

Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017 – “An Easter World”

The Resurrection of our Lord, Year A – Texts: John 20:1-18

Westwood First Presbyterian Church

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Have you ever asked yourself the question: “What kind of world is this?” Maybe it happened while experiencing something beautiful; a work of art, a new born baby. Maybe something in nature; a forest, a mountain. Maybe it was on a spring morning as we’ve had lately. You look around and see new life, new life coming up through ground that seemed so cold and dead just a few short months ago.

“What kind of world is this?” Sadly, this question is probably asked most often when the world seems most brutal, cruel and sad. When the world is plunged into war, when people suffer from terrible acts of violence and terrorism, when they see the tragic effects of natural disaster or act of terrorism, when the innocent suffer and die, when they lose someone they love, when their lives change in ways they hadn’t counted on. Especially at these times, we may ask the question: “What kind of world is this?” The answer can be elusive. It seems to me that the answer may lie in one’s perspective.

Now, on the day Jesus was brutally tortured, humiliated, crucified between two thieves, the day Jesus died on that cross, the question: “What kind of world is this?” seemed to have a simple answer. The answer was, “The worst kind of world!” It was a “Good Friday kind of world!” The kind of world where pain and suffering seem to be all there is, where the bad guys seem to have their way, where fear and doubt shout down hope, where hatred runs roughshod over love. A kind of world where the evil seems to win. This is the Good Friday world in which we find Mary Magdalene as she goes to the tomb of Jesus that Third Day, early in the morning. Mary is suffering in a Good Friday world as she cries bitter tears of sadness for Jesus. She (along with two other Mary’s – one being Jesus’ mother) had seen Jesus after His experience of being tortured and mocked. She’d witnessed His struggle carrying that cross all the way to the “Place of the Skull.” She’d felt each blow of the hammer in the very depths of her being as Jesus was nailed to the cross. She’d seen Jesus – through her tears – suffer the agony of a brutal execution. She heard His final words – “It is finished” – and her heart broke into a thousand pieces. Mary’s still living in that Good Friday world. A world where, after Jesus’ death, someone took Jesus’ body down from the cross and carried it to a tomb just in time for the beginning of Sabbath. After Sabbath, we find Mary back at the tomb, still living in that Good Friday world where her hope had been dashed to pieces the moment Jesus took His last breath. That Good Friday world where life appeared to succumb to death. It was a world that would seem get worse. Mary approaches the tomb. She arrives and sees, to her horror, that it is wide open. The huge, heavy stone that’d blocked the entrance had been rolled away.

In her shock and despair Mary runs to tell the disciples. They are also living in that Good Friday world. They’d closed themselves away behind locked doors for fear of their lives because the people that had arrested and crucified and killed Jesus were searching for them too. They hear Mary’s news, and run to the open tomb. One after the other they nervously look inside. Once there, as their eyes get accustomed to the darkness, they see that the body of Jesus is gone. Then they suddenly begin to realize what Jesus had told them; everything about His dying and rising again on the Third Day. It begins to dawn on them that it was true – all of it! They see and believe! They return to the other disciples in awe and wonder with renewed faith bursting their hearts and souls!

They were emerging from the Good Friday world to begin living in the Easter World! But poor Mary, she was alone again, still existing in that Good Friday world. But then, suddenly, her world is changed, changed forever, changed for the better. Mary meets the Risen Christ. She's actually, in John's gospel, the first person to see Him! When she does she begins to realize that hope is stronger than fear, that love is stronger than hate, that faith is stronger than doubt, that life is stronger than death. All because of God's loving, saving work in Jesus! Now, Mary too lives in the Easter World, leaving the Good Friday world far behind, becoming a quickly fading memory. She lives reflecting Jesus' Resurrection Light, refusing to dwell in the darkness of Good Friday. Her eyes have been opened. Her life – her world, **everything** has been changed forever.

This is the world in which Jesus invites us to live. Indeed, this is the world in which He **calls** us to live, in the same faith in which He calls us to **follow** Him. Is it difficult to live in the Easter World? Sure. Will there be days full of things like, grief, anxiety, and fear? Uh huh. Will there be times when the sadness, pain and doubt of the Good Friday world threaten to overwhelm us? Yep. I mean, we don't deny the realities of the world we live in. Things seem, in human terms, pretty darn hopeless. The problems are real... Yeah, but so is the Resurrection! And in it the hope that comes from confidence that God's working in the world and in us to bring Easter realities to Good Friday problems. The Easter message is that we live in an Easter World. And, as Pope John Paul II said: "We do not abandon ourselves to despair. We are the Easter people and hallelujah is our song." That sounds too happy, too clichéd, too absurd in the face of atrocity, pain, death, and tragedy. C'mon, we can't just slap a smile on and go about our day. But when you think about it – and let it sink in for a bit – you realize it's not an exhortation to superficiality. It's a statement about our identity. We are the Easter people. We are the people touched by the Resurrection. We are God's people – people loved by God! So much so that God came to us as one of us in Christ Jesus. He lived our human life. He knew human pain and death on, of all things, a cross! On that cross, He commended His spirit to God. He did so, knowing that God would raise Him, trusting that His Father's love was greater – far greater!

Do we remember how John's gospel begins? John wrote...**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him; and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in Him was life; and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness...and the darkness did not overcome it.** Not then – not now. The love that spoke creation into being with a word was there that first Easter morning. The light that shone in that primordial darkness was there as the first rays of the morning sun shone on that borrowed tomb. It was already empty...the light had overcome the darkness. Quite frankly, it never had a chance. And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing. The love that breathed new life into the first human beings was the same love that raised Jesus. The love that created the world and everything in it, including us, the love that lived among us as Jesus, the love that raised Jesus, **that** love is among us still, and it will raise us too! It will transform us!

We are the Easter people and we have hope. Not because the pain and suffering will go away, but because Christ has already won! Somehow that changes everything because He's not left us alone. He's given us Himself **and** each other. So, we don't just stand there. We go. We **run**. We act like people with hope. Not because we think the world isn't broken, but because we've been asked to participate in redeeming it. As Easter people, we're not supposed to sit idly by. We are "Christ is risen indeed", and I don't doubt that we believe it. But if we do, shouldn't it make a difference in how we live? Probably! Shouldn't we do something to help make a difference? No matter how small? Shouldn't we find a need and help meet it? Shouldn't we offer comfort and support with those who grieving?

Shouldn't we cry with those who are suffering? Shouldn't we help bind up the broken-hearted? Shouldn't we help bear one another's burdens? **We're not helpless.** We're called to be God's image bearers in the world. We're called to bear witness to a broken world that God has not abandoned it. We are the Easter people. We should act like it. This is the Easter Message...

So, when the question is asked – “What kind of world is this? We can say – for us, as the Easter People – that it is an Easter World where the love of God is made real! We can say He is risen...He is risen, indeed!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen!