

He Is Risen!
Matthew 28:1-10
March 23, 2008
Kory Wilcoxson

The great church figure Martin Luther once wrote, “Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection not in books alone, but in every single leaf of springtime.” Obviously, Luther never spent his Easter in Chicago. But even on wintry days like today, we are reminded that if God can raise Jesus from the dead, God can surely make brown grass covered in white snow turn green again.

Today is all about resurrection. After six long weeks of Lent, we come to the day that helps make sense of all the other days, not just the meal of Maundy Thursday and the tragedy of Good Friday. A pastor once said that Easter is something we do once every spring, but resurrection is something God does everyday.

We think of Easter as a day of celebration, but for the people experiencing the first Easter, it was anything but a party. The reaction of those who learn about the resurrection is not elation or happiness, but confusion, disbelief and fear. This is scary stuff we’re talking about.

We don’t get that, because our worship – and maybe even our faith – doesn’t lend itself to being surprised. A few times my daughter Sydney has hidden behind a piece of furniture and jumped out to scare me, making me spill hot tea all over myself. That proves my point that kids don’t get heart attacks, they just give them. My first reaction to Sydney is usually anger: “Syd, stop that! You know I don’t like to be surprised!”

That’s especially true when it comes to our worship. We want our Sunday mornings to be orderly and dignified. The most demonstrative we get is a vigorous head-nod. But a resurrection Savior is not orderly and dignified. That’s not predictable and manageable. That will leave us shaking in our nice Sunday shoes. What does the song say? Sometimes it causes me to tremble.

That’s certainly what the ladies approaching the tomb experience. First, they trembled out of sadness from the previous day’s events. After the last couple chapters in Matthew and the first verse of our reading, you get the impression the story is over. The bad guys have won. Death has won. The women are simply going to the tomb to put the sad period on the end of a tragic sentence.

But wait! Just when it seems all is lost, there’s a glimmer of hope, and eleventh-hour surprise. I’m not ashamed to admit I grew up watching professional wrestling – there’s not a lot to do in southern Indiana – and one of my favorites was Hulk Hogan. Hogan had this patented move where he’d let his opponent wear him down and get him in a sleeper hold. When that happened, it looked like all was lost. The referee would raise Hogan’s hand to see if he was still conscious, and it would drop. Then the referee would raise Hogan’s hand again, and it would drop. And then the referee would raise Hogan’s hand again, and just as it was about to drop, the limp hand would turn into a fist, and it would start trembling and shaking, and Hogan would break out of the hold and beat the snot out of the other guy. I believed every minute of it.

That’s what the women at the tomb experience: a last-second rally, a trembling earthquake, a rolled-away stone. The poor men who were guarding the tomb are put in a

sleeper hold of their own, as they shook and became like dead men at the sight of the angel.

No longer trembling from sadness, the women are now trembling in fear of this miracle. We know, because the angel's first words are, "Do not be afraid." Easy for him to say! He wasn't just body-slammed by the news that Jesus is no longer dead. This is not orderly and dignified. This is not predictable and manageable. This is resurrection.

So now the women, trembling with excitement, go to tell the disciples of this great news. And on the way, they meet the Risen One himself, who nonchalantly says, "Greetings!" like it's the most natural thing in the world to run into a previously dead guy while strolling through a cemetery. I'm sure if the women were carrying hot tea they would have spilled it all over themselves. They fall down and worship Jesus, who says to them, "Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee," which was where they were to start spreading the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. And so begins the story of what we know as Christianity, the story that has changed countless lives.

What does this story mean for you? I don't mean on an intellectual level, because there's comes a point where all our explanations fall silent. Resurrection is not a matter of analysis and inference; it is a matter of faith and worship. So on this Easter Sunday, when the Lord has once again been resurrected, what is it going to mean for you?

For some, it may mean a new beginning. Remember how this passage opens: "At the dawn of the first day of the week..." A new day has dawned, and with it a new sense of hope. Because we've just slogged our way through Lent, we tend to think of Easter as the end of something. But in actuality it's the beginning of something. New life, new hope, a new call. What is beginning today for you?

Maybe this Easter represents a renewal of hope for you. You know, our world is so good at giving us reasons not to hope. It doesn't take much for any hope we have to be choked out like a flower overcome by weeds. But Easter is a reminder that the love of God blossoms through the thickest thistles.

What do you hope for in life? I don't mean things like a bigger house or latest iPod. There's nothing wrong with those kinds of hopes, but those aren't resurrection hopes. Resurrection hopes are so exciting and unreal they cause us to tremble. Cured illnesses. Restored relationships. Life after death.

Think about it for a second. What do you hope for? God can do that. If God can raise Jesus from the dead, God can do that. We probably can't see it, maybe don't even believe it, but God can do it. Can a ruined life be restored? I hope so. I have a relative going through a very difficult time right now. She's made bad choices, and is now facing consequences that could change her life forever. At times it looks like there's no way out, like there's a huge stone blocking her path.

But I believe in a God who moves stones. Is that not what the resurrection of Jesus is all about? Did he not forgive prostitutes and tax collectors, the lowest of the low? Did he not heal those who were doomed to a life of sickness? Did he not say, "Your sins are forgiven?" As Jean Valjean says about God in the play "Les Miserables," "He gave me hope when hope was gone." That's resurrection.

But what about those of us who have hoped and hoped, and yet still feel the darkness of the tomb around us? It would be great if God rescued all of us from our trials, but life doesn't work that way. For those of us who feel like we're on the losing end of a sleeper hold, is there a message here for us today?

I believe there is. What we hear today, as we approaching the empty tomb with trembling steps, is the opposite of so many other things we've heard. Time and time again, when we've approached someone with hope in our hearts, we've been turned back by one simple word: "No." Can I have another chance? No. Is there hope? No. Will you forgive me? No.

In the midst of "no," the resurrection is God's "yes," a "yes" spoken to us, shouted to us, not only about our existence in this world, but the one beyond. Can we say a definitive word about what awaits us after this life? I can't. I know what I believe, but I can't tell you for sure. The best I can offer is, "I don't know."

But the resurrection is God saying, "I know." Before it is born, a baby has no idea about the world it is about to enter. Likewise, we know nothing of the world that awaits us. But we do know the stone has been moved, the tomb is empty, death has been overcome, and despite what the world may tell us, the love of God has won.

This is not just about something that happened in the past. If the resurrection were just a one-time event that happened 2000 years ago, we'd be studying it in history class, not reading about it in church. But we don't proclaim about Christ, "He rose"; we speak boldly, "He is risen!" Resurrection is something God is doing every day.

And that perspective helps us put everything else into place. No matter what we are facing, no matter what life throws at us, no matter what unknowns loom in our future, we know that because Jesus lives – and he does live – we can face tomorrow, because we don't face it alone. We let God work every day to resurrect our minds and hearts now, so that God can resurrect our bodies later.

And we are called to go to Galilee, to take what we know, what we've experienced, and share it with others, telling them – or better yet, showing them – what it means to live in light of the resurrection. Because he lives, we live. If we believe, we no longer are trapped in our old life. We have new life, a life that continues on well after our time here on earth has ended. We have been given a new beginning and a new hope and a new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just thinking about that causes me to tremble. Praise be to God.