

Rock and Rolling Stone
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
April 11, 2004 Easter
Text: Luke 24:1-12

Easter arrived this year, smack dab in the middle of Good Friday. I was a participant in the annual Heights Community Good Friday service, which is always held next door at St. Paul's. It's one of those three hour worship services, organized around different parts of the Passion narrative. Picture the scene in your mind's eye: the haunting music, the sad hymns, the thoughtful prayers, we black-robed ministers in turn waxing eloquent (more or less) about the meaning of Christ's death, followed by periods of silence. It was during one of those silences, late in the afternoon, that it happened. The silence was shattered....by the sound of a baby's laughter. Not a gurgle, not a screech, but a sustained laugh, as delight bubbled up from the belly of this babe, and filled the sacred hall. It was as if God had had enough of our solemn assembly, and needed to remind us that this Friday is only good because it didn't end at the cross. That baby was the most articulate preacher that day, proclaiming God's word: *Behold, I make all things new. [Isaiah 43:19]*.

Martin Luther called it "the laughter which takes away the seriousness of death." And today we can believe it. The music is strong and triumphant. There's a festiveness and excitement in the air you can feel. A time to put on new clothes and new life and celebrate! Behind us is the paralyzing cold of winter (well, maybe). Behind us are the cross, the grave, the terror of darkness. This is the day of resurrection. Christ is risen! [Christ is risen indeed]

I actually have a lot of sympathy for those who find themselves moved to attend worship if only today (though understand, I'm not advocating it!). Never is the hope of Christian faith better articulated than in the miracle of resurrection. Christ is risen! --and that means there is no force of death, no night of sorrow, no demonic influence that can defeat the life and light that is Christ. We are drawn here today by the power of hope.

That is *not*, however, what drew those first believers to Jesus' tomb. The gospel accounts uniformly report that the women were going to the tomb to carry out what one did at the time of death: wrapping the body with linen and spices...a ritual that held both honorific and practical significance. They had not been able to do it when Jesus' body had been taken off the cross in deference to Sabbath law which prohibited it. But the Sabbath passed, and then they knew it was time.

"Closure" is the way we'd describe it now. They left home that early morning expecting to say a final goodbye to their beloved friend and teacher. Hear God's word in the Easter gospel according to Luke, in the 24th chapter at the first verse.

[Luke 24:1-12]

The story is told of a time when God looked down at the earth, and alarmed at all the evil that was going on, decided to assess the spiritual health of the human beings. So God sent an angel with a strong background in sociology to perform a survey. The angel returned with the results. "Well, God," the angel explained. "According to our survey, 95% of the people are wicked, bad and evil. And 5% are trying to be good, kind, and loving. "Only 5%!" "Yes," said the angel, "and furthermore, the 5% are feeling very sad and discouraged." This troubled God greatly, so God decided to reach out to those good people by sending the 5% an uplifting and encouraging e-mail. And you know what that e-mail said? Oh, I see...so you didn't get one either?

Hope is in short supply these days. I read recently that the Boomers are the first generation who don't believe things will be better for their children than they were for themselves. The myth of the inevitable human march to progress has been lost in an ocean of war and terrorism, nuclear proliferation, the increasing gap between the haves and have-nots, the vulnerable state of earth's resources, corruption and the loss of integrity at the highest levels of government and business. Many of us have a persistent feeling that somehow we've lost the way; we're going in the wrong direction—that life is more threatened, more uncertain, and more complicated now than at any time.

We are not unlike the women who went to the tomb. They were realists; remember, they had stood at the foot of Jesus' cross and had seen him die. They came to the tomb with no other expectation than to do what they knew they had to do. A rock—solid, tangible, hard-- was all that stood between them and the end. But what happened there changed everything. They came to the tomb and discovered the rock had been transformed into a rolling stone. *Why do you look for the living among the dead?* The realism of the world they knew so well was shattered by the power and grace of God. Christ is alive!

And in that truth lies hope. If the One who was dead now lives, then that means death—in all its many guises—is contingent. It does not have the final word. It is not "the end." The power death wields is immense, but it is not ultimate. It cannot overcome the Light of the world, the living Christ who reigns forever and ever.

What I like best about the resurrection account we read today is that it took awhile for the people to get it. They didn't march out of the empty tomb and start a church. They gathered together, they talked and prayed; each of them would come to have his or her own experience of the risen Christ. But that day, to their amazement and perplexity, their perception changed. The rock-solid certainty of death was cracked wide open. The implications of that new reality took some time to develop. But the realization that the past was no longer a reliable predictor of the future made all the difference to them. Hope was born.

The poet Emily Dickinson wrote of this hope as "the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all." We don't have to know all the answers. We don't even have to know the words. What matters is that we are gripped by something—no, by Someone—who shows us that life will overcome death, that good will outlast evil, that it will be on earth as it is in heaven.

Friends, the resurrection of Christ makes the status quo radically uncertain. "The way things are" is not the way they shall be. Resurrection turns rocks into rolling stones. The things we feared were fixed, immovable, impossible to change are in fact the very materials God is using to create a new heaven and a new earth. On the one hand, God does this without our help; hope is not the same as optimism in human ability to right what is wrong. On the other hand, God invites us to share in this resurrection work to make all things new. The joy of this day is not found simply in the remembrance of Jesus' resurrection long ago, but in his living presence with us right here, right now. The hope of Easter is found not only in *eternal* life after death, but in *abundant* life before death. Infused with that hope, we dare to look for the living in places of sorrow, brokenness, suffering, and death. The stone has been rolled away, to reveal not only that Christ is alive. So are we, in a deeper, more fulfilling way than we had ever imagined.

There is a tomb where Easter needs to happen today. On February 29th, Heights United Presbyterian Church died. The once-prominent congregation—located at Lee and Washington—simply didn't withstand the steady decline of membership. They provided for a proper burial—the final service was conducted with a celebration of its rich history. Then the key was turned, the door was locked, and it was all over. Or so the presbytery thought. You may know that in our denomination, it is the wider church—not the local congregation—which owns the physical property. The presbytery didn't want to be saddled with additional strains on its already-stretched budget. They figured they would sell it to another church.

But that's where some Fairmount members stepped in with a different idea. The need in the Heights for a youth center is well-documented: kids have nowhere to go after school. You see them hanging out at the library, walking around Coventry or up and down Lee Road. What if Fairmount could spearhead a community-wide effort to develop Heights United into a youth center, with a Boys and Girls Club program for after school recreation, tutoring, and socializing in a safe and positive environment? The high-ceilinged sanctuary would make a fabulous gymnasium. The Sunday School classrooms could easily be adapted for learning space, a game room, a computer lab. The former church's location –directly across from Heights High, and on major bus routes— makes it highly accessible to young people.

But there's a big old rock sealing the entrance. You know: how could we raise that kind of money? What are the risks? How would we undertake leadership for such a huge responsibility? It's never been done here in the Heights before.

When these concerns crowd in, let us return to that first Easter. How a tomb became a doorway. A rock became a rolling stone, and the end, a new beginning. A church died; do you believe that out of its tomb God can raise a dynamic youth center? Do you believe that out of the tomb of warfare, violence, greed, and corruption God can raise a realm of justice and peace? Do you believe that out of our tombs of doubt and fear, resignation, grief, God can raise you and me to new life?

Christ is risen! [Christ is risen indeed!] Friends, this day offers us hope so strong that no grave can contain it. In that hope may we live today and every day.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER. AMEN.

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor