

“New Life”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Easter Sunday – April 21, 2019

Luke 24: 1-12

We were all struck by the images we saw on television, on our computers, or on our phones on Monday afternoon. If you were like me, they stopped you in your tracks, and you were transfixed by what you were witnessing. Flames dancing all around the spire of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. It felt like a movie, and your mind wondered whether it was real, or if it was some incredible special effects.

Only it wasn't a movie. It was real. And it was horrifying. It was every pastor's nightmare, every church governing board's greatest fear. Except this was at one of the most revered and celebrated spaces of worship in the world. If you've been fortunate enough to visit Notre Dame, as I have, you remember the incredible stained-glass rose windows, the soaring columns and ceilings, the sound of organ, instrumental, and vocal music being offered in that space. To see it burning in front of my eyes was surreal. And it brought back vivid memories of when my church in high school was struck by lightning and caught on fire. The damage, the chaos, the interruption to life and routine was significant and long-lasting.

Churches experience fires all the time. Some are accidental, as it appears was the case at Notre Dame. Some are acts of nature, like the lightning which struck my home church in West Virginia. Some are intentional acts of hate and terror, like the three black churches which were set ablaze in Louisiana two weeks before the fire in Paris. The fire at Notre Dame has received the most publicity, but it is not any more destructive or harrowing to Christ's Church. Fires to church buildings cause fear, anxiety, and perplexity, for a space that is held as sacred and integral to spiritual life and practice is damaged or destroyed.

This experience has also reminded us that the church is more than buildings. Don't get me wrong – it is heart-breaking to consider the damage done to this 850-year-old cathedral. But it will be rebuilt – the immediate response for funds has been overwhelming. Whether or not other churches are rebuilt depends on their size, their insurance, and their community's response. Ultimately, though, Christ's Church is not limited or defined solely by a structure or a building.

Richard Hong is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Englewood, New Jersey. Three years ago during Holy Week, their church building was destroyed by fire. He shares these words after the fire at Notre Dame:

The destruction of our sanctuary just five days before Easter made that Easter even more meaningful to us. Easter is a day when Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It represents life after death. It

represents recovery from tragedy. In the aftermath of the fire, the coming of Easter helped us focus not on what we lost, but on what we could become.

We were reminded that a church is the people, not a building -- the Greek word that ultimately became "church" was ekklesia, which means "assembly." It was never meant to refer to the structure in which the people gathered. The structure is meant to serve the people, not the other way around...

One of the more interesting observations I made after our fire is that while strangers were sending me messages about how devastated they were upon hearing about it, our members were not devastated. Our members set about the task of continuing to be the church. We lost our building, but we still had our church -- because we still had each other, and God was with us. God is still with us (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/19/opinions/easter-after-notre-dame-fire-what-i-pray-hong/index.html>).

We gather this morning for worship because we believe God is still with us. Despite an arrest and a betrayal. Despite a flogging and an unjust verdict. Despite nails in the hands and feet, and a pierced side. Despite a dying breath from high on a cross. Despite a body laid in a tomb, and a rock covering its entrance.

Despite death's seemingly final word - we believe God is still us on this Easter morning.

In Luke's Gospel, after Jesus has died, we are told that Joseph of Arimathea takes Jesus' body to be buried. The body was prepared for burial according to Jewish custom, and "The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid" (23:55). These women were eyewitnesses to Jesus' final resting place, assuring that he was cared for with dignity in death. But being late in the day on Friday, the sabbath was to begin at sundown. They did not do anything more to Jesus' body at that time, so that they could observe the sabbath as instructed by the commandments.

After the sabbath, these same women came back to anoint Jesus' body - to continue to care for him in death as he had cared for them in life. But in the dim light of early dawn, things were not the same as when they were last there. The stone was rolled away, and the tomb was open. As they entered, they no longer saw his linen-wrapped body, but instead the tomb was empty. They were perplexed.

Out of nowhere, two men in bright white clothes were standing beside them in the tomb, and they were terrified. Just as the angels calmed the anxious shepherds outside of Bethlehem, these messengers from God sought to calm the women, reminding the women of what Jesus had told them: "that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again" (24:7). Instead of puzzlement and terror, the women remembered what their Lord had told them, and they went and told the others. Instead of being disoriented, they became reoriented as witnesses to the unbelievable.

