

SERMON: Easter: What Are We Celebrating?
 SCRIPTURE: John 20: 19-20; Revelation 21:1-5
 SPEAKER: Tom Campbell-Schmitt
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Several years ago I was walking in our neighborhood and noticed all kinds of cars on the street in front of someone's home. There were balloons and streamers decorating the outside of the house. I heard festive music being piped over some speakers and since I knew the family who lived there (and the front door was wide open!) I decide to invite myself in. I gravitated to the punch bowl and began sipping my drink but admittedly feeling a little awkward. So I leaned over to someone next to me and asked, "Can you tell me – what are we're celebrating?" And it turned out that someone was having one of those milestone birthdays.

Well, as I was thinking about that the thought occurred to me that the whole world is celebrating today. Families are coloring eggs and hiding them and looking for them. Easter brunches are a big deal. There's festive food at the table. But why, what's the purpose? And of course we sort of know the purpose in general terms. But today what we want to do is focus our attention on this question: What does Easter really mean? What is the significance of this story for our lives today? Is it just about the season of spring and the new life that's popping up around us, or is there more to it than that? That's what I want to help us reflect on and think about as we gather here today.

I want to begin by just reminding you of the basic story that leads up to Easter. Because you can't really celebrate Easter, you can't feel the real joy of this day, unless you felt the sorrow and the tragedy leading up to it. And so I remind you that in his 33rd year of life on this earth Jesus of Nazareth whom the disciples believed was the Messiah – the One promised of old by God who would free the people and rule over them with love and justice – this Jesus was arrested. It was Thursday night. He was hauled into a religious courtroom on a charge of blasphemy – at least for the religious people it was blasphemy – because he claimed to be the son of God. For the political types, the Romans, he was charged with sedition and insurrection – because he claimed to be a king. And Jesus was tried late that night; he was found guilty, and (image) he was taken out to be prepared to be crucified – a very brutal form of capital punishment.

We remember on that day the terrible things that happened: the way Jesus was abused and humiliated and finally nailed to the cross. And we can only imagine so far back in time – now over two thousand years later – what those who loved him and believed in him experienced as they stood by and watched as his broken body was hoisted high into the air on that cross and Jesus spoke his final words. Numb with pain, his followers lived the next day in shock and horror. On

Saturday they could not have imagined really what the future would hold for them. Everything seemed dark and hopeless.

If you have ever been with someone when they have been stung by a sudden tragedy; you sat in the hospital room or with them in their home, you know that there are no words to say. People sit in silence and you see the far-away stares. People bring food but no one wants to eat. This is what the disciples were experiencing on that Saturday. Early on the first day of the week which you will remember was Sunday, before the daylight had even come up, the women ran to the tomb. They went to finish their burial preparations. They had hastily laid the body of Jesus in the tomb because the Sabbath was coming on Friday night when the sun went down no one was supposed to touch a dead body once the Sabbath came. And so Jesus' body had been quickly buried so it wouldn't be exposed to the elements. But now it was time to go back and to finish the work that had been started.

And so they were wondering who would roll the stone away when they approached the tomb. And then they saw it: to their horror the stone was already rolled away. They ran to the entrance and there was no body lying inside and they wondered who stole the body of Jesus? Who was still trying to humiliate him even in death? Then they saw a young man who spoke to them; and he gave them this message (the Easter message that rings down through the centuries). He said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? Jesus is not here. He is risen just as he said."

And over the next few hours the gospels tell us that Jesus appeared first to the women and then as we heard earlier he appeared to the disciples as they were in hiding Sunday evening, Easter evening. And after he appeared to them he appeared to some of the other disciples and Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, that Jesus appeared to as many as five hundred other people, and finally he appeared in a vision to the apostle Paul. They had seen the Lord. He was risen from the grave. It's almost impossible for us to wrap our minds around the joy, the hope, the exuberance and the peace that this event brought to those who were there – especially when you think about what they had experience earlier that weekend. But what we know today is that this event continues to effect us, it continues to transform the lives of people everywhere; it continues to give us hope. And that's what we want to think about today.

