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“A Joyful Performance”
A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Easter Sunday
April 4, 2010

Isa. 65:17–25; Ps. 118:1–2, 14–24; 1 Cor. 15:19–26; Lk. 24:1–12

Gracious God, with millions of people around the world, we come to worship you this morning because we heard that you have done a new thing, that a resurrection has happened. We are not sure how to receive this good news. We have come because we have heard that finally death has been defeated. We have heard that there is something loose in our world that is not beholden to nor afraid of death. We come to hear about it again, to embrace it, to hold it close, to be part of it. Startle us again, O God, as you startled his friends and disciples long ago, with the power of your everlasting and trustworthy love—in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tom and Dick Smothers were a popular team who sang and performed many years ago. They were known as the Smothers Brothers. They actually existed because they are cousins of Marilyn Hedgpeth. In the early days of TV, they had a popular show that came on Sunday nights. Dick was the older, wiser, more sophisticated of the two, and he usually found a way to expose his younger brother’s goofiness.

I remember a show one Easter Sunday evening that got a lot of attention. Dick asked his brother if he knew what day it was. “Yes,” said Tom. “It’s Easter.” “Do you know what Easter is about?” “It’s about Jesus, who was killed on a cross. He was buried.” His brother nodded approval, and Tom continued: “Easter is when

Jesus comes out of his tomb, and if he sees his shadow, he goes back in, and we get six more weeks of winter.”¹

You can understand why this scene got a lot of attention when it happened. I think it is telling because the Easter story we celebrate this morning often gets caught up in our own culture, with Hallmark cards and rabbits and flowers, and we miss what Easter means.

The Easter story has always been under attack and misunderstood. The women who had followed Jesus went to the tomb to anoint his body—when they first realized that something was going on here, they sent word to the disciples. They told what they had seen and heard. And the disciples greeted their announcement by calling it “an idle tale.”

Why such negativity to the announcement “He is Risen?”

Some have suggested the negativity was because the message was brought by women. No doubt there was a gender bias here as it was strong in that day as it still is in our day. We know from Jewish law that women were not considered credible witnesses. Women could not give testimony in court. “It’s an idle tale,” they said. The gender of those delivering the message was partly responsible for the response, I am sure. Yet, that does not wholly explain this turn of events. The men at the tomb reminded them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” (Lk. 24:5–7) And yet, the message still received the cold shoulder. *An idle tale!*

Maybe we will better understand why they responded that way when we think about some of our own responses, not only our singing of “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” with gusto and excitement, but the response that sometimes comes late at night, when we are alone, when we are facing a crisis. The response that is deep

¹ “Biography for Tom Smothers,” Internet Movie Database, 4/2/2010, <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0810691/bio>>

within us may be that this good news is too good: too good to be true, too good to be believed. *An idle tale!*

The affirmation that Jesus Christ is alive and at work in our world does not make sense in our rational world. In the world we live in, when people die, they stay dead. It looks like an idle tale unless the God who created this world came to us to claim us, to restore us. Jesus' life and death and resurrection is the affirmation that God is in control, that death no longer is our final destiny. This, my friends, is not an idle tale because it is entirely God's tale.

The world as we know it is a Good Friday world: a world of betrayal and suffering and death. These qualities seem to rule, to have the upper hand to carry the day, a day when people's wounds are deep. But God has a different plan. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is, as we say these days, a game-changer.

This is the most stunning claim the Christian faith has to make: God is in charge. This is God's world, and in Jesus Christ, God has come to claim it. The reign of God is real and will prevail. Nothing in life or in death can separate us from that promise, from the love of God made known to us in Christ Jesus.

Does this mean there is no more death? Obviously not. Death is undeniable and inevitable. What the resurrection means is that the ultimate power of death has been altered. The Apostle Paul got it so right with his eloquent rhetorical question, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:55, 57). The resurrection does not alter the reality of death. What the resurrection does is to defeat the power of death to rob life of its meaning and its purpose.

Edna St. Vincent Millay begins one of her poems with this pithy line: "I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death."² Does death have power? Of course it does, but Easter, the good, glad news of Easter is this: death no longer has the ultimate power.

² Edna St. Vincent Millay. "Conscientious Objector," *Collected Poems* (New York: Harper, 1956), 305.

N.T. Wright, an Anglican priest and bishop of Durham, England, in his book *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* puts it this way:

*When Jesus emerged from the tomb, justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty rose with him. Something has happened in and through Jesus as a result of which the world is a different place, a place where heaven and earth have been joined forever. God's future has arrived in the present. Instead of mere echoes, we hear the voice itself: a voice which speaks of rescue from evil and death, and hence of new creation.*³

Another witness, Anne Lamott, wrote, “Easter is so profound. Easter says that love is more powerful than death: bigger than the dark, bigger than cancer, bigger than airport security lines.” She was with a dear friend who was dying and wrote: “Hope is not about proving anything. It’s about choosing to believe this one thing: that love is bigger than any grim, bleak [stuff] anyone can throw at us” (p. 274).

Friends, I hope you hear the story this morning as more than an idle tale. I hope you hear it as God’s new song, the proclamation that has been performed by Christ. Now there is a task remaining. N.T. Wright asserts that the task remaining is for us to perform the music of Easter, the music of resurrection.

To believe that Jesus Christ is not dead—“why do you seek the living among the dead?”—to believe that Jesus is alive gives us a task to perform that music of the resurrection, to give brave testimony. It happens in every act of kindness, every act of courage that speaks out against evil, every visit to someone who is homebound, every meal served at the shelter, every Habitat home built for someone. The music of resurrection, the song of hope is performed among us as a community of God’s people.

Calvin Butts is the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, which is located north of 125th Street in New York City. It is in the midst of social decay

³ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: why Christianity makes sense* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 100.

and dysfunction, burned out buildings, pawn shops, boarded up storefronts and grocery stores, prostitutes and crack dealers plying their trades. The Abyssinian Baptist Church decided to stay put and play the music of the resurrection. They established a bank, a latchkey program for children after school, a housing program, and they conducted boycotts against overpriced supermarkets. A reporter from the *New York Times* did a story on this church and its remarkable ministries. They interviewed the pastor, Calvin Butts. The reporter said to him, “You’re doing great stuff. But it’s hard to see what difference any of that is making. What enables you and your folks to keep going?” Calvin Butt’s answer was classic. “We’ve read the Bible,” he said, “and we know how it ends. We aren’t at the end yet.”⁴

We know how it ends. We know there is hope, and we try to keep that hope alive in the community around us.

Hear the music. Perform it, for the good news of the day is:

Christ is alive!
Let Christians sing.
Till earth and sky and ocean ring
With joy, with justice, love, and praise.⁵

Let it be so among us! Amen.

⁴ Theodore J. Wardlaw, “Preaching the Advent Texts,” *Journal for Preachers* XXXI (Advent 2007): 31:4.

⁵ Brian Wren, “Christ Is Alive!” *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 108.