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Easter Sunday
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

April 9th, 2023
In Defense of the Foolish
John 20:1-18

A friend of mine was asking about my schedule for this week and said, “Isn’t this week kind of like your dissertation defense?” Yes, Easter is a big deal – bigger than Christmas! It is the capstone for the Christian year. Easter is when we declare the essence of everything the church has to say. And the thesis would be: there is resurrection in the face of death. The words the church says on Easter are its *raison d’etre*. The dissertation defense is about Jesus after three days of being dead and buried in a tomb that he rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples.

How Jesus was born is incredible.

How Jesus lived is unmatched.

But Jesus overcoming the ultimate enemy of death by rising to new life – that is it, that is the defense of why we do all this year in and year out.

Without the resurrection of Jesus, the church crumbles. On Easter, we remember the words of Jesus when he was alive who said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He said that to his friends Mary and Martha when their brother Lazarus had died. In the face of death, he said, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” In the face of death, Jesus did not say to the grieving sisters, “He’s in a better place.” “It was his time.” “He lived a good life.” Instead, Jesus asked Martha, “Do you believe?” “I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. Do you believe this?”

Last summer a longtime member of this church, Bud McFarlane was buried at the Naval Academy. There was a huge turnout for his service and afterwards the crowd walked from the chapel across the campus to the cemetery. The Naval Chaplain and I led the processional. The service had all the pomp and circumstance due for a man who dedicated his life to public service and pursuing the common good. Unfortunately, the day in early August was stiflingly hot. It was one of those days when it was so hot you could basically see your breath. As we left the chapel, sweat instantly started forming. It was a decent walk to the graveside and the grave was in the full sun. The family was seated close by but everyone else scattered looking for a tiny bit of shelter in any shade they could find. The chaplain and I took turns speaking. He was announcing all the official military honors and I was announcing all the Christian liturgies. The people were far off and there were no microphones. There was competing noise from the trees and the birds, and the idling cars and I felt like I was shouting. I was shouting like a fool – a fool in the face of death who was audaciously, starkly, and boldly proclaiming resurrection while standing at a graveside.

Every time we stand at the graveside of the deceased, we make the defense of the Christian faith. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” I bet there were some people at the gravesite that day, who only heard and saw foolishness. Look at that foolish lady, dressed in a black woolen, robe on a 95-degree day, standing in the blazing sun at the head of grave and proclaiming life after death. But to some...that message, that truth, that witness is the very display of God’s power. Bud McFarlane believed that Jesus was the resurrection and the life and every Easter Sunday, he would weep at the Easter hymns. Thine be the Glory, Risen and Conquering

Son – that was the power of God, and he staked his life on it. And I was proud to declare his faith to his family and friends. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live!”

I am proud to proclaim the Christian faith even though it does feel at times like you are foolishly shouting into the wind with lots of distracted listeners and lots of background noise and lots of competing secular preachers. I am preaching Jesus as the way, and they are preaching –

status as the way
money as the way
power as the way
pop culture as the way
independence as the way
activism as the way
nothing as the way.

To prove a point, four days after Lazarus had died, when his body was already decaying, Jesus rose him from the dead. “I am the resurrection and the life and whoever believes in me, even though they die, will live.” Jesus wanted his friends to witness the resurrection because he needed them to believe in it. He needed his disciples to live knowing that death would not be final. Jesus wanted them to understand that God can and does offer resurrection to eternal life. Do you believe? Jesus asks.

When my son was about three years old, we were walking home when we came across a dead bird lying on the sidewalk. He immediately jumped into action and started running home as fast as his chubby little legs would carry him. He told us he was going to fix it, with glue! He ran into the house and grabbed a bottle of Elmer’s glue and hustled back to find the bird. He was absolutely convinced that with a bit of glue this little guy would be back to flying in no time. He squeezed the glue all over the bird and then stood back to watch what would happen. Of course, nothing happened but I could not let that be the end because this little boy believed in resurrection. He believed the bird would live again. And I reminded him that glue must dry before it works so I bet if we go home and have a snack then the glue will dry, and the bird will be gone by the time we get back. He liked that idea. And sure enough (I made sure of it) that bird was gone when we came back to check on it.

There are so many places in the world telling us that resurrection is not real, new life is not a thing, second chances do not happen, there is no redeeming going on. The church must shout over that noise and make the defense for a different worldview.

What reminded me of the story of my son and the little bird was another dead bird we saw on the sidewalk a few weeks ago. This time he looked at it said, “There’s a dead bird. Gross!” and he kept on walking. It made me sad that he no longer held that innocent belief that a little glue can make everything better. It made me remember his certainty about it just a few years before. Life had taught him that what is dead is dead and it is foolishness to think otherwise. The world is like that; it will rob us of our beliefs because life is hard, and the world is full of evil, and cynics are noisy, and belief takes effort.

We need Easter to remind us of the story of Jesus. The story about how he practiced resurrection during his life by raising the dead and forgiving the sinners and healing the sick. And the story

that Jesus on Easter morning made the most compelling defense of the Christian faith by appearing to friends and doubters alike who had seen him die on a cross and had watched him buried in a tomb and who had been hiding away in fear for three days and he appeared to them and asked them again, “Do you believe?”

For those of you who are staying up to date watching Ted Lasso, you will know, and this is not really a spoiler, that the Richmond soccer club had a piece of paper with the word BELIEVE taped above the coach’s door. It is their focal point in the locker room and a symbol of Ted’s coaching style for the underdog of a team. During a recent episode, one of Richmond’s enemy’s sneaks into the locker room at night and tears the sign in half so B-E-L is all that remains. ‘BEL’ is a good descriptor of how life feels without faith. Believe is the message Jesus wants to impart to his disciples. Believe in God. Believe in me. Believe in life after death. Believe. Don’t let anyone steal that from you. Hold fast to your faith, even if at times you feel like a fool doing so.

Jesus brought faith to his disciples. Then Jesus died a horrible death, and they were afraid. On Easter Sunday, Jesus returned to his friends and restored their faith. Easter Sunday is our chance to be restored – whatever life has stolen from you, whatever belief has been ripped from you, however suffering has hardened you – today, we joyfully and seemingly foolishly defy all of it and say, “Yes, Lord, I believe.”

Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed!

Amen.