Sermon for Easter Sunday

Text: I Corinthians 15:20

*Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised.*

Rising from the Ashes

They didn’t expect it. The women went to the place where they had buried Jesus with sad tears in their eyes, confusion in their minds and grief in their hearts. They went to Jesus’ tomb to complete what they had done in such a hurry on the eve of the Sabbath — to give Jesus a proper burial and spend some time grieving their loss. I can imagine them walking through the place where the tomb was located silently, veils over their faces, wearing the clothes of those who are mourning, their eyes downcast and then as they neared the tomb they lifted their heads and what they saw took them surprise. The stone that had been rolled over the tomb’s entrance on Friday evening was now rolled away. They looked into the tomb and it was empty. Jesus’ body was gone. It’s as if this is all too much for them to take in so Luke reports, “They stood there puzzled about this”. They stood dumbfounded.
And who can blame them? In hindsight we could say, “These women and the disciples should have known. Didn’t Jesus tell them that he would suffer and die at the hands of his enemies and after three days rise again?” They weren’t waiting at the tomb for Jesus to rise from the dead. They weren’t even waiting there just in case what Jesus had said about rising again to life might actually happen. It’s clear that it just didn’t occur to them that the resurrection was even vaguely possible.

Mary Magdalene didn’t expect to see Jesus. While the others went into the tomb, she stayed outside weeping. Through her tears she thought it was a gardener approaching her, not thinking for one minute that it could be Jesus. When Jesus spoke her name this was the last voice she expected to hear. The illogical, the unthinkable, the unnatural, and the incredible had happened. He was dead – she saw his burial linen cloth – now he is alive and her preoccupation with death disappears as she is overcome with joy at seeing the living Christ.

We understand Mary’s grief. When a person dies, there is no coming back. Death is final. We know that from our own experience. When we express our final goodbyes at a funeral service we know that we will need to continue this life without that person being by our side to help us or to chat with or to share life’s experiences with. Death takes a person from us in this life and it doesn’t care whether that person is young or old, the most loved, the most caring, the most talented and the dearest. We react in the same way as the disciples did – afraid, angry, grief stricken, confused, and lonely because death is so final. As far as the disciples and
the women were concerned death had won the day on Calvary and a good man died.

But that was Good Friday and Easter Saturday. Easter Sunday brings a whole new perspective on death. Jesus comes to us again on this resurrection day and says to us, “See what I have done for you. Look at the mark of the nails on my hands – I have died for you

1. To take away your guilt and sin,
2. To replace your tears with joy,
3. To give you hope in place of fear and discouragement,
4. To give you peace when you are anxious –

I’ve taken all this on to the cross with me and it’s all been buried in the tomb.

Now I am alive and I have come to give you new life now and forever”.

A pastor was chatting to a woman who clearly by her own admission was not a “religious person”. Anyway, as it happened the pastor mentioned that he was conducting the funeral of a young father who had been struck down by a sudden illness. He mentioned how confident and courageous he was as his strength slowly faded away and he knew death was coming closer. The pastor spoke of the young man’s faith in Jesus and his firm belief that he was going to heaven. As an aside he also described how people came with the intention of cheering him up but found that he was the one who cheered them up. His trust in God was inspirational.
The woman listened attentively and then said, “Do you believe that there is more to life than what we have right now? I mean, were we put here just to endure stress and worry and sickness and every other bad thing that can happen to us or is there something better?”

“That something better” that this woman was referring to is what Easter is all about. The Easter triumph of Jesus over the grave does give us the assurance that there is something better. We heard Paul say in one of the readings, “If our hope in Christ is good for this life only and no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in all the world. But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised” (1 Corinthians 15:19-20).

Jesus has made sure that death is not the end of us. Just as Jesus rose from the dead, (you might say he is the trail blazer and has shown us the way to heaven), likewise those who believe in Jesus will never die; they will rise again to live in a new home in heaven with a new body and a new life. There is something better to look forward to.

Paul spoke about this when he wrote, “Our dead decaying bodies will be changed into bodies that won’t die or decay...Death has lost the battle! ....Thank God for letting our Lord Jesus Christ give us the victory! (1 Corinthians 15:53 - 58).

Throughout the centuries Christians have used symbols to try and describe Jesus’ Easter victory. One of them is the phoenix. No, I’m not talking about the place in the USA called Phoenix, or the classic car called the Dodge Phoenix.
The phoenix is a mythological bird, something like an eagle, that became a symbol in the ancient church of the resurrection. The phoenix symbolized hope and a continuity of life after death. When talking about the resurrection and new life we are accustomed to referring to eggs, butterflies, and lilies, even peacocks as symbols of the resurrection, but we rarely talk about the phoenix.

