

EASTER 2010
“THE VICTORY IS OURS!”
Luke 24:1-12; I Corinthians 15:51-57
Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

Did you notice something unusual about the Gospel lesson that was just read? Did you catch the fact that Luke starts the Easter story, not with an exclamation, but with a conjunction! English majors will find it fascinating that the 24th chapter of Luke, the climax and finale of the story of Jesus, starts out with the word “But.” Have you ever noticed that? I’d like to you take one of the pew Bibles and turn to p. 860 and look at the text once again. Teachers tell us that the word “but” cancels out everything in the sentence that comes before it. “I wanted to buy you a gift, but I didn’t have any money.” The intention was there, but the reality is, you didn’t get a gift! “I thought I’d be here on time, but my watch stopped.” Reality: I was late!

Apply that to Luke’s Gospel: In chapter 23, Luke concludes the story of the crucifixion with the very tender story of Jesus’ burial. Joseph of Arimathea asks for the body of Jesus, and Pilate agrees. He lays Jesus’ body in a tomb. The women prepare spices and ointments. They see where the body is laid. On the Sabbath, they obey the Ten Commandments and rest.

Then comes that fascinating little word “but.” “*But on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb.*” Luke is giving us a hint that something wonderful is about to happen. Forget about the burial! Forget about the spices! God has a different agenda! The women are on their way to anoint a dead body, but God has other plans! It is as if by starting his story with that little word, “but,” Luke is crossing out everything that has happened all week.

My friends, **that’s the message of Easter!** The resurrection does not leave us where we were yesterday, or where we are today, **but** always invites us forward into the future, God’s future. The message of Easter is that the death that was destroyed in Jesus will be destroyed in each and every one of us as well!

The Easter story is our story, my friends, for every week we re-enact the drama of pain and suffering, loss and defeat. Like the women, we come to church nursing our wounds, trying to put one foot ahead of the other, trying to get along as best we can. In Mark’s Gospel, the women are concerned about who will roll away the stone, for it is very large. Luke tells us simply that when the women get to the tomb, **the stone is already rolled away.** Their obstacles have been removed!

But, alas the women hardly notice that important fact, for the body of Jesus is gone! Two men, whom we presume to be angels, make a profound theological statement, “*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*” But the women still don’t seem to grasp what has happened. The angels then state the obvious: “*He is not here, but has risen.*” Emphasis on the second part of the sentence: **He has risen!** Remember that he told you that he would be crucified and on the third day rise again? Well, the women had been in denial, frankly. They didn’t want to face

Jesus' death, and quite honestly, they hadn't grasped this resurrection idea. But slowly, the news and the new reality began to sink in, and the women, the first witnesses to the resurrection, become the first evangelists, and tell the good news that Jesus is indeed risen from the dead!

But alas! The men disciples do not believe them, and consider their words to be "an idle tale!" Peter is from Missouri. He has to see for himself. Then that afternoon and evening, Jesus appears to the disciples on the Emmaus Road and in the breaking of the bread. Slowly, they come to belief. Slowly, the Easter story begins to sink in.

Through the years, the story of the Resurrection has been difficult to communicate effectively, and it takes most of us a long time, just as it did the first disciples, to grasp its implications for our lives. Of course, the idea that Jesus was raised from the dead is the cornerstone of our faith. In New Member Classes, we start with that. What we believe about Jesus is what defines our faith. None of the other tenets of our belief system are as important as our conviction that this Jesus, who lived and died, also rose again; and that God was present in Jesus in a fuller and more complete way than God is present in any of us. Wars have been fought and people have given their lives over the belief that Jesus was both God and man. As United Methodists, we may waffle on other things. But believing in Jesus is central to our faith.

We come to church on Easter to celebrate the fact that Jesus rose from the dead, and that because of his Easter victory, we, too, will have a new life with Christ when we die. But sometimes, to be honest, Jesus seems a bit remote from our present situation, and like the women (and men) of the first century, we would rather not think about death (especially our own.) We hear triumphant Easter music and the glorious words of Paul, "*O Death, where is your sting?*" but, it still hurts when someone we love dies, and, in our time of sorrow, sometimes these words are not much comfort. But if we just think of Easter as the promise of life after death, we will have missed the point! For Easter is primarily not about the next life and what happens when we die; it is about this life and how we can live a new and transformed life here and now, today.

That message is as hard for us to understand as it was for the first disciples, for it seems that we live in a Good Friday world, just as they did. We live in a world (need I remind you) where might more often than not makes right, where the best defense is usually a good offense, where good guys regularly finish last. We live in a world filled with suffering, disease, tragedy and death. The idea that death has been conquered, that the powers of evil have been overcome, doesn't quite square with the headlines of today's *Plain Dealer* or the police blotter in the *Sun* newspapers or the top stories most evenings on the television news. National scandals, international tragedies, and local horror stories aside, just our personal agendas make it hard to accept the Easter story that evil, darkness and death have been unconditionally conquered. Yes, most of us live in a Good Friday world, where darkness often seems to prevail over light.

