

“Surprise! Hope is Alive!”
John 20: 1-18; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43
April 20, 2014-Resurrection Sunday
Salem United Methodist Church
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It was the first day of the week, but it wasn't early in the day. It was about 1 o'clock in the afternoon on last Palm Sunday when evil took the lives of three innocent people: fifteen year old Reat Underwood, his grandfather, Dr. William Corporon, and Terri LaManno. Reat was trying out for a musical at the Jewish Community Center. His grandfather was picking him up. Terri was visiting her mother at the Shalom Center. Shalom means peace and wholeness. On the campus of peace and wholeness, calmness was shattered. Three lives were taken because one person, an avowed racist and anti-Semite was filled with hate. This tragedy makes no sense to us. We cry out, "Why?" All three of these lives were living out their faith, their Christian faith. Terri devoted her life to serving others. She not only cared for her aging mother, but was an occupational therapist. She was a member of St. Peter's Catholic Church and taught her faith to her children. Her daughter said, "It's perfectly normal to be angry, but forgiveness is something she taught me since I was little." The theme of her funeral was about love and forgiveness, not anger and bitterness. Reat and his grandfather came from a family that put others before themselves, too. Dr. Corporon devoted his life to healing others as an Emergency Room doctor. He was a doting grandfather and moved to be closer to his grandson, Reat who loved theatrical acting and singing. Reat was a Boy Scout who was in the process of completing his Eagle Scout award. He, his grandfather, and his family were active members of Church of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. Reat and his grandfather's funerals were held on Good Friday. Each of these people loved and served the Lord with their lives. They were people who put others first before self. All three of them touched so many lives. Their families are struggling to make sense of this tragedy and are hoping that something good comes out of this evil event.

On that first Good Friday another person who put others before himself was also horribly killed. Jesus did nothing wrong, yet he was executed as a common criminal. He healed the sick. He taught about God's love for us and showed us God's love. God's Son knew he would be painfully executed and suffered tremendously as he died our human death. His death was ugly and violent. Those he mentored were afraid. They abandoned their teacher and hid. A few stood by his cross, watched him suffer and die. Then they placed him in the tomb where he stayed that second day. His closest followers who had such hope in Jesus as the Messiah now they found themselves in the depths of despair. They sat together behind closed doors in fear. They wondered, "What is going to happen to us? What do we do now?" Have you ever been there? Have you ever sat in the darkness, behind closed doors wondering, "What happens now? How do we make sense of this?" Perhaps it was a terminal diagnosis; a loss of a job, a marriage that fell apart, a child has made a very poor choice that will impact the rest of his/her life, a death of a loved one. The plans we made. The hopes we had, have vanished. When we sit in this kind of darkness, we wonder, "Where is the hope? What good could possibly come out of this?" This kind of aloneness, helplessness, hopelessness has been called the "Dark Night of the Soul." It is a tomb-like experience. We are entombed by our fear and despair. We cry out, "Why, God? Where are you, God?" One person who was experiencing this kind of darkness shared that he heard these words over and over again, "God is good. God is good." And he clung to those words. They became a mantra of sorts that comforted him while he sat in the dark dampness of his tomb.

And then, surprise! Somehow the sun rises. A new day begins-the third day. And the stone is rolled away. New life begins. Resurrection occurs. No one actually saw Jesus rise from the dead. They only saw the empty tomb. Later they saw and touched his resurrected body. Their doubts disappeared. Their hope was restored. He is alive! He is risen! He is risen, indeed! All four Gospels tell of the Resurrection of Jesus. The early church told and retold the events of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He was no ghost. Scientifically we cannot explain how this happened. I can't explain how a nucleus holds my DNA, but it does and I believe that it does. I can't explain the Resurrection of Jesus, but I know that history has been changed because of it. I believe that my life and the lives of others are being transformed because of it. I believe that the Resurrected Jesus offers us hope and I know that we cannot live without hope. One theologian, Frederick Buechner, stated that the "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing." God has a way of bringing good out of evil. The ugly, violent Crucifixion of Jesus was not the last thing. Jesus rose from the dead as the first fruits of the Resurrection. Hope is alive!

The Gospel of John states that Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. John wrote in such way that every word holds a special meaning. It was the first day of the week in which God began Creation in Genesis. Jesus' Resurrection on the first day of the week is the beginning of a new creation. God's new world has begun. Evil is defeated. God wins. Read the end of the Bible. God wins! No economic disaster, no terrorist plot, no climate disaster, no illness, no death, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. God wins! Jesus' resurrection proves this! The Resurrection vindicates Jesus' life and teaching which was all about love, not hate, not revenge. His death on the cross becomes a signpost of God's love that offers us reconciliation, forgiveness, and salvation. His Resurrection is a signpost of victory over despair, evil, sin, and death. His Resurrection offers us a new transformed life of hope and the promise of a new life eternally with God. Surprise! Hope is alive!

If there is anyone who is in that second day of despair and doesn't think there is any hope, I say to you, "God is good." At the right time, God will roll away the stone from your tomb. The light of his wonderful love will pour into those dark recesses. Have the courage to get up, step out of the tomb, and receive God's gift of new life. Embrace it and allow God's hope to embrace you. For those of us who have been in that second day of despair, I say to you, "God is calling us to be that signpost of hope for another, to point the way, to reflect God's light into the dark corners of someone's tomb." We do not receive this new transformed life to become couch potatoes until God calls us home. No, we receive this new life so that we can be agents of God's love and hope in our families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and to the world.

This is the purpose and mission of the church. We are to be signposts of God's hope. We are to not only point to hope, but stand up against evil. Speak out for what is right and stand in the gap for others so they know that hope is alive. No one can survive without hope. Doctors know that their patients need hope. How do we as the church, as Christians offer this hope? At the funeral of Reet and his grandfather, a family member offered this as an answer, "Love one another more deeply. Search for and find faith that will sustain us when the unthinkable happens, when life happens. Live with grace and peace from day to day. Tragedy is the starting point for something much greater. Hate is transformed by God's love."

I believe this story of the Resurrection. I know that the church at its best offers hope. And I trust that each day we will be surprised by the transforming love of the Resurrection and that we will always believe that Hope is Alive!

Resources: *Surprised By Hope* by N. T. Wright; *24 Hours That Changed the World* by Adam Hamilton; <http://www.kansascity.com/2014/04/17/4965927/forgiveness-is-theme-of-funeral.html>; <http://www.kshb.com/news/region-kansas/overland-park/full-video-reat-underwood-william-corporon-laid-to-rest>

