

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Easter Sunday- March 23, 2008

Scripture lessons: Psalm 118:14-24 & Luke 24:1-12

ONE MORE MOVE

A couple of days ago we were in a much different mood in this place. On Good Friday we remembered Jesus nailed to the cross. Death was front and center and that's unusual because normally we avoid looking at it.

Most people stay away from Good Friday services. We frequently keep dying people distant from us in hospitals and other facilities. In our wider world, youthfulness is pushed to the fore by constant advertising about how we can resist or cover over the fact that we get older, wear down, and die. We all admit that eventually we'll have to bite the dust, but still don't seem to believe it enough actually to prepare much for it. For example, in the state of Michigan, 70% of adults, including many over age 65, haven't yet gotten around to making a will.

It's interesting to note that even though we often avoid thinking about death, we appear ready to spend more and more for a coffin when our time for it comes. This past week I read a market analysis of the casket business by an MBA student at the University of Southern California named John Schmidt. He concludes that even though there's a major trend away from coffins and towards cremation, the prospect for making money in the casket business is still solid. That's because "growth in the deceased" is expected to increase significantly in the next few decades. In 2004, 2.4 million people died in the United States. By 2040 that number's expected to reach 4.1 million.

More important for potential casket sales is the fact that most of the anticipated death increase will come from the demise of "Baby Boomers" (my generation). It seems we Boomers already have indicated a desire for more stylish and expensive coffins, ones with which we can make a more personal "statement". In response, the funeral industry is now offering "Designer Caskets" that can cost as much \$20,000.

More modestly priced "theme" caskets are also available. You can order a "University Casket" in the colors of your alma mater with your school logo on it. John Schmidt reports that a coffin of this type was displayed at the Ohio State University homecoming game back in 2000 and stirred considerable interest there. You might also want to check out the themed caskets featured at FuneralDepot.com. You can buy the "Fairway to Heaven" coffin for a golf enthusiast or the "Race is Over" coffin for a race car fan or the "Return to Sender-Express Delivery" coffin for a diehard jokester.

You can buy caskets at Costco now. The "Lady of Guadalupe" casket, the "In God's Care" casket, and the "Mother" casket are featured on their website, and who knows?-they may soon have the "Mother-in-Law" casket, too.

It seems that once we finally get ourselves to thinking about death we're ready these days to spend bigger chunks of cash on our burial box. I'm not sure what that means and I'll let you speculate about it for yourself. The big question it raises for me, however, is whether we ever get around to taking seriously the deeper question of what death actually is. To get right to the point-is death THE END or not?

Many people in my parents' generation, including my own mother and father, taught their children this prayer at bedtime: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. This I ask for Jesus' sake. Amen."

There was a second verse I also learned, but didn't pray. It went like this: "Our days begin with trouble here our life is but a span. And cruel death is always near so frail a thing is man." (I didn't pray that one because I figured if I did I'd really have sweet dreams.)

But people used to teach their kids a prayer and a verse like that because they wanted them to know, even as children, that death is real. They wanted them to know that it can come at any time and that in spite of death's specter they could always count on God.

How many of us teach our children that prayer now? I know I've softened it for our daughter, Sophie. I've taught her, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Keep me safe all through the night and bring me to Your morning light." That's a milder, sweeter, and more pleasant prayer, but probably a more cowardly one, too.

Are we more averse in our time to thinking seriously about death? If so, is it because we no longer really believe that we can count on God in the face of it?

I'm sure many of you remember Mel Blanc. If you don't remember his name, then you'd likely still recognize his voice. His was behind most of the characters in the famous *Looney Tunes* cartoons. At the end of every one, he'd say through Porky Pig: "Th-th-that's all folks!" A few years ago Mel Blanc died and on his tombstone his family had engraved, "That's all, folks."

We're here today to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But when we get right down to it in the face of death where do we, in fact, take our stand? Is it with "He is risen" or is it with "That's all, folks"?