Too often we allow Good Friday to define our faith as well. A dead Jesus makes no demands on us. A dead Jesus will never ask us to change from what is expedient to what is just, from what is illusion to what is true, from what is safe to what is abundant. Jesus is not content to leave us where we were yesterday, or where we are today, but is always calling us forward, and that can make us more than a little uncomfortable. Frankly, most of us have gotten used to the rut we're in, and we'd just as soon complain about our Good Friday world, and not make an effort to change.

Occasionally someone's experience will be so amazing, so compelling, that it brings inspiration to others. There are times when a resurrection experience speaks to us of the power of God, not just at the Garden tomb, but where we live our lives.

This morning I want to tell you about a young man who was diagnosed with a brain tumor when he was eleven years old. I know the story firsthand, because his grandmother is a faithful member of Church of the Saviour and asked me to pray for him. In fact, he was baptized right here at our altar. The young man, Luke, had extensive surgery. His cranium had to be cut open to remove the tumors. The surgery was successful, but slowly Luke began to lose his eyesight. More surgery was done, but his eyesight was not able to be restored. Knowing he was going blind, Luke took measures to adapt to his new reality.

What has happened since is little short of a miracle. No, God didn't give Luke his eyesight back. The miracle is that Luke has overcome his physical condition, and now as a freshman in high school is on the honor roll at his school. The other students can see; Luke is blind. He also runs cross country. Think about that. Luke is also on his school's wrestling team, is a drummer in a band and plays the bass guitar. The television show, *The Real Winning Edge*, did a story on Luke that was shown in cities across the United States a few months ago, although, regrettably, not in Cleveland. When I saw the show, I knew instantly that Luke's story was going to be part of my Easter message for 2010.

As I watched the [video](#), tears rolled down my cheeks. There was Luke --- wrestling and beating his opponents! There was Luke --- skateboarding down a flight of cement steps! And in the interview that follows, Luke tells the reporter that it is his faith in God that has kept him going and growing and moving forward toward a new life. When he took a fall at a cross country match, he got up quickly. "I can't let falling get in my way!" was his response. Today is Luke's fifteenth birthday. Happy birthday, Luke, from your friends at Church of the Saviour! You are an inspiration to all of us. You have grasped the true meaning of Easter.

Now I am aware that there are those in the congregation this morning who have recently received discouraging medical diagnoses, either for yourself or a member of your family. I can't tell you how many have lost jobs in our area and for how many these are days of economic stress and strain. Marital and family problems abound. The angel of death is always nearby, and rarely does a week go by without word that someone in our congregation has lost a close relative or friend. Many are facing uncertainty as we look toward the future.

We hear the Easter message this morning --- the music of the brass and organ, the words of the Gospel --- but we cannot deny any of these realities. For many of us it is a Good Friday world. The Easter message does not deny the reality of Good Friday. In fact, without Good Friday, there would be no need for Easter. But Easter proclaims that we do not have to stay on Calvary's Hill. We can move with Luke to the Garden Tomb and beyond, for the Lord is risen! Tears of grief can give way to tears of joy. Death is swallowed up in victory!

Evil conquered? Death overcome? The Christian answer is "yes!" To live in a world where evil holds no fear and death holds no threat requires a radical shift in understanding and in attitude. Courage must flourish where fear once dominated. We must no longer tremble before the powers of darkness and evil, for we know that their ultimate defeat is assured, and we can face them unafraid. What is there that can harm us? What do we have to fear? Yes, God gives us the power and the faith to live victorious lives. As the Apostle Paul says, "*Thanks be to God who gives us the victory!*"

A word of warning: We must not try to live the new life by ourselves. It is simply too difficult to go it alone. That's why God gives us the community of faith. I remember last Sunday when a young woman took the microphone during the sharing of prayer concerns at our 9:30 service and thanked God for the women of the Mom's Group for the meals they brought

after she and her husband had their second baby. “They’re all great cooks,” she said. “I want the recipes!”

The community of faith surrounds us when we are in need. The community of faith also celebrates with us when we are joyful. What a great wedding reception John Barkey and Thelma Tucker shared with the whole church two weeks ago. They started serving wedding cake at 8:30 Sunday morning, and kept serving until one o’clock in the afternoon. What a party! What a birthday party Marian Barnes had last Sunday! She shared her birthday with the whole congregation! Who’s next? We have 52 Sundays, and every one of them is supposed to be a “little Easter,” a day of joy and festivities as we celebrate the victory of God’s love!

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was a leader in the movement to overcome apartheid in South Africa and one of the leading spokespersons for the Christian faith in our time. I love the quote that I put in the bulletin this morning for you to take home and remember: “*Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death. And victory is ours through Him who loved us.*” Yes, **the victory is ours**. Because of Easter, we can live a victorious life, today and every day!

Prayer: O God, we are all too aware that most of us live in a Good Friday world most of the time. Let us hear the message of hope and transformation that Easter brings, and help us to live Easter this day and every day. Amen.