Now I want to recognize that this is a hard thing to believe. We just have to be honest about that. It's difficult to believe in the resurrection. It was difficult for the first followers of Jesus to believe. When the women arrived at the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away their first response was not to sing the Hallelujah Chorus. No, it was to say "Someone has stolen his body." When they had heard from the angel that Jesus was risen and they went to tell the disciples Jesus had risen Peter didn't say, "Praise the Lord! Christ is risen!" He said, "You must be out of your mind!" When Jesus came to visit the disciples Thomas wasn't

with them and so when he returned they said, “Thomas, we have seen the Lord! He is risen from the grave!”

And what did Thomas say? He didn’t say, “I knew it. I just knew he would rise!” Instead he said, “I won’t believe it unless I touch him.” This is not an easy story to believe in. But if we call ourselves Christians, it’s a story we need to believe. It needs to make sense to us. After all, the historic affirmation of the Christian church – the Apostle’s Creed – that we recite on a regular basis says, “The third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” The resurrection of Jesus lies at the very core of our faith. And I believe Christ will help us come to know his living presence in our own experience if we are willing to trust him and walk with him.

Recently I’ve been reading a book just published by biblical scholar N.T. Wright. It’s titled “*Surprised By Hope – Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church.*” Wright argues that most people – many Christians among them – have gotten the Easter message wrong. There are some who find the story so incredible they just can’t believe it. And I appreciate their doubt and their skepticism – remember Thomas wasn’t afraid to ask the hard questions, so why shouldn’t we?

One skeptic says that the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection is just a repackaging of the old dying and rising God-myth found in some ancient cultures. And if you take the time to study this argument you find that the myths are really not very parallel with the Gospel accounts. Others – Christians among them – say they can’t believe in such a supernatural thing as a bodily resurrection so they prefer to think of it more metaphorically. The followers of Jesus, as disappointed as they were by the death of their leader, sucked it up and overcame adversity. They wanted to believe so badly that out of this tragedy a new community of faith began. It continues today as the Christian Church.

But N. T. Wright argues convincingly, “What we believe about the bodily resurrection of Jesus and about life after death directly affects what we believe about life before death. For if God intends to renew the whole creation – which is what we pray when we say “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” – and if this has already begun in Jesus’ resurrection – The church cannot stop at “saving souls” but must work to bring about God’s kingdom on earth, bringing healing and hope in the present life – not just the future – but right now.” (N.T. Wright)

Every spring when the daffodils and tulips and the dogwood and magnolia trees are all in bloom we reemerge from the death of winter into the season of new life – because winter is not the final word. But the Christian gospel is about more than just the end of winter; it is about a God who is more powerful than nature itself – because this God created nature as well as you and me. And there is one word that summarizes the hope we have as Christians. That word is resurrection.

Resurrection begins with the story of Jesus. He came into our situation, into our struggle. He lived his life, he taught us about his daddy and the reign of God

in heaven and on earth (which means the air that is all around us), he suffered and died on a cross, and he rose from the grave. And far from being an ancient myth, the friends of Jesus who had watched him suffer and die testified that they had seen him raised from the grave. The apostle Paul who lived ten, twenty years later, said he had seen the living Christ and we know that his own life was utterly and completely transformed because of it. The event of Christ's rising has captured the longings of every human heart. We need to know that even in the face of the darkest circumstances there is still hope; that in the face of death there is the sure and certain hope of life after death, and life before death. Let me say more of what I mean by that.

This week's *Newsweek* magazine has a powerful story about what is now taking place in Rwanda. This April marks the fifteenth anniversary of the terrible genocide that swept through that tiny nation. In the words of the writer, "an orgy of slaughter and cruelty so extreme that it defied description or understanding ... Victims knew their attackers, and attackers knew their victims. This small, beautiful country is like one huge extended family." Our own Beatrice Mujawimana managed to escape that holocaust but her parents along with ten of her brothers and sisters were not so lucky. They died in the carnage in part because her mother was a Tutsi and her father was a Hutu – which meant they were being attacked from both sides.

