

St. Luke's UMC
 April 4, 2021
 Easter Sunday

Finding Hope
Matthew 28:1-10

***“He is not here...he has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee.
 There you will see Him.”***

There's a story about a church that put on an annual Passion Play. It seemed they always picked someone to play Jesus who was especially weak looking. But one year the director decided to change it up and picked a Jesus who appeared strong and muscular. But unbeknownst to the director the person chosen was somewhat of a bully. In the scene where Jesus is carrying the cross to Golgotha, there was a guy playing a Roman soldier whose job was to occasionally taunt Jesus along the way. As it turns out this guy was often the victim of the bully's actions in real life. Now he had his chance to exact some revenge. He really got into his role. He shoved Jesus hard and kept poking him with his staff. At one point he was yelling at him so much that he accidentally spit in Jesus' face. Jesus stopped, wiped his face off, leaned over to the guy and said with a scowl, "When I'm through with the Resurrection, you're the first person I'm coming to see!"

It's a silly story, but it does make an important point. For the risen Jesus, you are the first person he wants to see. Not because he's out to get even with you. Not because he's angry with you. Not because he wants to punish you. Its because He wants to give you hope.

Jesus' resurrection means that the bullies of our world are overthrown:

- the bully of sin
- the bully of poverty and injustice
- the bully of racism
- the bully of isolation and loneliness
- and the bully of death itself.

Easter means the bullies of our world are overthrown, but the way God proclaims that hope is through people; people who have discovered that hope themselves and allow their lives to be used to give hope to others. Easter is about people finding and then giving hope! So that is why I can imagine Jesus saying, "Once I'm through with the Resurrection, you are the first person I'm coming to see."

This all started with the women who went to the tomb that first Easter morning. Why were they there? Maybe to pay their last respects. Mark tells us they went to anoint Jesus' body because there had been no time to do that before the Sabbath. No doubt they were seeking comfort and closure. Perhaps if they could just see his body it might ease their pain. Instead they arrived and found that an earthquake has caused the stone sealing the tomb to be rolled back. And an angel was sitting on top of it and announced

the proclamation that changed history. It is the greatest message of hope ever shared. And what are the first words of that message? That Jesus is risen? No. That death is defeated? No. In the Gospel of Matthew the first words of Easter are: "He is not here." The greatest good news in history begins, "He is not here." That's a little underwhelming isn't it? He is not here? When is that ever good news?

You wake up with a pain in your side. You're not sure what it is. You try to ignore it but it doesn't go away. You begin to wonder what it could be, and now your thoughts are imagining all kinds of possibilities. So you get in the car and drive to your doctor. You go inside and ask the receptionist for an appointment but that person says, "The doctor is not here."

I have a barber I like to cut my hair. I can never remember her day off. It's posted over her chair but I forget it. I shouldn't, because it seems everytime I go to get my hair cut, it is her off day. They tell me every time, "She's not here."

Is it not anti-climactic for the first words of the angel to be, "He is not here?" Shouldn't the positive word of hope be spoken first? That's the way the Gospel of Mark does it. He has the angel say, "He is risen! He's not here." Matthew should have taken notes from Mark. After all, Mark was the first Gospel. We believe Matthew had access to Mark's writings.

If you turn the phrases around surely it's for a purpose, but what could it be?

Maybe Matthew is recognizing the sequence of hope and how hope works. Hope doesn't begin with the arrival of good news. It begins earlier. Hope doesn't begin when the doctor says to the couple, "Congratulations, you're expecting." No, hope begins when the couple is sitting up late at night at the kitchen table asking the question, "Should we try again?" That's where hope starts.

Hope doesn't begin when the check arrives in the mail and you celebrate because now you can pay your rent. Hope begins when you're at the altar praying and your pockets are empty.

Hope doesn't begin when your child comes home one day and says, "I'm sorry." Hope begins when you sit on the porch everyday scanning the horizon, looking for that prodigal to come home.