Today we say, "Christ is risen indeed!" but probably still have our doubts about it. We can sometimes feel *sooo* foolish in believing it. Sometimes it seems like such a thin reed on which to hang our biggest and best hope- our hope for final and everlasting victory over death not just for Jesus and not just for us, but for all of creation. How can we go on believing *that* when 2000 years later the power of death still seems so dominant?

We keep on believing it as *fools*- fools for Jesus Christ. We believe it together *as fools* with those who've dared to keep acting on it even in times and places where death's power looks like it has taken over completely. We believe it with irrepressible, huge-hearted, and crazy fools like Desmond Tutu.

In the midst of his darkest times struggling against the deathly grip of South African apartheid, in days of absolutely zero optimism that things in his homeland were getting even the least bit better, in a period in the late 1970s in which he had not one shred of clean, clear evidence that things in his nation would ever really change, he still insisted that:

"The resurrection of Jesus (Christ) is our guarantee that right has triumphed and will triumph over wrong, that good has triumphed and will triumph over evil . . . that love has triumphed and will triumph over hate (that life has triumphed and will triumph over death). You and I know . . . despite all the evidence to the contrary that we, black and white together, are one in the Lord, and we will hold hands, black and white together, with our heads held high as we stride into the glorious future which God holds out to us."

Desmond Tutu was and is a complete fool- for Jesus Christ. Such foolishness kept him alive in the battle against apartheid and it opened the door to victory for him and his people over apartheid's deadly evil. Let it be our daily prayer that we will always be as full of Easter foolishness as he is.

Preacher Dan Chun tells of a mistake that he saw in one of the famous closing scenes of Ingmar Bergman's classic movie, *The Seventh Seal*. It's a mistake that I think opens up for us another angle on the foundation we have for our Easter foolishness. The film centers on the story of a medieval knight who, against the backdrop of villagers battling the black plague, plays a metaphorical game of chess against none other than Death.

The knight and Death agree that if Death wins, the knight will die soon. In one of the closing scenes, Death claims "checkmate" and before long the knight goes off to his grave. Dan Chun says, however, that if you know the game of chess well and if you study the scene closely, you'll see the mistake. You'll see that Death, in fact, does not checkmate Bergman's knight. Death appears to win, but only on false pretenses because the knight's king, in fact, still has . . . one more move.

One more move- that's the glory of the hope we sing on Easter morning. We sing out that God our King, the Lord of all, the One who became flesh in Jesus Christ, still and always has "one more move". It's the Bible's story through and through.

Begin, for instance, with the book of Exodus. It starts out, "There arose a Pharaoh in Egypt who did not know Joseph." That Pharaoh makes the Hebrews into slaves, gives them unbearable burdens, and kills their baby boys. It's the first of many deadly assaults against God's chosen people.

But soon a man named Moses hears God speak to him from a burning bush. God says, "Moses, I've heard the cry of my people in Egypt and I'm ready to set them free. Guess who's going to help me."

Moses balks, but God bucks him up. Moses goes, Pharaoh is confronted, the Hebrews are freed, and the people of Israel are born. They enter a land of their own and new life rises because all along the King has had . . . one more move.

Israel's freedom turns out to be short-lived. The empire of Assyria attacks. Cities are burned and pillaged. Whole tribes of Israel are carried off into exile. A hundred and thirty years later, the Babylonians do the same thing to those whom the Assyrians hadn't conquered. There's more death, more deportation, and more exile for God's chosen people.

But then along comes Jeremiah, the prophet. He brings God's promise of return to the beleaguered exiles. He points them to a great homecoming party- a great "dance of the merry-makers" he calls it.

Tyrants, whether Assyrian, Babylonian, or any other, become edgy and nervous whenever people on the bottom start to make music and to dance. But dance is what Israel does and soon they return home. New life rises again because all along the King has had . . . one more move.

A few centuries later, the story moves to a backwater town named Bethlehem in Judea. Terrible oppressors once again rule God's people. Roman are troops on every corner. They're soldiers in the world's most powerful army and they're in service to the world's most ruthless regime.

