

Sermon – “The Unimaginable”

Scripture Readings – Colossians 3:1-4, John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

In our first scripture reading, Colossians 3:1-4, Christians are called to live lives that reflect their belief in the resurrection and the power of God to forgive. Although baptism is not explicitly mentioned in this passage, the connection is implicit. For anyone who has invested their hope in the risen Lord, it turns out certain expectations go with that bond. There is a proper way to conduct oneself in light of the resurrection event. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Amen.

And now, let us open the scriptures to the reading of the events that took place on that first Easter morning as they are recorded by “the other disciple” in the Gospel of John, chapter 20. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" Ra BOONE' E (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. Amen.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: “The Unimaginable”

The text: Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; John 20:18a

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Today we gather with Christians around the world to commemorate the unimaginable, the unthinkable, the inconceivable, mindboggling story of the resurrection of a young, poor marginalized Rabbi... Jesus of Nazareth, following a politically motivated, cruel, and undeserving death on a cross outside Jerusalem.

As Roland Bainton points out in his book Christianity, which the Covenant Bible Study is reading together this spring: *Caesar Augustus and Quirinius would have been not only amazed but shocked had they been told that the one who would make them memorable was Jesus, a Jew, for the Jews alone would do no homage to the emperor as divine.*

And how unimaginable is it that the One who was crucified “King of the Jews” would become the way and the truth for people of all walks of life, making no distinction between Jew or Greek, free or slave, male or female.

And how mindboggling is it that in spite of all the foibles of the Church over the years, we continue to proclaim and unravel the mystery of resurrection in our own lives and in the world today....how it is that the God who is beyond our comprehension would reveal what it means to be fully human by becoming one of us...the way of Christ is the way of humility, forgiveness and resurrection. The God who is beyond our wildest dreams calls us to accept our humanity, invites us to respect the humanity of others, and empowers us to do the unimaginable:

The unimaginable is referenced in a song from the revolutionary musical “Hamilton,” which has recently resurrected Broadway. Peter, our son Paul and I saw Hamilton in Chicago a few weeks ago, the same day we delivered 50 care packages to the Syrian Community Network on the north side of Chicago. These care packages were lovingly created by our Children of Abraham interfaith group to greet and to welcome poor, friendless Syrian children who have come to America.

The music and lyrics of Hamilton were created by Lin-Manual Miranda who was inspired reading the biography of Alexander Hamilton written by historian Ron Chernow in 2004.

In many ways the entire production of Hamilton is unimaginable. The story of our European founding fathers told in the genre of rap, originally performed by an entire cast of people of color, is unthinkable. Yet rap is the music of revolution and society’s marginalized, and our founding father, Alexander Hamilton, *was both*. Furthermore, for children in America, this fascinating screenplay has resurrected the unimaginable story of our founding fathers and mothers. The clever lines and lyrics have renewed an enthusiasm for American history, poignantly so for twenty thousand poor youth in New York City who have seen the show and delighted in the rap, thanks to the generosity of the Rockefeller Foundation.

The musical captures Hamilton's marginalized childhood with succinct, colorful language. Born out of wedlock, abandoned by his father, Hamilton becomes an orphan in the untimely death of his mother. He is eventually taken in by the kindness of a prosperous merchant family. A group of wealthy local men recognize his genius and sponsor his education at King's College in New York City where he comes to America as a poor, friendless immigrant.

As the story of Hamilton's life is rapped, the lyrics reveal psychological insight into how the losses, the insecurities and the unresolved conflicts of his childhood haunt him and color all the days of his life. Hamilton's resolute spirit and prolific writing are both his strengths and his weaknesses.

And so woven within the story of this founding father's accomplishments, as a prominent author of the U.S. Constitution and the Federalist Papers and as the founder of our nation's financial system, is the unraveling of Alexander's marriage to Elisa through infidelity, betrayal, blackmail, public confession, political disaster, and then the unimaginable, the tragic death of their son Philip killed in a duel defending his father's honor.

And this is when we learn through a melodic song in a minor key that the Hamilton's move uptown because it's quiet uptown and they are working through the unimaginable. We are gently asked to have pity, to give them their space, time in church with their other children, time in prayer, time in conversation with one another, time walking in the garden, as they learn to live with the unimaginable.

And then serendipitously with one word the truly unimaginable is spoken with clarity and beauty. As Alexander and Elisa stand in the garden together, she takes his hand and the chorus sings: Forgiveness, can you imagine? Forgiveness!

When we are able to do the unimaginable, to forgive, to our surprise and delight we experience a resurrection and we recognize that it is by the grace and power of God that we are able rise to the occasion.

On this day of resurrection we proclaim the mystery of Christian faith, that Jesus Christ risked death and brokenness to give us life and make us whole. In Christ's strength to absorb the hostility of the world on the cross we encounter a healing and life-giving God on Easter morning.

Today we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we proclaim with Christians around the world that death is not the last word, that the love of God could not be contained in the tomb. Love trumps hate and God has the last word: Forgiveness ...the unimaginable! Hallelujah! Amen.