Where does hope begin in the Easter story? When the women got to the tomb? I don't think so. I believe it started much earlier, when they first woke up in that twilight of consciousness when they realize all the disappointment and awful things they've experienced were not just a bad dream. They really happened. And they are tempted to pull the cover over their heads and say, "I can't face life." But they don't! They put their feet on the floor. They arise, and they go out to face a difficult assignment. I believe that's where hope begins. In that moment of sheer determination when we choose not to give up and quit but arise and face life on life's terms and in doing so discover one day that God has provided a hope that is better than anything we could have imagined.

Hope begins not in the experience of a new thing but in the refusal to give up on the idea that something new and better is possible.

And what was that new possibility the women at the tomb discovered? “He is not here...” said the angel, “***He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you...***” Notice again the abstract quality of hope. There’s nothing concrete here. There is no experience of the risen Christ. No proof beyond an empty tomb. Just a hope that He has risen and has gone ahead of them; a hope that their present emptiness will lead to something rewarding. Now that is hope, when you believe your emptiness will become something meaningful.

A former pastor on the St. Luke’s staff a number of years ago, David Owen, just died two weeks ago. Though I didn’t know David I knew him through the people he influenced and I know him through his writings. David was like what Brennan Manning termed “a ragamuffin for Christ.” David’s own struggles and places of emptiness was where Christ best used him and even blessed him. Charlie Richardson in our church took a series of sermons David preached at North UM Church on living the Christian life and turned them into a booklet. In one sermon David tells how he came to be on staff at St. Luke’s.

It was 1978 and he had left the ministry and taken a job at a Mental Health Center but the salary was quite small. He was in the middle of a divorce and in his own words he had crashed and burned. Carver McGriff, the senior pastor at St. Luke’s at the time, invited him to teach a class at the church and offered him \$900 a year. Remember, this was 1978! He declined the offer telling Carver, “Thanks, but I think I’m through with church.”

Because he and his son had been living in a parsonage, they had to move out, so he looked for a home in the Meridian-Kessler area so his son could be near his friends. He had a hard time finding rental properties in that areas but he did find a house for sale that would have suited them ideally. He went through the loan process and was told he didn’t qualify. His annual income was \$900 short.

So what do you think he did? He called Carver McGriff and asked if that teaching spot was still open. As he said, “It was love of my son alone that got me back in ministry.” Now you might say that didn’t take much faith. He needed the money and remembered a conversation. But you see, what he discovered was that God had been going ahead of him in an off-chance encounter and the offering a position that provided exactly what he needed. It was an answer before he ever learned the problem. And that answer became a return to rewarding ministry and many of you St. Lukers benefited. You see, David ended up taking over the Singles Ministry where so many married couples in our church today met. Marriages and families and untold numbers of other people have been blessed because God used Carver to make an offer to David in the midst of his emptiness.

He’s not here. He has risen and is going ahead of you...He’s going ahead of you in your emptiness, in your defeat, in your problems, in your giving up on faith and even God.

Hope arises when we look back over our lives and understand how God had gone ahead of us.

But there is something even more specific about the angel's message to the women that first Easter morning that is critical not to miss. "He is not here...He has risen and is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see Him." This is what the women were told to tell the disciples. But why Galilee? Why do they have to go there to see Him?

Certainly Galilee was familiar territory. That's where they were from. Galilee represented normal life where they went to work, and worship, and community events, and out to eat with friends. In other words Galilee was what life looked like when everything got back to normal. There you *will* see Him.

But Galilee represents something more, even more important. Galilee was the place where they were called. That is where Jesus first met them and invited them to follow. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see Him.

As they return to their call, as they return to their mission, as they return to serving, and bringing hope and working to put things right in the world, there they will see Him.