Yet in a stable out back a young woman is starting to sing. She sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . . for he has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts and has put down the mighty from their thrones." This young woman's name is Mary and she's about to have a baby. She will name her child Jesus, and with him new life will rise again because all along the King has had . . . one more move.

This Jesus reaches the Friday in his life that we remembered two days ago. The way it turned out was no surprise at all to anyone who understands how religious, political, economic, and military establishments usually work. This Jesus had disregarded many social conventions. He had eaten with tax collectors and prostitutes. He had reached out especially to the sick and the outcast, the wretched and the despised. He had openly and seriously criticized the king, Herod, and many of the leading clergy in order to spur them and everyone else into the life abundant God wants for them. But it was more than any of them could take.

So Caesar commanded the troops. They whipped and scourged Jesus, mocked and scorned him, and nailed him up to die. His body was laid low in a tomb to rot away like every human body has ever rotted away so that the powers-that-be confidently declared, "That's all, folks. The show is over. It's the big checkmate.

But then came the day we celebrate now. The women go to the tomb and find the stone rolled away. Messengers from God tell them Jesus isn't there anymore because he is risen! New life rises again because all along the King has had . . . one more move. It's the glory of the hope we sing out on this Easter morning- that the King still and always has . . . one more move.

Nevertheless, it remains true that we still have plenty of steep challenges that can weigh us down and tempt us to despair. Our wider world is full of wars and rumors of war. Between and within nations there are toxic levels of rancor and distrust. Just as in Jesus' time, people continue to hate, to hurt, and to kill each other.

Closer to home, in our personal lives, we know what it means to carry heavy burdens. You might have awful stress at work. You may have serious financial pressures. Maybe you're in a marriage that's falling apart or already has fallen. Maybe you have a child or someone else close to you who are struggling just to stay afloat or loved ones that you wish were close but who are deeply estranged from you. Maybe you yourself have done something so wrong or said something so bad or messed something up so much that it feels like things can never be made right again.

But, then again, maybe not- maybe you're at a point in your life where everything's going just great, thank you very much. You're sailing along with no crisis at all on any horizon that you can see. Instead, you look forward to every day being better than the previous one. If that's the way it is for you now, then hallelujah and praise God because that's a wonderful thing.

Yet if it is that way for you now, you and we know that it won't always be. The day will come when you and I and all of us won't be able to avoid death any longer, try as we might. The time will arrive when it's right here right now for each of us because the mortality rate for human beings is still hovering right around 100%.

But when death comes we will keep remembering and celebrating our Easter foolishness. No matter what form it takes to make its presence felt- whether in hard times that cause us to want to give up or in the Grim Reaper standing at our door ready to take us to the grave, we will remember and continue to celebrate the wild and blessed truth of *Easter*. We'll remember that even though it can seem like the show is over and that's all, folks, even though it can look like nothing less than the big checkmate up ahead, in the end it's really not. It's really not because Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. It's really not because all along the King has had and still has . . . one more move. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER- March 23, 2008

Ever living God, life begins again today, for You have raised Jesus Christ from the dead. He lives forever with You, far beyond us, the Lord of all time and space. He lives forever with us, bringing Your life into our life, the Lord of all here and now.

In the ecstasy of Easter, we pray for You to fill us with resurrection hope. Give us pure confidence in Your power to bring life out of death in every situation. Help us to see and to join in Your continuing battle against every power that would enslave us, that would capture and seal us in the tomb, that would keep us from becoming all that You mean for us to be. Raise us to new glory in Your service. Make us shining lights of Your reign on earth. Recreate us as Your Easter people to make peace, to do justice, and to pour out Your love no matter where death may threaten.

In love, we pray this morning for all those in special need of Your Easter joy, for those who yearn to make the journey from illness to health, from grief to consolation, from loneliness to intimacy, from despair to hope. Make them and all of us brand new in the joy of Your life eternal.

You are the Lord of all creation. In the light of Jesus' resurrection, we see again that You always have one more move, that You are our sure hope in this life, in death, and in the life that is to come. We pray for the coming of Your Kingdom now and forever in the way that Jesus has taught us, saying, "Our Father, . . ." Amen.