

THE FINAL TRIUMPH

***A sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 16, 2017
based on the story of Easter, Mark 16:1-8***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross—How the Cross of Christ Can Save You.” If you are interested in earlier installments of the series, you’ll find information in this morning’s bulletin about how you can access videos or podcasts of previous messages. Let us begin with a moment of prayer

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Are you feeling happy this morning? You should be, right? It’s Easter! There are Easter bunnies and flowers and happy songs in worship. But maybe you are not feeling it, because you or loved ones are dealing with some serious trouble. Or maybe you have read the news lately, full of wrenching stories about chemical weapons in Syria and bombings of Coptic churches in Egypt. There is so much that can truly disturb us in life. Then it is helpful to keep in mind that Easter is a part of a much larger gospel story—a story that includes a cross—and the whole story contains a good deal of trouble and anguish.

This month Adam Alderson, who is on our church staff, is playing the role of Caiaphas in the Weathervane theater’s production of Jesus Christ Superstar. A couple weeks ago, Adam’s family was preparing to go see a run-through of the show, and planned to take along Adam and Patti’s little son, Alex. Patti’s mother was talking to Alex beforehand and explained that they would be going to this show that was all about Jesus, but they would probably not be staying for the end. Little Alex asked why not, and his grandmother explained that the end of the show had some really rough moments. Alex said, “Grandma, I can handle it. I’m a Christian. I know that he dies.”

As Christians, we can face the rough places in life squarely, because Jesus meets the troubles of life head on. This is one of the most important aspects of the gospel story—it is a story that does not try to put an upbeat spin on things; rather it is the account of how Jesus enters into a world full of wrong and pain, and as he does so, he does not try to avoid or smooth over our human situation, but he squarely confronts our human problem, with a message that is true, and with actions that genuinely and profoundly deal with our human trouble.

This sort of straightforward approach is often sadly lacking in our world today—as for example in the case of that poor United airlines passenger this past week, who, although he had booked his ticket and paid for his flight, was forcibly yanked off the plane and beaten up in the process, because the airline wanted to make room for some employees on the flight. You would have thought that United’s CEO, when confronted by the story, would have admitted the wrong and taken immediate decisive action to set things right. Dismay erupted across the country when instead of that he defended what happened, glossed it over, and said that the passenger and three others who were forced off the plane were “re-accommodated.” The storm of protests included a post by

Cleveland Browns offensive lineman Joe Thomas, who remarked, “I had to re-accommodate someone once.” (*a game photo was shown that Joe Thomas posted—of him absolutely clobbering another football player*) Faced with criticism, United still refused to admit any wrongdoing and pointed out that the contract of carriage—the fine print that no one reads when buying an airline ticket—allows airlines to bump paying passengers off a flight. But when an injustice is done, it does not help to say, “But it was all perfectly legal.” Finally, with the stock price collapsing, the CEO issued a belated apology. When it comes to the sins of humanity, we long for someone who will deal honestly with things and who will stand clearly for what is right.

This is precisely what Jesus does, with regard to the sins of the whole world. Though Jesus is himself without sin, he enters into a world that is full of wrong, where he speaks the truth, and he takes decisive action to set things right. He does by going to the cross. The story of the cross is a story that leads to Easter, but you don’t get to Easter without the cross.

Sometimes people wonder why the cross was necessary. It is necessary because when the world as a whole is so off kilter, something needs to happen to set things aright. So what can God do to put the world right? God could tell people how they ought to live, in order to live rightly; but of course, God does exactly that, in the ten commandments, and the rest of the Old Testament, and yet people routinely forget God and ignore God and engage in all sorts of very negative actions. So perhaps God should punish those people who turn from God and are guilty of wrongdoing. But since we are all imperfect and we all fall short of God’s call, we would all end up in punishment. So perhaps God could forgive and choose to overlook wrongs that are done. But how would that be an adequate response to the serious wrongs that we see in the world? When terrorists slaughter Palm Sunday worshippers in Egypt, can God simply say, “Oh well. All is forgiven. No big deal”? Something decisive needs to happen that will deal with sin and that at the same time will provide a way for the redemption of a sinful humanity.

This is precisely what unfolds on the cross. Through the course of this sermon series, we have considered the full scope of what Jesus does on the cross, and we have noted that his work on the cross can be visualized by thinking of the different “points” of the cross, with each arm or beam of the cross representing a different aspect of what happens on the cross.

We have seen that the cross is, first of all, connection—Jesus on the cross fully joins in our human condition; he shares in our human brokenness and our suffering. If you are undergoing pain or disappointment or regret or sorrow in your personal life, or if you consider with sadness the tragedy and injustice in the world at large, you can lift your eyes to the cross and know that we are not alone, for Christ has connected himself fully with us.

