

The First Baptist Church, Midland
April 4, 2010 – Easter Sunday
Mark 16:1-8

My Lord, What a Morning!

An Easter Sunday Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: New Life and Resurrection

Easter's hope of resurrection... is there any greater celebration in the life of the Christian community? Jesus entered the world on the note of glad tidings: *Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy*, the angels said... *a great joy which shall come to all the people*. (Luke 2:10) And then toward the end of John's gospel when Jesus is addressing his disciples during one of their final times together he says, *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete*. (John 15:11) At the beginning and at the end of his life, the theme is one of celebration. So it is on this Easter morning that we embrace the story of resurrection with a sense of elation. Yes, this is one of the disciplines, you know... one of the tools we use as we seek to more fully become the children of faith God intends for us to be.

The truth is, sometimes it's easier to be joyful than others and I suppose that's why we might consider celebration to be a discipline. Let's be honest... without a joyful spirit faith could sometimes be a difficult thing to embrace. There are those occasions when your spirit really doesn't want to sing, aren't there? We experienced that just 2 ½ weeks ago.

That's when Paula lost her oldest and closest brother in a startling way. One moment he was with us and the next moment he was gone due to a massive coronary. And I have to tell you that in that moment there was no desire to celebrate because our hearts were broken and our spirits were diminished. And it didn't help that some people were saying crazy things.

For example, a call came from Florida from one of Linda's friends (Linda is Al's wife) and this caller said something to Linda that was beyond comprehension. We had just arrived and were sitting around the kitchen table in the old farmhouse when Linda began to tearfully melt. Of course, that was to be expected.

But as I sought to calm her, I discovered the reason for her tears at least in that moment. Now let me frame this for you. Al was a man of faith. No, he wasn't perfect and he was no saint. But he was a man of faith who believed in God. He grew up in the church and after he came home from his second tour of duty in Viet Nam he and Linda were married (I got to perform their wedding). They soon became very engaged in the life of our church (I got to baptize Al), and he carried that engagement throughout his life until the last few years. It was then that he chose to stop going to church but not to stop serving.

Al worked in the Neo-Natal Intensive Care Unit at the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. You know what they called the unit... *Al's House!* We never knew that until after he was gone. He embraced that unit as sacred and we learned in his death from his co-workers who came in droves to the funeral that he was always there for the staff and for the families who had children in that unit. If something went wrong with the equipment in any way, he would be at that hospital 24 hours a day to see that the problem was rectified. He could fix anything... anything at all. From day one when he walked into that NIC unit he told the staff... *I'm here for you. If there is anything you need, never hesitate to call me.* Everybody knew Al. This was his place of ministry.

But do you know what Linda's pious friend in Florida said to her about her beloved? She informed Linda that Al would probably not be making it to heaven and "if" he did, she would not recognize him because he had not been attending church regularly in the last few years. Because he hadn't been in church, he would be distorted from recognition by his loved ones. This was the penalty that God would impose.

Now I don't know about you, but this does not describe the God I love and serve. And I don't believe this is the God who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to show us how to serve and believe and to provide for our eternal security.

So, I took Linda's hand, looked her in the eye and said, "Linda, don't you dare believe what Barb said to you. It was cruel and thoughtless and most of all, it was wrong. There is nowhere in my Bible where Jesus paints that kind of picture. To the contrary, the Jesus I know promised that in his house there are many rooms and that he is going to prepare a place for us that where he is, we may be also.

As I said that, Linda began to immediately regain her composure and a smile emerged. Joy had begun to find a place in her crumbling heart because hope always trumps despair. And by the time a few days had passed the spirit of celebration was in the air when we gathered to honor and remember Al's life.

Such is the glory and the promise of the resurrection! It takes us where we could never go on our own. And it prepares us for whatever life might bring. I love the way a little six year old girl expressed this truth.

She and her family were watching a movie on the life of Jesus and were all deeply moved as the story realistically portrayed the crucifixion. Tears were running down the little girl's face as they took Jesus from the cross and lay him in a borrowed tomb. She watched as a guard was placed outside the tomb. And then suddenly a big smile broke on her face. She bounced up on the arm of the chair and said with great anticipation, "Oh mommy... Now comes the good part!"