According to the legend*, this bird lived for 500 years and built a nest of twigs and spices. At the end of 500 years, the sun's hot rays would set the nest alight, but instead of trying to smother the flames, the phoenix would fan the flames with its wings, burning itself up in the fire. Then, with a renewed and refreshed body it would rise from the ashes. In Christian art, the resurrected phoenix became a popular symbol of Christ's bodily resurrection from the grave and also for the resurrection of believers.

The phoenix sums up the Easter message perfectly. Jesus gave up his life and from the grave he was raised to life again on the third day. New life rises from the ashes of death. Today we are celebrating Christ's victory over the grave, the gift of eternal life for all who believe in Jesus. Today we are reminded that Jesus has defeated the last and greatest enemy of all – death. He has made it possible for us to pass from this life, to the joy and bliss of eternal life with him in heaven. In the place of death, there is new life, a life with a new, glorious, refreshed body, just like the phoenix as it rose from the ashes.
But Easter isn’t just about the day we take our last breath, the day our bodies die and we enter eternal life. It’s about a daily rising to new life. Every day, like the phoenix, we rise from the ashes of sin and guilt and are refreshed and renewed by our living Lord and Savior with his forgiveness and reassured that he still loves us and will continue to give us the strength we need.

Every day we find ourselves in ashes:
Some of our own making – temptation, selfishness, impatience, unkindness, a lack of self-control, being hard to get on with, and a lack of commitment and loyalty, and some we have no control over – sickness, natural disasters, war and death.

Christ has made it possible for us to rise like the phoenix out of these soul-destroying ashes to a new life with hope and peace and joy – with the strength and courage and boldness that comes from knowing that with the risen and all-powerful Alpha and Omega on our side nothing can destroy us or separate us from the One who loves us so dearly and who wants us to enjoy the blessed reward of life forever in heaven.

You probably know people, just as I do, who simply fill you with admiration that leads to comments like this, “She has really been given a rough road to travel with sickness and tragedy and yet what amazing strength and courage she has that is just an amazing witness to the power of Jesus in a person’s life”. This is what I call the “phoenix principle” or the “new life of Easter factor” that enables any of us to rise above the ashes with Christ and be victorious even when life is dishing up its worst. The “phoenix principle” is available to all of us and to everyone – all that needs to happen is for us
to believe and trust Jesus. The "phoenix principle" is worth sharing. Let it be known that the living Christ makes it possible for anyone to rise above the ashes of trouble and death.

Today and every day we are glad to say, “Christ is risen” and everyone joyfully responds

“He is risen indeed”.

Sermon for Easter Sunday

Text: John 20:18

Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!"

Ta! Da! Jesus is Alive!

It was time for the kids talk on Easter morning. One little boy was so excited about Easter that he couldn’t hold back and before the pastor could start his talk, loudly said, “Do you know what the first words Jesus said when he came out of the tomb on Easter morning?”

The pastor looked at the boy and could see the seriousness on his face. Quickly the pastor went through the four gospels in his head trying to remember what the first words Jesus said on Easter morning. Not wanting to confuse the children with the different reports of the four gospels, he asked the children. There were various suggestions but finally the pastor asked the boy, “So what were Jesus’ first words on Easter morning”. The boy got to his feet and said with the broadest grin, he loudly said, “Ta-da” (with his arms wide apart and leaning back).

Easter morning was certainly a “ta-da” moment. No one expected it.
The disciples and Jesus’ friends had placed in the tomb the stone-cold body of Jesus. He was as dead as anyone could be. The cruel treatment by the authorities and then the hours he had spent on the cross had drained the life from him. They rolled a stone across the door of the tomb thinking that this was the end of Jesus. He would never walk with them again. When you’re dead you’re dead. That first Easter the disciples were as low as you could get. Jesus was gone. There was no future. Whatever future they had planned around Jesus and everything he had said about love and the Kingdom of God, well, all that was now as dead as Jesus himself.

Now if I were Jesus on Easter morning I’d be tempted to do a “Ta-da! Look! I’m alive!” just to show the disciples that they had got it all wrong about who I was and what I had come to do.

If I were Jesus I would do a “Ta-da! Hey, I’m alive!” because they really hadn’t been listening carefully when I spoke about my death and that I would rise again after three days nor had they taken any notice that I had authority over death when I raised Lazarus and others from the dead;

I would do a “Ta-da!” to emphasize that they hadn’t taken seriously my words, “I am the Resurrection and the Life” and that I was sent to prepare the way so that all who believe can be in my Father’s house with eternal life and freedom from death.

But Jesus was far more sensitive than to walk into a locked room where the disciples were hiding from the authorities or walk up behind Mary and say loudly, “Ta-da” just to get a
reaction because he knew that would scare the living
daylight's out of them. The last thing they expected to see
was a dead man walking and talking and eating with them.
And so more appropriately Jesus says quietly, “Peace be
with you. Don’t be afraid”.

Even though the expression “Ta-da” isn’t in the Easter story,
nevertheless, it does express something of the excitement,
importance, and joy of Easter.

