

APRIL 16, 2017 EASTER SUNDAY
BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING!”

Pastor Becky Smithey

Scripture: John 20: 1-18

Is there any hope? This is a question that many of us face at some point in our lives. Is there any hope...for the married couple who seem to wind up at the same dead-end of unresolved conflict again and again? Or how about the person who has fallen victim to alcohol, drugs, or gambling or any of a number of addictive behaviors? The person who is in so deep that he or she fears they'll never find a way out? Is there any hope for them? Where is the hope for the mom-to-be who goes to her obstetrician for a routine checkup and hears the words, “I’m sorry, we can’t find a heartbeat?” Or for a single mom who works a full-time job by day, serves as both mother and father by night and wonders to herself-- “How long can I keep this up?” Or the person who battles depression and anxiety? Or the person who stands by their spouse’s bedside as they lay dying? And where is the hope for a generation of young people who seem to be an easy mark for drugs, STD’s, abuse, or the pain of a broken family?

The question is...Where is hope? What is its source? What reason is there to hope? The dominant theme of the Christian faith is that there is hope. And it’s not a hope based on some nebulous optimism that in the end everything will turn out alright.

It is a hope which is based on faith and love. The faith that the God of Creation cares about you and me...so much so that every hair on our head is counted! And that not one sparrow falls to the ground without our heavenly Father knowing about it. And that, in the Father’s eyes, we are worth much more than sparrows. Our hope is in the love that never fails. The love that pursues us long before we are even aware that we are loved or lovable. It’s the love that comes looking for us when we are at the bottom of the ditch. It’s the love which weeps for us and with us as we struggle in our brokenness and sins. It’s the love that goes to the Cross in order to show us how great that love is, how important we are, and how powerful is the hope which can conquer even death itself!!! The hope we have is found in an empty tomb, a Risen Savior and a God Who calls us into God’s life, God’s Kingdom, and to God’s side without us even having to buy a ticket!!! The hope we have is found in a God Who has purchased us with God’s blood! The hope we have is in a God Who seeks out the hopeless, and transforms!

Some 2,000 years ago, early on a Sunday morning, “while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene”—one of the world’s hopeless outcasts—“went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed.” And at that moment, this was just another twist of the knife for Mary. I mean, how bad could it get? This is just chaos upon chaos. What kind of a cruel trick is this? Someone has taken Jesus’ dead body? So Mary runs back to the city, back to Peter and back to John. And like a gun-shot to start a race, Mary’s words get everyone running to check it out for themselves.

The younger disciple gets there first, and sure enough, the tomb is open and empty! But he just peers in, he doesn't go in. And there is a really strange thing in there...the tomb is not completely empty, the linen cloths are lying there. It appears that someone has not only taken Jesus' body away; they have first gone to the trouble of unwrapping it!!! Why on earth would you do that?

Peter, out of breath, gets to the tomb a few moments later. And being Peter, in he goes! And here's an even stranger thing. The linen cloths are lying there; but the single cloth, the napkin that had been around Jesus' head, isn't with the others. It's in a place all by itself. Someone, having unwrapped the body—a majorly complicated task in itself—has also gone to the trouble of laying the cloths out. As a matter of fact, it looks like the body wasn't picked up and unwrapped at all. It looks like it just disappeared, leaving the empty cloths, like some balloon when the air has gone out of it.

Now, as modern people, who like to think of ourselves as sophisticated, we might sometimes forget that the idea that God could raise someone from the dead would be just as difficult for these ancient people to comprehend as it is for us. They were not stupid! They had seen lots and lots of people die and never once had they seen anyone come out of the tomb, except Lazarus... but when Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb he still looked like a mummy.

Finally, the younger disciple comes into the tomb after Peter. The Scripture says that “He saw and believed.” To him, somebody taking Jesus' body away, but unwrapping it first—suddenly looks stupid and irrelevant. As a matter of fact, it's harder to believe that this would happen than the something, quite new, that surges up in this young man's heart! It's a different sensation. It's something brand new and exciting. It's kind of like falling in love or hearing the sound of rain drops after a long drought. It's faith. Oh, he'd had faith before. He'd believed what Jesus had told him. He'd believed Jesus was the Messiah. But this was different. “He saw and believed.”

The world had turned the corner. The New Creation had begun. Jesus was alive. Nothing would ever be the same again!!! Faith, hope and love had taken a hold of this disciple, and when that happens to a person anything is possible!!! Life in its fullest becomes Reality!!! And the old thoughts, the old worries, the old treasures fall away just as easily and naturally as Jesus' grave clothes! Resurrection occurs!!!

But Mary had not experienced this yet. And that's how it is with faith, with Jesus, with Resurrection and new birth. Jesus comes to each one of us personally. No one else can believe for us. Christianity must be experienced. God must come to each of us in Jesus Christ. So “Mary stood outside the tomb crying.”

How many of us are standing outside the tombs of our lives, this morning, crying? Do we dare look in? When Mary looked in she “saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been. They asked her, ‘Woman, why are you crying?’ ‘They have taken my Lord away,’ she said, ‘and I don’t know where they have put him.’”

And we are told, “At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there...” But she didn’t know it was Jesus. She had not yet been spiritually enlightened. She was still looking at things in only a worldly way. Her heart had not yet been awakened. So, naturally, Mary thought Jesus was the gardener. And maybe he was the fellow who took Jesus’ body away. And then, and then, and then...

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’” Jesus said her name. And she saw Him for Who He really was! And hope exploded into her solitary life like fireworks on the 4th of July!!!

It’s interesting that Jesus tells Mary not to cling to Him. Could it be that Jesus was warning Mary that the new relationship she was going to be having with Him was not going to be like the old one? Jesus wouldn’t be going around Galilee and Judea anymore, walking the streets, talking and praying with her. His earthly ministry was just about over. It would now be up to the Apostles to spread the Good News.

“Go instead to my brothers and tell them,” Jesus said to Mary. And so Mary is really the first Apostle. She’s the apostle to the apostles. She’s the first to bring the news. She’s the first eyewitness to the most important event in history!!! And if someone in the 1st Century had wanted to invent a story about people seeing Jesus, they would never have dreamed of giving the star part to a woman...let alone to a ragamuffin outcaste like Mary Magdalene!!!

You know, it’s been said, “Ask people around the world what they think is the biggest day of the year for Christians, and most will say ‘Christmas.’ But the true answer is Easter.” Without Easter, no one would ever have dreamed of celebrating Christmas. Far from being the dramatic conclusion to the story of Jesus—Easter is the beginning. And you and I are living in the middle of it as well.

Read the first sermons that were ever preached in the early Church in Acts. What do they begin with? They make no reference to Jesus’ teachings or early life. Jesus’ teachings and life only take on meaning when we take into full account who the Teacher is, that is, God’s own Son Who died and Rose Again!!! That is why the Gospels have often been called Easter accounts with extended prologues!!!

Like Mary and the other apostles, Resurrection is where our faith begins. And that is where we find hope and reason, great, great reason to live!!!!
Praise God!!! Amen.