



Sunday, April 21, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown  
SERMON  
EASTER SUNDAY  
COURAGEOUS ENDURANCE

**INTRODUCTION:**

Year after year, for thousands of years, Christians hear this amazing story about resurrection. Somehow Easter endures across the ages. Somehow, the idea that even death is overcome by the power of God's love and faithfulness, can resuscitate even the most anemic hope. In our darkest hour, hope lives!

Yet, over the years, the story can lose its deep resonance. We get so familiar with the text, that we no longer are astonished by the empty tomb and its implications for our lives today.

So, this morning, I want to invite you to hear this story again with fresh ears. As I slowly read from the Gospel of John, imagine that you have never heard this before. Ask yourself which characters do you identify most with. Where are you standing in the scene? What emotions are evoked as the story is told? What puzzles you about it and why?

There is a deep, enduring truth contained within this text that resonates beyond whether or not you think it actually happened or not. What does this story mean to you and how might it contain the power to transform lives from generation to generation?

Hear this reading from the Gospel of John

Chapter 20 verses 1 through 18.



**John 20:1-18**

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." So, Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

The Word of God for the people of God.



Were you able to do it? Could you hear this story as if for the first time, or at least see it through a different lens? What is the deep, enduring truth contained within this text? Is there any resonance for you that transcends beyond whether or not you think it actually happened?

For those of us who do believe it actually happened, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus frames our entire worldview. It confirms the continual cosmic pattern that we see bursting out all around us. When the flowers and leaves wither and fall from the gardens and trees in November, we know that the cold dark winter is upon us, yet, always new life is sure to follow. As it is this very day, new life springs forth from what looked completely and utterly lifeless in the frozen death of winter. For Christians, the entire meaning of life is wrapped up in a story about this continually repeated cycle of life, death and resurrection.

In fact, I see God affirmed every day in our physical universe. Critical clues about reality is revealed in the patterns of physical matter. The ever-expanding laws of science continually give us unprecedented and invaluable insight into an invisible and mysterious Spiritual reality; a reality that is completely awesome and totally amazing. Who here today has never been caught up in the awe, beauty and mystery of the natural world? Rabbi Abraham Heschel calls it "radical amazement". He says we should "get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal. ..." To be spiritual," he says, "is to be amazed."

Generally, amazement happens when we least expect it. Like Mary weeping at the empty tomb, we might think all is lost. Our grief is too much to bear, our loss is too great to console, our broken dreams and expectations can never be restored. The misguided mistakes that have defined our life cannot possibly be redeemed. But this is exactly the point where the miracle happens. From out of the cold, dark depths of disorientation, despair and death we confront our powerlessness and surrender to an amazing new reality. Jesus shows us, that on the far side of suffering, God is always transforming the world. Jesus shows us that God can even transform you. As he stood before Mary, alive and still bleeding from the painful wounds, he gave her this insistent and amazing hope. No matter what happens in our life or death, no matter what disappointment you must endure, in the end, God will always resurrect and redeem. God will overcome anything, even the worst tragedy, through the phenomenal power of love.

The resurrection story of Jesus is the story where we discover that love will always overcome the most horrible injustice, wickedness and violence that the world can throw. This Easter story is what gives us the courage and humility to endure all suffering, face every fear and release all our hopes and dreams. Resurrection means that one day all the haunting pain and unresolved grief will be transformed into new life. In resurrection we find the courage to confront our weakness and admit our vulnerability, face the truth, change course, take action and trust in the awesome power of God. Resurrection is the unexpected stunned amazement that comes when we can see hope even through our tears.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the essential archetypical story of the repetitive story of life, death and resurrection. It is about a love so great that it willingly agrees to suffer for the sake of the world, and in doing so is transformed and made whole.

In times like this, it is easy to think that the death-dealing powers are winning, but Easter teaches us that ultimately God is always victorious over the powers of hate, self-interested oppression and even death. Maybe you think that your guilt is too great for God to forgive, but Easter teaches us that God never gives up on us and yearns to liberate all humanity from shame, reconciling us to God and each other. If you are caught in a web of despair or trapped in a sea of pain and anguish – hear this story! You are not alone: Jesus suffers with you in solidarity. And most of all, Easter means you too will know resurrection.

People of God, this is our amazing and awesome story. This is the good news of the Gospel. When we least expect it, through our struggles, doubt and skepticism, God is forever reaching out, even to the point of death, and emerges still, alive, transformed and resurrected into a victorious new life. Easter shows us that even

the bloody horror of the cross is transformed into a tree of life! That is astounding!

Whatever your circumstances are, no matter what you believe actually happened, the truth of this story is one of relentless hope that can grow into the very condition of your soul. The Easter story gives birth to a courageous endurance even in these farcical times. As long as Easter endures, so will courage, kindness, and the triumph of love. It's up to us to keep the story going. Let's live it every day and, why not tell it again next year! Amen?