Like Beatrice, John Rucyahana was able to survive the genocide. In 1996, John, who is now an Anglican Bishop, packed up his family (who were living in Uganda at the time) and returned to the land of his birth, in his words, "to preach hope standing on a pile of bones." One of his first tasks was to build a boarding school for the many orphans whose parents had died. The school has become one of the best in the country. It is called Sonrise, which as Rucyahana explains, "means the Son of God rises into the misery, into our darkness." But the Bishop is reaching out to perpetrators as well as victims. His prison ministry encourages those who participated in the genocide to accept responsibility and repent. He has built reconciliation villages whose primary purpose is to bring victims and perpetrators together. One woman who had been raped and is now raising that child said, "In the beginning it was very difficult, but now I have learned to forgive."

John Rucyahana and others are rebuilding a nation out of the ashes. He says, "If your faith is strong, you can even embrace the people who killed your children, destroyed your homes, and left you traumatized and afraid. I think God is using this, the humility, the brokenness, the ashes, to set an example of reconciliation for other nations. If Rwanda can recover from this ... other nations can recover."

Every one of us in this room will experience seasons of challenge and struggle. We will have moments of despair that feel like dark cold winter.

And across the course of our lives we experience these seasons as well. From childhood to adulthood we walk through the seasons of life – and finally its winter. When you're little you look forward to the passing of time; when you're older you begin to dread it. Some of you in this church have been in fellowship groups (called Mariner ships) for practically your whole adult life. You've watch each other age and go through seasons of challenge. You've watched your children grow up and leave the nest. And part of what you and I recognize is that in the years to come somebody in our circle of friends is going to get cancer, somebody is going to die younger than what any of us would have anticipated, somebody's going to experience a tragedy with their children, and one by one we're going to say goodbye to each other, because that's how the seasons of life pass by for us all.

All of which point us once more to the meaning of Easter: Christians believe that death and darkness and defeat do not have the final word. So where does our hope come from? Does it come from wishful thinking? From our lucky stars? Or does it come from somewhere else? For those of us who are Christians, our hope comes from Jesus Christ. There is a God in the heavens who loves us and calls us by name. There is a God who came and suffered on our behalf and walks with us through our pain. There is a risen Christ who took on himself the sins of the world and in the end defeated the grave, triumphed over evil and tragedy, and stood among his disciples on the first Easter evening. He looked at them in that dark room where they had been hiding for fear of being found out and said to them, "Peace I give to you." And they were filled will joy.

That's the message of Easter. Easter is about resurrection and resurrection is all about hope. Paul said in Colossians 3, "You have been raised with Christ." That's an interesting way of expressing it. He's talking about a present reality – not something out there in the distant future when you die. The resurrection of Christ has an immediate effect on us, not after we die, but now, today, in this very moment.

There are times when we have an insight that changes the way we see everything around us. Easter is one of those times. Here is what Paul said, if Easter is true then "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." The word of Easter is that Christ wants to enfold each one of us has in his loving embrace. And once he has us he will not let us go. Jurgen Moltmann captured the meaning of Easter well when he said, "Since the earliest times Christians have celebrated Easter by laughing and dancing in the face of death. By mocking hell and making the Lords of this world sound so absurd. Easter is God's protest against death."

This is what Easter means to me. When I'm worried for my family I find peace because I remember: *Christ is risen*. When I preach at the funeral of a friend or ponder my own death, I remember: *Christ is risen*. When God prompts me to tackle some of the tough problems and injustices in our society and the world around us, I remember: *Christ is risen*. So if you're here today and you're

not sure that you have that hope, I'd like to invite you to say, "Jesus, I want to follow you. I want the hope of Easter; I want the hope of your resurrection, in my life."