Bishop NT Wright says that for skeptics of the resurrection, for those who say they can't believe because there is the burden of proof, there was no body, just an empty tomb, He says the burden of proof goes the other way too. Because if there was no resurrection how do you explain the beginning of the church? How do you explain why people afraid, uneducated, without much influence would set themselves on a mission that would eventually lead to the sacrifice of their own lives? If we say they did it because of an unsubstantiated hope, that is a stretch. There had to be more, and in the end, the conclusion that makes most sense is that they had experiences of the Risen Christ.

They experienced Christ as they returned to their mission. They didn't experience Him at the empty tomb. They didn't experience Him just sitting around waiting for inspiration. They experienced Him in carrying on his work. Easter hope gave them courage to do difficult things. And that is what it means for us. Easter gives us hope to face tough assignments.

I believe we water down the message of Easter when we turn into a fluffy hope that Christ rose simply so that we can go to heaven one day, and now all is right with the world. No it isn't. All is not right with the world! We've had 2021 Easters now and there are still deadly viruses, and crime, and poverty, and racism and inequities and injustices and all kinds of reasons to say surely this is not how God means for the world to be. Easter doesn't magically make those things disappear.

But what Easter does do is give people hope, hope to face those things, hope to believe that God is working in our world. God is out ahead of us and as we go God will use us to make a difference. **Easter gives us the courage to live now the way we believe things can be.** As Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno said, "Live in such a way that if there is no life after death it would be an injustice." (*NIDB, Luke, p349*)

The 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico will forever be remembered because of a gesture by two African American sprinters, John Carlos and Tommy Smith, from San Jose State University. On the final of the 200 Meters, Carlos shot out of the blocks but Smith overtook him and won the gold, setting a new world record. The third person on the platform was Peter Norman, an Australian who ran the race of his life and got the silver medal.

The two American runners were part of the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Their plan was to make a peaceful demonstration protesting the racism they faced routinely, like people throwing bananas at them on the track and black athletes not having access to housing back at their university.

Right before the medal ceremony they told the Australian what they planned to do. They asked Norman if he believe in human rights. He did. Australia was in the midst of their own racial struggles. Black people there wouldn't be granted the right to vote until the 1970's.

Then they asked Norman if he believed in God. He didn't hesitate in answering. He was a strong Christian with deep convictions. He not only encouraged their action, he said, "I'll stand with you."

As the American national anthem played, Smith and Carlos raised their fist as a sign of black power. Many Americans watching vowed never to forgive them. And both men paid a huge price for their action. On the stand, Peter Norman stood quietly as he looked ahead. But if you look close you'll notice something on his shirt. It was an Olympic Project for Human Rights button he borrowed from another American in his way to the platform. It was his way of standing with them.

But he, too, would pay a price. Back home in Australia he was vilified. He was rejected by all track and field associations, the only sports community he'd ever known. Though he qualified for the 72 Olympics in Munich he refused a place on the team. He was even denied participation in the 2000 Olympics hosted in his home country.

In 2006 Peter Norman died unexpectedly. Carlos and Smith flew to Australia for the funeral and they spoke. Carlos said, "There's no one in the nation of Australia who should be honored, recognized, appreciated more than Peter Norman for his humanitarian concerns, character, strength and willingness to be a sacrificial lamb."

It was not until 2012 that the Australian government apologized to the Norman family for ostracizing one of their heroes.

Just before his death, in 2003, San Jose State University did its own act of recompense. They built a statue depicting the act of protest from 1968 in honor of Smith and Carlos. But notice that the silver medal plinth is empty. No Peter Norman. Why did they leave him out? That was Peter Norman's idea. He suggested it. At the dedication he said he

hoped when people visited the statue they would stand on the empty platform and imagine themselves filling that spot.

Where is hope to found in our world? In people who imagine themselves filling an empty space. Hope is found in an empty tomb. He is not here. He has risen and is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.

Yes, I believe Jesus would say something like, "Once I'm through with the resurrection, you're the first person I'm coming to see."