Furthermore, Jesus on the cross deals with our human wrongdoing in the one redemptive way possible. We have already noted that wrongdoing calls for punishment, but if divine punishment were to come for all the wrongs in human beings, we would each

be in serious trouble; yet at the same time if God were to simply overlook wrongdoing nothing would be resolved. So we are in an apparently irresolvable situation. Jesus provides the answer by offering his life as a sacrifice for us. Having united himself with us, Jesus takes all the punishment that is due for all the wrongs of the world onto himself, so that we can be forgiven. Thus sin is dealt with squarely—it is not overlooked—but a way is created by which we, though we are guilty, can be forgiven, and forgiven completely; we can be set free from sin, and enabled to live in the mercy of God.

Jesus goes still further. The fundamental nature of sin is not simply that human beings have done wrongs, but we have spiritually alienated ourselves from God. The core of sin is the spiritual division that exists between ourselves and the Almighty. Jesus overcomes that gap between humanity and God by offering up his life as a perfect offering on our behalf, offsetting the lack in all humanity, and so he opens the way for each of us to be lifted out of our alienation back into fellowship with God.

Jesus' whole action on the cross is thus a complete revelation of the love of God for us. It is one thing to say that God loves you; but actions of course speak far louder than words, and as Jesus observed, "there is no greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) In the cross we see, with perfect clarity, how much God loves us, and we are moved then to treat others, not with hatred or division, but with love.

So on the cross Jesus engages himself directly with all the wrong of the world, and as he atones for our sin, and reconciles us to God, and fills us with God's grace, he opens the way to real victory over the power of evil. It is a victory that begins to unfold on the cross; and then the story comes to the final triumph on Easter.

The climax comes in Jesus' confrontation with our ultimate human problem of death. Once again the Biblical Word speaks the truth about our human situation. Sometimes people want to imagine that somehow, no matter what, our spirits are going to float off after death into some happy land. But the Bible is honest about our circumstances. We are mortal, and when in our sinfulness we have separated ourselves from God, we are in trouble, because God is the only source of life. We are not going anywhere positive after death, unless something should dramatically change our situation. Something decisive has to happen to open the way for us into a new future beyond death.

This is exactly what happens through the cross and resurrection. The Bible says that "the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23) So Jesus, having united himself with a sinful humanity, enters into death. But having atoned for our sin on the cross, Jesus breaks the power of death. He rises from the dead, and so opens the way for us into new and eternal life. As Paul goes on to say in Romans, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

The whole story of the cross and resurrection is thus God's action to put humanity onto a whole new course. We are not stuck in sin and trouble and death; but through Christ we can be put right with God, we can be set free to live in the power of God's Spirit,

with Christ we can begin to set the whole world aright, and we can look forward to an eternal promise. All that is offered to us, as Paul says, as a gift. We are invited to receive that gift in faith, in order that the transforming grace of Christ can flow in and through us.

So if you are struggling right now with trouble in life or with the trouble that you see in the world, the gospel story changes everything, because this is the story of how Christ enters directly into our troubled condition and creates a new future. In the depths of difficulty, you can look to the cross and know that Christ has joined with you, and is at work with saving power. And then you can look at Easter and know that the cross is not the end of the story. God is leading us toward a bright future.

But what if we are not there yet, if we still are confronting lots of trouble? We can put our trust in Christ, and even if we seem to be seeing no progress, we can find in Christ a genuine and sure hope; and so, as Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “As we hope for what we do not yet see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:25)

Some of you may have been following the scenario of April the giraffe—the expectant mother giraffe in a zoo in upstate New York whose pregnancy has been watched by millions of people as it has been livestreamed since February. They started livestreaming in February because they thought April might give birth at any time. What actually happened day after day was nothing. People kept watching and waiting, and waiting. There began to be speculation in the internet that it was all a hoax. Some suggested that it was the ultimate April Fool’s joke. There’s a parallel here with how people sometimes view the gospel story. People will say that the whole story of Jesus giving his life for us on the cross and rising from the dead is just a hoax and a joke, because new life does not appear to be arriving in this world—there is so much trouble in the world at large and in our own experience.

Well, yesterday morning, April gave birth. It was no hoax and no joke, but very real. New life burst forth.

Everything about the gospel story is no hoax and no joke. Jesus enters into very real suffering and a very real death; and then on Easter morning, what they find is a very real empty tomb. New life bursts forth. That life can take hold in us as we open ourselves to the saving power of Christ. We may still struggle with lengthy challenges and slow progress, we may have to wait at times with patience; but as we put our faith in Christ, we can experience his renewing grace, we can find real hope in him, and we can share in the new and eternal life that he brings forth on Easter.