

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
EASTER SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
HE AROSE
John 20:1-9
April 4, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

Today is Easter. Yes it is. And that means this is a very important day in the Christian Church. And to put it simply, this is the day we celebrate Jesus' coming back from the dead. Jesus died on a cross for our sins, was buried in a tomb, but then He rose again from the dead and came back to life. And He promises that we can live forever, also. That is really the Easter story as briefly as it can be told. But permit me to expand on it just a little. This is a journey we started on Ash Wednesday. This past week has been a week of contrasts; from Palm Sunday to Easter.

Easter is often a celebration of things past and things future, Christ's resurrection from the tomb and our hope of resurrection when we die. The New Testament makes it clear that resurrection is to be celebrated as a present-tense reality. In the life of faith, we are continually being raised from spiritual death into glorious life.

Mary Magdalene came to Jesus' tomb while it was still dark. Her master had been executed like a common criminal. His broken body had been laid in a borrowed tomb. She thought the empty tomb was another crime against Jesus' body. But the tomb was the womb of the risen Christ.

A mother of twins was heard to remark, **“God should not have created twins until science had found a way for mothers to be in two places at the same time!”** Busy people of every kind have had similar feelings, but in our physical universe an object cannot be located in two places at the same time. This fact lies behind the popular mantra: **“Location! Location! Location!”** Is it possible, however, that a one-time event in a specific place can be appropriated by other people at other times in other places? The first Easter was a unique event; yet, as followers of Christ, we are privileged to experience its meaning and power in our own lives.

We associate Easter with lilies and sunlight, happy children and glorious choirs, spring wardrobes and Easter baskets, exclamations and boundless joy. For churchgoers around the world this is the most popular Sunday of the entire year. Not only is Easter worship a firmly-established tradition, but it is also a relatively safe Sunday to attend church. On Easter, “**never is heard a discouraging word,**” a minor key, or a sour note. Easter is our most popular and most indomitable celebration.

The first Easter, however, did not happen in a church or cathedral, but in a cemetery. It did not occur on a stage for all to see, but in a darkened tomb. “**Resurrection**” was not the first word about Jesus, but the last. Resurrection was God’s response to the worst that the world can do. That’s why we gathered here on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, as well as on this Easter Sunday morning. The prerequisite of resurrection is death. It is perfectly understandable that we would want the good news without the bad news. Talk of death is depressing. Jesus’ death, even though it was two thousand years ago, is a grim and painful subject to think about. The story of Holy Week is dark and tragic. It is easier to go from Palm Sunday straight to Easter. Life is hard enough without reliving Jesus’ crucifixion. But resurrection has no meaning apart from a death. Resurrection only occurs where someone has died.

It is impossible for us to appreciate the reality and finality of Jesus’ death for his followers. Having heard the story so often, we cannot feel the impact of his death as they did. For us, it is almost as if Jesus didn’t really die. But he did. His followers believed they had lost him forever. For them it was the end of everything that mattered. It is obvious that no one among all his followers expected resurrection.

What was the point of the resurrection for Jesus’ followers? The point of the resurrection was not that they had immortality as a birthright. Some Christians think resurrection is the same thing as the immortality of the soul. But the immortality of the soul was widely accepted in the first-century world. A majority of the religions and philosophies of the Greco-Roman world taught that humans have a dual nature, and consist of a soul and a body. Although the body obviously perishes, they believed the soul was immortal. The biblical view is that humans have a holistic or unitary nature. A whole person is born, and a whole person dies. Resurrection is the belief that God raises us from the dead, not that we are naturally immortal. The point of the resurrection is not that we do not have to die. Each of us will die. Death is real.

Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, John tells us, as early as she could, “*while it was still dark.*” She did not go expecting to find Jesus miraculously alive. She knew death was real. She went to mourn the loss of her dearest friend. The risen Christ was a shocking surprise to Mary, the last thing she might have expected. The point of the resurrection of Jesus is that, by the surprising grace and power of God, Christ has conquered death for us and set us free from its bondage. Death does not have the last word. Death no longer has dominion over us, nor does the fear of death.

The late John Claypool frequently said that God’s other name is Surprise. We experience resurrection in unlikely places. Resurrection occurs in our darkest hours, at our uttermost extremities, beyond our hope and strength. The places where we experience resurrection are as unlikely as a sealed tomb. Resurrection comes when we least expect it. It comes up on our blind side. Struggling in a graveyard situation, overcome by grief, like Mary Magdalene, we suddenly find the tomb of our dead hopes mysteriously empty. Resurrection is God’s gift of life in our deadliest circumstances.

An ancient symbol of resurrection is the butterfly. Few things in nature appear less promising than a cocoon. It looks like a little wad of dead matter. If you didn’t know, you would never imagine the potent seeds of life and beauty it contains. The cocoon itself gives no evidence of the incredible loveliness that will come forth. Life sometimes looks like a wad of dead matter. We arrive at what appears to be a dead end. We find ourselves in situations that seem like tombs. In just such places God is at work to transform death into life, darkness into light, despair into promise. In the places where you least expect it, you will find that God has opened a new future filled with surprising possibilities.

Easter is not merely the commemoration of an ancient miracle, a two-thousand-year-old resurrection. This relegates it to the past, where we cannot go. Neither is Easter merely the promise of life beyond death. This pushes it into the future. Whatever it means for the past and the future, resurrection happens in the midst of life. Go, then, in faith. Whatever the future holds, wherever the journey takes us, we may trust in the God of resurrection and eternal life. Where does resurrection happen? It happens where we need it most.

Resurrection is the power of God over all the forces that diminish and destroy life. Greed diminishes us as surely as illness. Selfishness is just as big and destructive as despair. Resurrection is also the power of God to fulfill all of the possibilities of life. We can be raised daily from self-centeredness to sacrificial

service, from guilt and grief to forgiveness and hope. As Christians, we are being raised daily from death to life.

If you are ready to embrace and experience the amazing power of resurrection on this Easter Sunday morning, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church. **HAPPY EASTER!**