Now comes the good part! I would say she was right on target. The suffering is completed, death has had its moment... but new life holds the future. My friends, because of the truth represented by this day we'll never be the same again and a wonderful song fills the air.

Beethoven wrote the music and Henry Van Dyke authored the lyrics. (Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee) *Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love; Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above. Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the dark of doubt away; Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!*

Oh, to be so creative to be able to write a hymn like this. How triumphant! And it speaks to the message of resurrection Sunday, doesn't it.

Now I have a question... do you feel the celebration defined by this Easter morning? Does the light of this day drive the dark of your doubt away? Are you embracing the reality that this is the festival of resurrection... the day that defines our faith... the day that assures our eternal life? Are you feeling the joy?

Perhaps you have heard the story about the stranger who was visiting in worship one Sunday. He was shouting and hollering in the last pew of the church at various times during the service. It was Easter and he was excited. Most folks didn't know what to make of it because it was a rather staid congregation. Finally, after one too many gleeful alleluias, the usher rushed up to him and asked, "Sir, is there anything wrong?"

"Not at all," the stranger responded with enthusiasm. "I've got religion."

"Well," the usher said, "please calm down. You didn't get it here."

Oh how I hope that before this day is over, we will all have somehow in our own special ways experienced this sense of joy brought to life by the Easter reality. You know the feeling, don't you? Everything just seems right with the world. How well I remember such a moment. It comes to mind because my little girl is with us this weekend.

It happened a couple years ago when Paula and I were in Athens over Spring Break taking care of our granddaughter, Julia. The house was quiet and it was around 9:00 am. We still hadn't heard from her so I went into her room to be sure she was okay. I quietly opened the door to take a peak and there she sat in the middle of her crib playing with her stuffed animal and laughing. She heard the door creak, quickly turned her head and when she saw me immediately stood up giggling with a smile from ear to ear... *Down*, she said. *Down...*

I immediately went over and picked her up out of her crib. I started dancing with her in my arms and singing to her... *I love Julia yes I do... I love Julia how about you. she's a precious little girl and if you watch her she will twirl.* We danced and twirled around her room for a minute and I had tears in my eyes. It was such a joyful moment. You've had those kinds of encounters, haven't you? But I wonder... have you ever been so overwhelmed that your eyes watered out of sheer joy in worship?

Too often, we see the church as a place of solemnity. And the truth is, there are those moments that demand our quiet and humble respect. But there are also those times when we celebrate the goodness of life and the joy of living. There are those times when we allow our emotion to guide our hearts. There are those times when we bring the spirit of the resurrection to life!

St. Francis once described his Easter experience. "Listen, my child," he said, "each year at Easter I used to watch Christ's resurrection. All the faithful would gather around His tomb and weep, weep inconsolably, beating on the ground to make it open. And behold! In the midst of our lamentations the tombstone crumbled to pieces and Christ sprang from the earth and ascended to heaven, smiling at us and waving a white banner. (The joy was overwhelming) There was only one year I did not see Him resurrected. That year a theologian of consequence, a graduate of the University of Bologna, came to us. He mounted the pulpit in church and began to elucidate the Resurrection for hours on end. He explained and explained until our heads began to swim; and that year the tombstone did not crumble, and, I swear to you, no one saw the Resurrection." (Nikos Kazantzakis' Tale of St. Francis, quoted by John Shea in Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography (Chicago, Ill.: The Thomas More Press, 1978), 69.)

I'll say it again... This miracle of ours... this story of resurrection needs to come alive in a way that will lift our hearts to joy, infusing us with the melody and encouraging us to want to sing of our good news to all the world because we know its truth enables us to dance our way through life with meaning.

My Lord! What a morning...
My Lord! What a morning...
My Lord! What a morning...
When the Son of God did rise!

No one ever said it any better than Paul in the 8th chapter of Romans. **"If God is for us, who is against us?... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."** (Romans 8:31-39) Now that, my friends, is why we celebrate. So won't you stand with me and affirm the brilliance of Henry Van Dyke and Ludwig van Beethoven and the love of our abiding and redeeming God...

Joyful, joyful we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!

My friends... He is risen! *He is risen indeed!*