

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRD SUNDAY of EASTER
“TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
April 26, 2009
Luke 24:35-48
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services

Easter is only a matter of hours removed from Good Friday. Often the distance between tragedy and triumph is not as far as we think. An act of caring, an expression of love, a word of kindness, a simple gift - - these things can transform someone's tragic situation into triumph. Let us not forget that there are many who are waiting for resurrection. Our celebration of diversity offers just such an opportunity.

On the road to Emmaus two of the disciples only recognized Christ when he broke bread with them. The other disciples first encountered him in a meal on the shore. We experience Christ's presence in similar ways. We know him in and through the sacraments, and we know him in the company of believers.

Those most obsessed with finding happiness are the ones least likely to find it. Genuine happiness is experienced when we are pursuing other things. Happiness is the by-product of pursuing goals more important than one's own happiness. When we take up our crosses and follow Christ, at some point we are surprised by joy.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill won the Nobel Prize for his six-volume history, ***The Second World War***. The final volume is titled ***Triumph and Tragedy***. “Triumph,” is easy to understand, but why did Churchill include “tragedy”? After D-Day, the Allies moved across Europe to Berlin, and the end was at hand. But President Roosevelt died shortly before the final victory against Germany, and this affected Churchill, he said, “**as if I had been struck a physical blow.**” Also, in July of 1945, the Labor Party won the general election and Churchill was out of office. The

end of the war was a triumph for the world, but was not without tragedy for Churchill.

As children we learned how the most satisfying stories end. They conclude with, **“and they all lived happily ever after.”** Some of us grew up believing that we would eventually arrive at that magnificent time ourselves. The Disney-fiction of our culture has reinforced our belief in the **“happily ever after”** world. Many of us live in expectation that our magical moment will occur at some point down the road - - - when we get married, or when we get promoted, or when we retire. Sadly, but inevitably, we learn that the **“happily ever after”** world is only a fantasy.

Everyone has moments of happiness, but happiness never comes to stay. But we can see the kind of happiness we want! And it is always the possessions of someone else, someone who may actually be less happy than we are. Dr. Thomas Szasz said **“happiness is an imaginary condition . . . usually attributed by adults to children, and by children to adults.”** The familiar line about the grass always being greener on the other side of the fence means that another person’s situation usually only looks better than ours. Many Americans think of happiness as a right - - a right guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence. But the “inalienable rights” are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Our fore-bearers may have been more realistic about happiness than we’ve given them credit for being! Happiness is no one’s right, nor is it guaranteed to anyone. **“Happily ever after”** may describe the bliss of heaven, but it will not be found on earth.

The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus raise questions about his resurrected body. In our Gospel lesson, the disciples to whom Jesus appeared on the road to Emmaus are reporting this to the other disciples. Suddenly Jesus appears in their midst. They are **“startled”** and **“frightened,”** and they think they are seeing a ghost. This indicates that the resurrected Jesus was not simply a resuscitated corpse. A physical body does not appear and disappear, or pass through closed doors. On the other hand, Jesus is concerned to demonstrate to the disciples that he is not a ghost. He invites them to observe and handle his body, but this does not convince the disciples. Their doubts are dispelled when Jesus eats a piece of fish in their presence.

The body of the resurrected Christ was apparently a transformation of his physical body, so that it retained many of its characteristics but transcended

its limitations. What matters is that the disciples experienced Jesus as a real and living person, the same Lord they had known and loved.

The resurrection of Jesus, extraordinarily wonderful as it was, had a downside for the disciples. The good news was that Jesus was alive. The bad news was that he would be leaving them to return to his Father. The triumph of Jesus' resurrection had a tragic element in it for the disciples. This is the nature of human life. Each day we live is made up of both sunshine and shadows, good news and bad news.

When Jesus called the twelve to follow him, he did not invite them to live **“happily ever after.”** Following Jesus meant privation and persecution for those first disciples. Following Jesus meant suffering as he suffered, and for some, dying as he died. They would be betrayed and forsaken by family members and friends. They would endure the loss of all things. Yet they testified again and again, like Paul, that nothing they lost mattered because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. Forgetting what lay behind and straining toward what lay ahead, they pressed on toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. What many would consider tragic they saw as a triumphant way to live.

Does such language have any meaning today, in our kind of world? Does anyone suffer today for following Jesus? Is there any significant cost in Christian discipleship today? Our comfortable versions of faith do not change the call of Christ. Christ still calls us away from ourselves. He still invites us to the way of genuine self-discovery, the way of becoming who we really are. But it is the way of self-giving, suffering love. This is the only way we become who we really are. It means saying No as well as Yes. We must say No to the gravitational pull of a dying world if we are to say Yes to the kingdom of God. The triumphant way is the way of love, which always involves suffering. You see, one can become too selfish to love.

According to T. S. Eliot, (*Murder in the Cathedral*), Saints are described and defined in different ways. All would agree, however, that the true saint follows the triumphant way of Christ. The true saint is empty of self-concern and filled with God's love. The true saint gives God's love to others - - warning them, leading them, bringing them back to God's ways. True saints have become instruments of God. They have lost their own will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for they have found freedom in

submission to God. True saints, desire nothing for themselves; not even the glory of martyrdom.

Resurrection, by definition, occurs only where something or someone has died. Resurrection is not rescue or healing. When these things happen, death is kept at bay. Resurrection happens in hopeless situations, where death has occurred. This puts resurrection beyond the reach of all human capacities and powers. Resurrection is not immortality, which claims that the soul automatically lives forever, for better or worse. Resurrection is exclusively the work of God. We die. The gospel proclaims that God, who raised up Jesus, will raise us up with him. Just as Creation is an act of God's power and love, so is Redemption. Come! **“Grow your spirit with us”**. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.