



A Glimpse of God's Last Act of Love

TEXT
Matthew 28:1-10

April 21, 2019 — Easter Sunday — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

H*e is not here, he is raised.* If these words are true, and I believe they are, then these words change everything — not just with death, but with every moment of life. Resurrection is a work of God's love, a love that will not let go of you, and a love that will transform you. Resurrection is God's last act of love.

These women, those first Easter preachers, they stood in the cemetery, and the earth shook. Angels appeared. Soldiers given the most unfortunate job — make sure the dead guy stays dead — they look dead now.

But to the women, the angels say, "He is not here; he has been raised ... and you will see him in Galilee." OK, but why Galilee? He's come back, but now we have to search for him?

Why didn't Jesus just walk back with the Marys and surprise the guys. "I'm back." That would have been the kindest thing.

Nicholas Wolterstorff taught theology at Yale Divinity School. His son Eric died in an accident at the age of 25. In a little book titled *Lament for a Son*, Dr. Wolterstorff wrote:

"I did not think of death as a bottomless pit. I did not grieve as one with no hope. Yet, Eric is gone now. I cannot talk with him now. I cannot hear of his plans for the future. ... That is my grief now. For that grief, what consolation can there be other than having him back?"¹

I imagine the disciples would have felt the same, but Jesus didn't come back to them. Evidently, resurrection means you have to take a road trip to Galilee. Why is that?

Here's what I think. Resurrection is not just about eternal life; it's about transformed life. In the resurrection, we do not simply live eternally, but we become the person God always intended us to be. If you are like me, this is good news. To say it more plainly, if you told me that I would be just like I am now, I would be this person forever, I'm not sure that's good news.

Resurrection is the work of God's love to make us new. That's why Galilee is so critical to the Easter story.

The angels say, "He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." OK, don't read this literally. It's not like there's a pizzeria in Galilee where Jesus hangs out. Galilee

is not a zip code; Galilee is a condition. Read the whole gospel, and you know that Galilee is the place where Jesus did his ministry. Galilee is where he healed the sick. It's where he forgave those who had messed up their lives. It's where he included women and children, lepers and Gentiles — those who society said didn't belong. They belonged to him. Galilee was where he spent every day making right that which had gone wrong. Galilee is the place where his loved showed up. If I understand it, what the angels say is, "Go live like he lived, and you will see him."

Here at Village, we speak of God's promised day. God's promised day is that ultimate day of resurrection. It's when God makes right all that has gone wrong. It's when swords are beaten into plowshares and when justice rolls down like waters. It's when love defines every encounter because we are at last who God intends us to be.

But that ultimate work of love is not simply announced; we are called to live toward it. To go to Galilee is to live toward God's promised day.

And goodness knows we live in need of transformation.

I could offer you a litany of wrongs in the world. We could talk of the crisis of the day. Violence is common. The vulnerable are often abused. The planet itself is threatened.

And the brokenness is in the church too. Too often the church makes the news because churches have excluded some of God's children or abused some of God's children. Goodness knows we live in need of transformation.

That is the truth. But this is also the truth: Christ has not simply announced the day when all will be redeemed, but he has called us to live toward that day, to go to Galilee.

We were working at Betty's home. Betty lived nestled in the shadows of Appalachia. Betty's home was a lime green trailer where she lived with her mother, who was suffering from dementia. The trailer was carved into the mountainside, and the mountain was eroding, threatening to push her trailer off the mountain.

For a week, a few of us worked to build a retaining wall. It was the hardest labor I have ever done. By Thursday, I could tell we weren't going to finish. We were doing more than battling a mountain; we were battling poverty, and poverty is a strong enemy.

Each day at lunchtime, Betty invited us to bring our dirty, smelly bodies and rest on her porch. We ate peanut butter and jelly or ham and cheese, and I closed my eyes for a moment. On Monday, we filled this time with laughter, but by Thursday

we mostly sat in an exhausted silence.

I had not finished my sandwich when I heard hammering. Thompson had gotten up, walked back to the wall and was hammering rebar to secure another crosstie in the wall. Thompson was a ninth-grader who had spent most of his time on the trip complaining that his mother made him come to Scott County, Tennessee. He wanted me to understand that he was far too cool for this. But on Thursday, he didn't stop for lunch. He got up and went back to the wall. I said, "Thompson, what are you doing? You need to take a break."

He said, "Rev., what is she going to do? No one even knows she's here. Rev., we have to finish this wall. We have to finish this wall." I realized in that moment that Galilee could be found in Tennessee, and as much as anytime in my life, I knew the risen Christ was alive.

Now don't let me claim more than I can. The world is always going to be a mess, and we are always going to be a mess. We will never heal everything that needs to be healed, and we will never comfort every sorrow or set to rights everything that has gone wrong. When we come to the end, we will stand in need of God to redeem our imperfect lives. And God's last act of love will be to do just that.

At the same time, resurrection calls us to do the good that is ours to do.

This past week, our children's wing was full of children

from Operation Breakthrough. Some of you were there with kids at tables. A few of them crawled into laps. You were reading together. To me, it looked like a glimpse of Galilee.

Some of you learned of prison inmates whose families were struggling, so a few months ago you purchased gifts for the holidays to show a little care for those the community would rather ignore. That's living toward Galilee.

Every week there are conversations organized at this church for the community to gather and talk about things that matter — because communities need a place where we can be informed and talk in civil tone about the things that matter most. And sometimes in those conversations, we get a glimpse of Galilee.

And we realized it's important to be known as a church not defined by who we keep out, but by who we let in. Because when all are welcome, then we are closer to Galilee.

Because Christ has called us to Galilee, you will provide medical care in the Dominican Republic and Haiti and Kenya, and you will break bread and offer prayers at the Mexican border — because the day we realize all people matter is the day we find ourselves in Galilee.

Because Christ has called us to Galilee, we will care for the earth and not just on Earth Day.

What I'm saying is, because Christ has called us to

Galilee, we are living toward the day when all that has gone wrong will be made right. We aren't going to be perfect in that. But we will do the good that is ours to do.

And then when our lives are over and we come to the end, we trust God will fulfill God's ultimate work of love and redeem all that has gone wrong.

I was eating dinner with my brother Gene. Gene was born a special needs kid. At 57, he thinks like a 5-year-old. He loves to watch reruns of *Chips* and *Emergency*. He loves when I tell you about him. He knows my name, but he calls me Bwuddah. His dream is to drive a car. A red car is preferable. He's 57 years old, and he just wants to drive.

We were eating at his favorite restaurant, Shoney's Big Boy. (Do you know what that is?) We ordered the "cholesterol plate." We were talking about the trips he would take when he got his red car. I'll never forget this moment. He asked me, "Bwuddah, do you think I'll ever drive that car?"

"Yes, Gene. Yes, I do."

Now I know he will never drive a car. But that's not what he was asking me, not really. He was asking me: Will there ever be a day when all this that has gone wrong will be made right? Will there ever be a day when everything that has fallen apart will be put together? Will there ever be a day when God will repair that which we cannot heal?

I said yes. God will do that for you and for me and for all, because the love of God witnessed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a transforming love that will never let us go; and we will not simply live with God, we will be who God created us to be.

"He is not here. He has been raised, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."

If these words are true, and I believe they are, they have changed everything not only in death, but in every moment of life.

¹Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (1987), p. 31

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.