“Ta-da” is an onomatopoeia – in other words, it’s a word that
imitates a sound. “Ta-da” is a fanfare – fanfares are usually
performed by musical instruments to highlight an important
occasion or event. When there is a royal wedding, a fanfare
of trumpets and pipe organ precede the arrival of the bride.
I’ve been to graduation ceremonies where a fanfare
welcomes the graduates. We are told that a trumpet fanfare
will herald Jesus' second coming.

Listen to this “ta-da” moment that Paul describes, “We shall
not all die, but when the last trumpet sounds, we shall all be
changed in an instant, as quickly as the blinking of an eye.
For when the trumpet sounds, the dead will be raised, never
to die again, and we shall all be changed” (1 Cor 15:52-53).
This will be a fanfare that will resound around the world, a
“ta-da” that will herald Christ’s return and resurrection of the
dead. Things will never be the same again. The new thing
that Christ has begun will be complete.

What a “ta-da” moment that will be. Whether we are the
ones being raised from the dead or we are living on the
earth, this will be a glorious moment that was started with Christ’s own resurrection.

Over the centuries people have greeted one another with the words, “Christ is risen” and responded, “He is risen indeed” as they gather on Easter morning. Because we say it often it can lose that exciting edge.

Maybe we should adopt the enthusiasm of the little boy at the kids talk and add a fanfare. “Ta-da! Jesus is alive!” This is the greatest moment in history. That’s not denying that the birth of God in Bethlehem to a virgin at Christmas and the death of God’s Son on a cross in Jerusalem on Good Friday were not great moments, but the resurrection at Easter is the culmination and finale of the great plan of salvation that God had put into motion through the birth, life, suffering and death of Jesus.

“Ta-da” God has taken away sin's power to condemn us. “Ta-da” he has freed us from death and its power over us.

“Ta-da” God has given us new life, eternal life, a new home and a new body in heaven.

Paul says, “Death is destroyed; victory is complete! … Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

The key to understanding the joy of the women as they ran back to the disciples shouting, “He’s alive! He’s alive” and Paul’s victory shout, “Death is destroyed” is that hope is real. In the face of death, the tears are real, the sadness is real,
the separation and brokenness are real but none of these have the last word.

Hope is certain and sure that death’s power has been defeated. Jesus’ own resurrection has shown that his sacrifice on the cross has wiped away our guilt and replaced it with his own righteousness. We are God’s new people made clean and ready by the death of Jesus to enter eternal life.

Hope comforts us as we stand at the grave of our loved ones telling us that this is not the end but the beginning of something wonderful and new for that person. Jesus has made sure of that!

When we face our dying day, hope tells us that we shall pass from this life into eternal life and be raised with a glorious new life and new body. Jesus has made sure of that!

There is human hope. Let’s say you get a shopping cart like the kind at the grocery store and you fill it will all the kinds of things that you are successfully achieving now and want to achieve in the future. For some it will include the busyness of raising a family, working to get ahead financially, seeking careers, getting ahead, taking courses, planning trips, enjoying grandchildren – I think you get the picture. As you go along through life you fill your shopping cart with all kinds of successes, assets, qualifications, comforts, and security. This is your hope for happy and comfortable life.
But as we all know, this kind of hope is a very fragile thing. It takes just a small upset, a financial set back, a lost job, an illness or accident and those hopes just vaporize in an instant. And of course, if death should come, whether it comes to us or a member of our family, it cuts all these hopes and dreams short.

Take the two men walking down the road to Emmaus. Two confused, dejected, sad men. They had been followers of Jesus. They had seen his power; they had great hopes that this man was the one who had been promised by God but their hope had evaporated. Death had done its worst. They saw only gloom and sadness.

But what a difference it made when they realized that the man walking with them was the risen Jesus. What had changed them? Hope. The fire of hope was rekindled in their hearts. It was a “Ta-da” moment for them. Jesus was alive. There were new and great things to come in the future.

God is a great giver of hope and Jesus' resurrection gives us an even greater hope. These three days of Easter we see the full range of human emotion – tears, fear, anger, guilt, despair, hopelessness, remorse, and then comes the resurrection of Jesus and hope and everything changes. With hope there comes joy, celebration, excitement, understanding, faith and renewal and these are deepened as the reality and the meaning of resurrection sink in.
In our darkest moment in life’s journey, hope reminds us that with Jesus there is always a future, if not in this life, then in heaven.

1. Hope reminds us that Jesus is our living Lord who is committed to walking with us and helping us to endure all things right now.

2. Hope assures us that nothing can separate us from Jesus’ love – nothing in all creation and beyond.

3. Hope comforts us with the knowledge that we can be contented and at peace even when things threaten us and our safety.

We have a living Lord who is very real and very active in the happenings of every day.

We have a living Lord to whom we can pour out our hearts and when we have complained and questioned God about our hurts and fears and doubts, we can then listen to his promises that give us hope and faith in the living Lord.

Ta-da Jesus is alive!