

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
Easter Sunday – 4.12.09
Rev. T. Michael Rock – Pastor and Teacher

Sermon Texts: acts 10:34-43 and Mark 16:1-8
Sermon Title: “The Hope of Emptiness”

(open with prayer)

When I think of Easter, words like awe, Mystery and wonder are the first ones that come to mind. It becomes clear on Easter morning how much we don't know. The prayer I focus on during times of not knowing comes from Franciscan Monk, Thomas Merton and it goes like this:

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

As members of Robbinsdale United Church of Christ built the covenant that is hanging over your heads, we struggled with who we were, how we would be known, and what in fact we believed. Above you are statements of hope and fear, desire and doubt. They are the collective works of young and old in response to the promises God has made and continues to make in this covenant relationship. I have read them all and each offers the beginning to understanding, but none of them pretends to understand fully. They have traveled with the church through lent and will remain for several weeks to come

precisely because they are a testimony to some things we know and many things we don't know, but we hope and pray that our desire to please God, does in fact please God.

So, as we are watched over by our various levels of understanding and faith we enter into the lives of the women who discovered the empty tomb. These three women, fulfilling their obligation to anoint the body of their beloved come with concern, not over the promise of Jesus to be resurrected, but over who would roll the stone away. After being with family after family who have been stung with the sadness and grief of death, there is almost always a mixed emotion in the events of death, burial and ritual. Most folks experience in the midst of their sadness moments of relief, and many feel guilty about it even though it is perfectly normal. Relief that pain is ended, relief that sorrow and worry are gone, and relief that the promises and commitments of time and energy get a little bit of rest. Relief is a perfectly normal part of the process of grief, so as these women enter the place where Jesus lay, I can easily imagine both their sadness and their relief. Yes, they have lost one whom they loved, but they also lost a sense of hope and promise. Their grief is real. They have also probably felt a little sense of rest from the journey of Jesus. Discipleship is hard. The ministry of loving and forgiving was not an easy one. The constant questions and confrontations about how to living as peacemakers and reconcilers were probably only taken on because Jesus was right there showing folks the way. Left alone with Jesus gone, the burden of this way of living was likely lifted when Jesus was nailed to that cross. This sense of relief from that burden was likely mixed with the sadness of those women who came and found an empty tomb.

All we know in this story is that they were amazed and left in fear. For me, looking through their eyes there is clarity. Amazement is there to look into an empty tomb to find an angel and a white cloth and to remember the words of Jesus that he would rise again. Fear is there because know they had to go back and actually follow through with their journey of discipleship. When they saw the empty tomb, they realized that they did indeed have to love and forgive. They did have to make peace, include everyone, speak the truth, confront evil, and love everyone, no exceptions. When faced with Easter every year as the birds sing, flowers bloom, sun warms, and hope ascends, I believe that amazement and fear are pretty normal responses to these claims. IT is also why the text ends their. The church has tried

to add endings to the gospel over the years, but none of those endings pack the truth and power of the empty tomb.

In fact, the empty tomb is wonderful symbol to carry us through life. It is a reminder of how little we know about life and death. It is a reminder of how to let go of our need to know and to just live. The empty tomb reminded those amazing women of their responsibility to live lives of healing and reconciliation and love. The empty tomb reminds me of that as well. It becomes the central story of the early church and our own lives, whenever someone asks about what we believe in or the proofs of faith, we can always remember the empty tomb. The disciples didn't pin their story on the resurrection bodily or not. They didn't tell the story of Jesus based on his being human or divine. It didn't matter if he was born of a virgin or was raised from the dead. The symbols for the early church were not crosses or heavenly angels. The symbols for the early church were loaves and fishes. The movement that was begun by those women who ran away with fear was to serve and love. The first sermons by Peter and John were about forgiveness and reconciliation. On this Easter Day, I want to let you know that it doesn't matter if you believe in the resurrection. It doesn't matter if you believe Jesus was human or divine. It doesn't even matter that you believe at all.

What matters is how you live. What matters is how you love. What matters is that hope and springtime and easter are all related. They are causes to be amazed and they reminders to get up and tend to our lives. There is hope in the empty tomb and that hope inspires all of us to live.

Take Up Your Life

Oh thou Easter God,
on the far side
of all the worst
we can do,
of all the worst
that can come to us:
waving from a high place
you seem to call,

"Come, then,
you also,

why not you also?
What keeps you
from the life of you?
Grief? Sadness?
Fear? Hopelessness?
Here I am
on the other side,
where Life is.
where your life is!
Take but a step forward
and you are on the way.

Rise up,
from your fear to your feet.
This is the day. This is the time.
You are the one; there is no other.

I will move the stone
and there will be light.
Only step toward me and I,
I will take a step toward you.
We will meet
in the light."

Oh thou ingenious God,
resurrection is thy breathing out -
breath, wind, spirit, life and light.
Resurrection
is thy clearest,
dearest
affirmation of creation
and us within it.
There is not death enough
to keep us down,
and is there a stone
that is not sand in the making?
"Live!"
is your plainest
and most ancient word ...
the one you spoke

before the very Beginning...
"Take up your life
and live!"

by Joseph H. Gilmore
(from *Eternity's Dance With Time*)

May the songs of the risen Christ and the empty tomb always remind us to live and love. AMEN.