What causes us to believe the unbelievable? In Luke's story of Easter morning, the risen Jesus is not to be found. The women's and disciples' belief was forged in the absence of his body, not the presence of his risen self. But that is extremely difficult to trust, isn't it? Our human nature demands that we see, touch, and hear this unbelievable thing before we will accept it as truth. So, why would the women accept what the messengers from God said? Why would Peter, after running by himself to the tomb and seeing the linen cloths by themselves, go home "amazed at what had happened?"

Because they remembered. They remembered who Jesus was and what he had said to them, what he had taught them. They remembered how Peter had called him the Messiah, and how through that testimony Jesus revealed what he would endure on their behalf (9:20-22). They remembered his commitment, his compassion, his love, his humility - both in life and through death. They remembered - and that calmed their fears, that gave them peace, that inspired them to bear witness to what they had seen and heard and experienced. Because they remembered, they believed the unbelievable.

We really cannot celebrate Easter fully and completely without facing our own perplexities and fears when it comes to death. The story takes place in a cemetery, at a tomb, where an earthly body has been laid to rest. At the time of death, it is natural to ask questions about what happens next. Will we have these bodies when we are in heaven? Who will we see? What will we do? Faith in the resurrection comes out of our facing and living through our encounters with death.

Last Sunday afternoon, I experienced that first-hand. After church on Palm Sunday, I went to the VA Hospital to visit John Owensby. John had had a pacemaker and defibrillator installed two days earlier, and was doing well on Saturday. As I walked down the hallway, I was looking forward to seeing John and possibly catching the end of the Masters golf tournament, which I knew he would be watching.

However, when I walked into his room, I sensed that something wasn't right. At first, I thought John was sleeping, but I noticed that his eyes were open and had not moved when I entered the room. As I walked to his bedside, I placed my hand on his arm. While he was still warm, I realized that his chest was not moving. For what maybe was five to ten seconds, I knew how the women felt - perplexed, puzzled, bewildered. But then, I understood and accepted this new reality - that John had died. A nurse had been in his room just two minutes before I walked in, and he was fine. When I let the nurses know, they were shocked, to say the least.

But I have to admit that I felt a sense of peace and assurance in the midst of that experience. For I remembered what this week was all about. I remembered the recent physical and mental challenges John had suffered with, and I was grateful he was not in pain anymore. I remembered that just as he had worked to help so many people with painting and repairing their homes, now God had prepared a house with many rooms where John would

reside. I remembered because others had borne witness to the empty tomb before me, and now I was called to bear witness, so that others might come to believe in the unbelievable.

Nancy Clair Pittman speaks of another lesson which Luke gives us in his account of Easter morning. *“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” the angelic figures say to the tops of the women’s heads. We are just as guilty of such a fruitless search. We too want to tend the corpses of long dead ideas and ideals. We cling to former visions of ourselves and our churches as if they might come back to life as long as we hold on to them. We grasp our loved ones too tightly, refusing to allow them to change, to become bigger, or smarter, or stronger. We choose to stay with what we know in our hearts to be dead, because it is safe, malleable, and so susceptible to burnishing through private memory. The words of the unworldly messengers are a challenge to stop hanging on to the dead and to move into new life. They are reminders that the Holy One dwells wherever new life bursts forth* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 351).

If we are not changed by what we have heard from the women and the witnesses who came before us about Easter morning, then we are searching for God among the dead. We are called as witnesses to the resurrection to new life – new life as Christ’s disciples, and new life as Christ’s Body, the Church. This cannot be a day which is like any other day. This must be a day, a time, a moment which shakes us, terrifies us, but ultimately moves us out to tell others what has been shared with us: he is not here, he is risen.

How are you clinging to former visions of yourself? By your actions or your inactions, do you give others the impression that this is just “an idle tale?” or that this day has transformed your life forever? How are you called to be changed by the women’s testimony? What new life must you move into today?

How is the church – this church – tending to corpses of long dead ideas and ideals? In what ways do our words and actions give others the impression that we are witnessing to the resurrection in all that we do? How must we be changed by the testimony of the women, and what do we need to remember anew, so that others might believe the unbelievable? What new life must we move into today?

Don’t take this day for granted, for it is a day unlike any other. It is a day which shakes us to our core, reminding us that God’s grace and love is more powerful than anything we will ever know. Allow the women’s testimony to permeate your soul, so that with your whole being you will believe the unbelievable:

“He is not here. He is risen. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Alleluia! Amen.