

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
EASTER SUNDAY
“YOUR FINEST HOUR: DEATH IS CONQUERED”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
April 12, 2009
Mark 16:1-8
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services

The resurrection of Christ does not mean that his work on earth is done. In a sense, his saving work really began with his resurrection. Easter is unfinished. Easter is about the unfinished business of God's saving work of salvation. We are to continue Christ's mission on earth.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” The astounding reality of Easter is most fully appreciated by those who come to it by way of the cross. If God has the power to transform such a tragic death into resurrection, then we can trust God's power to transform the sunsets of our lives into sunrises.

The first to discover the empty tomb of Jesus were the women who went to anoint his body for burial. They were completely unprepared for the angel's message and were astounded. God continues to confound us by bringing life out of death.

The year was 1940. In June, France fell to the Germans, leaving England to face the Nazis alone. From August 24th until September 4th, German planes attacked London and airfields in southern England by day and night. The blitz threatened to destroy London, but the British endured. The outcome fulfilled Winston Churchill's vision: Should the British Empire **“last for a thousand years,”** he claimed, it will still be said, **“This was their finest hour.”** The second volume of Churchill's six-volume history, *The Second World War*, is appropriately titled, *Their Finest Hour.*

Today almost anyone would agree that Easter is the church's finest hour. Today we are at our most beautiful and triumphant best! Easter is such an extraordinary celebration that it has become a cultural holiday, as well as a Christian holy day. Just look around you, all of nature seems to celebrate Easter. But let me hasten to say, if Easter is the church's finest hour, it is not because of us. It is because of what God has done. God has raised Jesus from the dead. And this is our declaration whenever we come together.

This day is so magnificent, so overwhelming in its gladness, that we may lose sight of what preceded it. The resurrection cannot stand on its own, but has meaning only as the

final act of a painful drama. A cross and a brutal crucifixion precede the resurrection. Easter soars in boundless joy because of what has been overcome. On our journey to the cross, let us remember that without Jesus' death there would be no Easter. The more we meditate on the meaning of his cross, the deeper will be our Easter gratitude and gladness.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week, he was welcomed as though he were a conquering hero. The palm branches, the hosannas, and the garments strewn in his path were the homage of people who had no idea that he would die like a common criminal. They did not know that their own religious leaders and their Roman overlords would collaborate in his arrest, his cruel treatment, and his agonizing death. We must not be similarly blind to the horrible reality that gives Easter its meaning.

Churchill referred to 1940 as both “**the most splendid**” and “**the most deadly**” year in all of British history. The implication is that it would not have been the most splendid had it not been the most deadly. There is a polarity here that we find everywhere in human experience. We cannot talk about light without eventually having to talk about darkness, and *vice versa*. They are polar opposites, and each is helpful in defining the other. A paradox, on the other hand, combines contradictory ideas or things in a meaningful whole. A paradoxical statement, for example: She discovered that when she started taking breaks she got more work done. There is a profound paradox at the heart of Jesus' teaching. It is his claim that we find life by losing it, or, that the way to receive love is to give love. This same paradox applies to Easter. Easter involves both a death and a resurrection. Remove one and you lose both.

Jesus' disciples, like so many of his hearers, had a difficult time with paradoxical truth. When he referred to his “**kingdom**,” they thought they knew what he was talking about, and envisioned a kingdom like David's. They couldn't hear Jesus when he described his “**kingdom**” in spiritual terms. We have similar difficulties. We hear, loud and clear, Jesus' promise of eternal life. It is the primary reason many are drawn to him. We do not hear as clearly his call to take up our crosses and follow him. Yet in Jesus' mind these two things are inseparable.

Jesus did not die in order to be raised to eternal life. He died in order to fulfill God's will. From the moment he “**set his face**” toward Jerusalem and the cross, he was under a great burden that grew heavier with each passing day. Never during this time did he seem confident, like someone with a “**free pass**” where suffering and death are concerned. Jesus' death was real, as was his sense of God-forsakenness. Otherwise, there could have been no resurrection.

We want life without death, but death gives life its meaning. We want joy without suffering, but redemptive suffering is the source of joy. We want the crown without the cross, but the cross and the crown are two parts of the same reality. The last thing in the world Jesus would have done was bear the cross in order to get the crown. He bore the cross for us, for love - - and it became his crowning achievement.

In A. J. Cronin's *The Keys of the Kingdom* a priest named Francis Chisholm spends most of his life as a missionary in China. It is many years before there are any actual converts. Toward the novel's end, Mr. Chia, one of the Chinese "resisters," says to Father Chisholm: **"My friend, I have often said: There are many religions and each has its gate to heaven. . . . Now it would appear that I have the extraordinary desire to enter by your gate. . . . Once, many years ago, when you cured my son, I was not serious. But then I was unaware of the nature of your life . . . of its patience, quietness and courage. The goodness of a religion is best judged by the goodness of its adherents. My friend . . . you have conquered me by example."**

When was your finest hour? It may come as a surprise to you that your finest hour was not when you were on the mountaintop. Your finest hour may have been during your most difficult moment, perhaps your most painful experience or even your most forgettable time. But it was when you gave the gift of yourself, in ways large or small, to someone who needed peace or power or love. The gift of yourself was your cross. And if you were blessed to see something of the difference it made, or even if you were not, your cross was your crown. Love is its own reward.

What does it mean that Christ has been raised from the dead? Does it mean that we now have the assurance of life after death, that this perennial question has been answered? This is precisely what many think it means. But life after death may be a blessing or a curse, depending on the nature of that life. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has shattered and remade history. Christ's resurrection is a cosmic event, ushering in a new age and a new dimension of existence. We have new life in Christ now, and our life in Christ cannot be destroyed by death.

If you are ready to commit to the task of finding victory over sin and death I would love to be your pastor. If you are willing to make this your church God will empower you to continue his work of redeeming the world. Make this your finest hour!

HAPPY EASTER!