen,” exactly like I did earlier. But in return, hundreds of people would respond, “Christ has risen, indeed!” We all, with joy, would lift our praise to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. But this morning, it's obviously different. Our sanctuary is eerily quiet and empty. And although we do believe Christ did indeed rise from the grave, celebrating Easter today, with all that's going on, is a little like having a party, a celebration, where nobody came.

Churches are meant to be packed on Easter Sunday. And when they're empty - there's a problem. Because consider the metaphor used often in scripture where Christ is described as a bridegroom, and the Church is the bride of Christ – his one and only love, for whom he, the bridegroom, would sacrifice anything, even his life. This conveys Christ's special relationship with the church - you and me and Easter people all around the world who believe in him and have acknowledged his great sacrifice for our sins, and his gift of eternal life. That's the message of the cross. Yet today, the bride and groom are separated, and we find an empty church. It just doesn't seem right, does it! But that's why I think you'll find today's scriptures to be hopeful ones in the midst of all we're going through.

¹ Saturday, Philip Yancy

First, let's look at the resurrection story that first Easter Sunday. According to St. John, it was still dark when Mary Magdalene went to tomb. Obviously John means to tell us it was very early in the morning. But the fact is, it wasn't just the darkness of the morning and the time of day he was talking about, it was the darkness within Mary. For as far as Mary knew, Jesus was dead and now her life just wouldn't be the same anymore. Scripture tells us that Mary had been one of Jesus' most devoted followers. She had been with Jesus throughout his ministry, she followed him to the cross and now stayed with him to the end. Watching as the flame of the person she believed to be the light of the world, went out. So on the very first Easter morning, Mary went to the place where Jesus was buried, expecting to see his dead body and pay her respects by properly anointing it. But instead she finds an empty tomb. And similarly, as hard as it is to believe, this Easter morning 2000 years later, we find an empty church. And given the circumstances of what's happening in our world today, don't the words of John resonate with us more than ever? "While it was still dark." "While it was still dark." While we're still at home alone. While we can't see our friends or grandchildren. While we can't fellowship together. Because it's still Saturday.

But as we all know, the story doesn't end there. Let's get back to Mary. She finds the stone removed from the front of the tomb and begins to despair even more, thinking someone has stolen Jesus' body. In her despair she basically dismisses the two angels inside the tomb that asked her why she is so upset. And when she turns around, for some reason, she doesn't even recognize Jesus who is standing there, supposing him to be the gardener. But then Mary hears Jesus call her name. "Mary!" "Mary!" I wonder if at that moment she recalled something Jesus earlier told his followers. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they know me, and they follow me." Mary knows that voice! Mary trusts that voice. Jesus is indeed alive. And with all the conviction one can muster after hearing his voice, she runs back to the disciples and declares, "I have seen the Lord!" So what lesson is in this for us? Well, think, during this time when we are separated from each other and our church, think of his voice... his words and promises spoken directly to you. Words like, "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world." Words like, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you." Words like, "Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Words like, "Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid. I am with you always – to the end of the age." Yes, the first thing we must do is listen for Jesus' voice. And then, if we have faith and trust in these words and promises of our risen Lord, we can be assured that the light of the world has not and will never go out of our lives.

And there's more. Later that first Easter Sunday, St. Luke tells us that two of Jesus disciples were leaving Jerusalem, heading back to their town of Emmaus, grieving Jesus' death, and having heard rumors that his body was stolen. They too, were depressed, and probably frightened as to what the Jewish authorities might do to them. So it's Saturday for them as well. When suddenly, Jesus appears to them. For whatever reason, their eyes are clouded over, and they don't recognize Jesus either. Was it a virus that affected everyone's eyes? No, more likely it is the fact none of us recognize Jesus when we allow fear or a crisis to overcome us. We are blind to the ways God is at work in our lives. As humans so often we desire an answer when, in fact, we have the answer walking right beside us. Christ could have immediately revealed himself to them, and it would have been obvious that he was risen indeed. However, it was important that they first had to see with their hearts before recognizing him with their eyes. And the same lesson holds true for us! We have to believe with our hearts that God is walking with us through all this. Because the bridge from hopelessness and despair to celebration and eternal joy is when we believe with our hearts. That's what happened with these two disciples. When their hearts literally burned with the assurance of God's peace and love. And, unafraid of the dark, these men went back to Jerusalem, and told the disciples, "The Lord has risen indeed!"

Yes, these are beautiful scripture lessons that give us the hope we need for the coming days. Because you see, and this is important – those disciples who lived through Friday, Saturday and Sunday, never doubted God again. They had learned that when God seems most absent, he probably is closer than you can ever imagine. When God looks most powerless, he is at his most powerful. When God appears dead, he is, beyond any doubt, alive! After Easter, they had learned never to count God out.²

And that's great news, isn't it! But it gets even better. Both Luke and John tell us that later, Jesus appeared to all his disciples, all of them, when they were all together. And some day, here at John Wesley, and in all our churches, we too will celebrate together, the risen Lord. The bride and the bridegroom will no longer be separated. The church will not be empty. The darkness will be overcome and the light of Christ will shine again in our sanctuaries. So until that day, let us listen for his voice and know that the Lord is walking this road with us. And so let us do this one more time, "Hallelujah, Christ has risen!" Yes, "Christ has risen, indeed!" Amen.

² Ibid