

Sermon – “Relentless Resurrection”  
Scripture Reading – Matthew 28:1-10  
Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

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 in Matthew 28:1-10. Hear God’s Holy Word.

*After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup> For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” <sup>8</sup> So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “Relentless Resurrection”

*The text: But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid.... Matthew 28:5a*

Let us pray. We gather with gratitude and joy for the meaning of this day and for the gift of your love which is stronger than our fears. Amen

“Do not be afraid!” According to Matthew’s gospel, as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary approached the tomb to anoint Christ’s body that first Easter morning, they discover the stone rolled back, the tomb empty, and an angel reassuring them with these words, “Do not be afraid!” Ironically, these are the first words the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary, the mother of Jesus, when he approached her with the news that she will bear a son named Emmanuel, God with us. One might say these words sum up the good news of the entire gospel narrative, words spoken often by Christ himself throughout his ministry. “Do not be afraid!”

I think it is fair to say that although these words can be of comfort spoken by a mother or father to a child, fear is more complex for adults and words of reassurance are more difficult. According to UCC pastor, the Rev. Martin Copenhaver...As we get older, we cannot escape the realization that, in Ernest Hemingway’s phrase, ‘life breaks everyone’ at some time or another or, at the very least, wears us down relentlessly.” (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, pg. 348). Surely, we are feeling the relentless shadow of the COVID-19 virus hovering over our world, even on this Easter morning as we celebrate the resurrection.

John Bell wrote a simple song for the Iona Community in Scotland with the words, “Don’t be afraid, my love is stronger than your fear.” On Thursday, January 30, 2020 at 4:00 p.m. in the afternoon, Karen Sherrick and I gathered for worship at the conference we were attending in Little Rock. The service began with this simple song of prayer and it was song throughout the

hour interwoven within readings, doodling, silence, and reflections. As I listened to this lovely song which I first heard in Iona, I found myself unexpectedly overcome with emotion.

The members of the Kenya Mission Trip were on my mind and during this worship hour I received a text from Reverend Choi that they landed safely in Chicago. Tears of joy and gratitude filled my being along with a powerful sense of being bathed in the relentless love of God which is greater than my fear. I was mindful that my anxiety about this mission was greater than I had realized, yet I was still surprised by the weeping of my heart during this worship experience.

Later that evening as Karen and I toured the Clinton Presidential Museum, I received a call from the nephew of one of my dearest friends, Dr. Ann Johanson, to tell me that Ann died that afternoon around 4:00 p.m. overlooking the Gulf of Mexico in her cottage on Sanibel Island. Unbeknownst to me, while Ann was crossing the bar to meet her Maker, I was being held in the comfort of the God whose love is stronger than our fear.

Ann was a pediatric endocrinologist, who rose to the stature of six feet, rose to the top of her medical school class, and rose to the challenge with relentless research to develop widely-available human growth hormone so that unusually small children around the world could attain normal heights.

Ann finished her medical training at the prestigious Johns Hopkins Medical School, whose researchers are in the news again during this unprecedented time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the last 70 years, researchers at that university have cultivated and provided the world with HeLa cells, H-E-L-A, named for Henrietta Lacks, whose immortal cells have brought forth relentless resurrections through the discovery of many lifesaving drugs and vaccines.

One hundred years ago, Henrietta Lacks was the sixth of ten children born to poor black parents in rural Virginia. At an early age she worked on a tobacco farm and married her cousin with whom she brought five children into the world. Shortly after her last childbirth, she felt a knot in her womb for which she sought care at Johns Hopkins, the only nearby hospital which would treat blacks. Doctors biopsied the tumor, diagnosed her with cervical cancer, and treated her with radiation. Despite treatment, she suffered through several months of spreading cancer. She died at the age of 31 on October 4, 1951 and was buried in an unmarked grave at a family cemetery near Lackstown, named after her family's slaveholders.

Unbeknownst to her, cancer researcher Dr. George Otto Gey studied cells taken from her cancer during her treatment. These unusually robust cancer cells came to be known as "immortal" since they could miraculously thrive and multiply in a test tube unlike most human cells which would die within a few days; in fact, cells from her cancer are still living in top-notch labs throughout the world today, permitting scientists everywhere to study how human cells work.

Three years after her death and during the height of the polio epidemic in 1954, Dr. Jonas Salk used Henrietta's cells to study the virus and to develop its first vaccine. Over the ensuing decades, her cells have relentlessly risen again and again to investigate cures for cancer, AIDS, and now, hopefully, COVID-19. Though born among lowly means and buried in an unmarked grave, the life journey and remarkable story of Henrietta Lacks captures the heart of the Gospel which recounts suffering, death, redemption, and, yes, relentless resurrection.

Today we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ commemorated relentlessly again and again over two millennia. We rejoice with Christians around the world that death is not the last word, that the love of God is stronger than our fear and will not be contained in the tomb.

The good news does not deny that suffering, sacrifice and death are a part of each of our lives. The good news affirms the Risen God whose angels reassure us, who has the power to bring life out of death, salvation out of sacrifice, and redemption out of suffering.

And so my friends, we proclaim this paradox, this unbelievable reality, what some have called a hoax, and we do so by faith, “recognizing that realities about which we hold no doubt are not large enough to reveal God to us. No, without apology or hesitation, what we proclaim at Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by certainty and too wonderful to be found only within the borders of our imagination.” (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, pg. 374, paraphrase of a quote by Martin Copenhaver)

Do not be afraid, and know that our Redeemer liveth!

Halleluiah! Amen.