

Greatest of All Time: 7. The Greatest Promise Keeper
John 19:41-42; John 20:1, 11-16, 18
Easter, April 17, 2022
Pastor Steve Richards

For those of you who may not be aware, last fall my wife, Amanda, was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer and as her health declined to the point that the outlook was grim. I asked what experiences she would like in the time remaining and her only request was to spend as much time as possible with family. We, then, discussed if there were certain family experiences and the one that stood out from the others was being able to take our two-year-old grandson to the beach and watch him experience the sand and the ocean for the first time. And last weekend was that experience. We'd had weeks to build the excitement. For days our grandson, Basil, mentioned how he was going on a plane up in the sky. We also talked about seeing the ocean – though at two years of age – did he really understand something he had never seen or experienced? He was excited, because we were excited. But how could he understand? So on Friday, we were able to coax him into his new swimsuit, and we walked to the beach. Amanda got in place to be able to capture the moment with photographs. Basil, his mother, and I walked toward the water and as the water came close enough to get his feet wet, he turned to walk back to the condo, and said, "I don't like it." All this planning. All this build up. All this anticipation. All of us were ready. And, "I don't like it!" Are there any other parents and grandparents who could share their own story this morning? Just so you don't think the entire weekend was a complete wasted effort, the next day we introduced him to the swimming pool for the first time, and he loved that.

So, how does this have anything to do with Easter? As those who have endured the past two years of my grandparent experience, it may not – I just want to tell you about my grandson! But last weekend, I thought about the disciples of Jesus and how Jesus had been leaving clues that there would be an Easter, but either the disciples were not paying attention or there was really no way for them to comprehend Easter without experiencing – and even then they didn't understand. How do you explain what happened in the past week?

They knew that entering Jerusalem would carry risks. Jesus had been warned many times that there were authorities that were ready to put an end to his life, but Jesus was resolute about entering Jerusalem. And when they arrived on the Sunday that we now celebrate as Palm Sunday, they thought Jesus would launch a revolution – take his rightful place on the throne of David and defeat the Roman government once and for all. Hosanna! Hail, King Jesus! And they, the disciples, would sit on his right and his left. But that's not how the week had gone. And by Thursday night, things were terribly wrong – Jesus was betrayed by one of his own disciples, denied by another, and all of the rest had gone into hiding. It was done. It was over. All the expectations. All the anticipation. And, I hear them saying, "I don't like it."

But it's not the end of the story. **Early in the morning, of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.** This was the Mary whom Jesus had set free from seven demons that had taken hold of her life. As a result, she became a follower of Jesus. And on that Sunday morning, when she arrived at the tomb, she discovered that the stone had been removed. Grave robbers were not uncommon. So, she ran to where the disciples were hiding: **"They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him."** Peter and John ran back to the tomb, and the only thing they found in the tomb were the cloths used to wrap Jesus' body after he had been taken from the cross. This was odd. Why take a body and leave behind the cloth used to wrap the body? Such cloths were considered valuable which was generally what

grave robbers were seeking. If the body was stolen, why leave the cloths and then place them exactly as they would be if the body had been there? Their conclusion is that no one took Jesus away. He left death behind. Jesus must have conquered death – but what that meant would take time to understand.

The disciples return to the place they had been hiding, while Mary remains in the garden, grieving over the death of Jesus and the disappearance of his body. She notices a man who appears to be the gardener. Maybe he took his body. “Tell me,” she pleads, “Tell me where you put the body.” He replies with one word – her name – “Mary”. Immediately, she recognizes it is Jesus. She goes to the disciples with the news that she has seen Jesus. The disciples have locked the door – afraid for their own lives. That evening, Jesus shows up. But is it really Jesus? So he shows them the wounds in his hands and side. But one disciple, Thomas is not among them – and because he did not see for himself, Thomas would not believe any of it. **“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.”** A week later the disciples are together again and this time when Jesus appears, Thomas is among them. “My Lord and My God,” cries Thomas. And then these words from Jesus to you and me: **“Blessed are those who don’t see and yet believe.”**

And that’s the Easter story. It’s a great story, but – come on, Pastor Steve, do you really believe all this? We know you are paid to stand here and say you do, but what makes this any more believable than the ground hog seeing its shadow?

Without the resurrection, it is impossible to imagine the movement initiated by Jesus would have endured. A small group might have kept his name alive and called him Christ, but at best as a small group within Judaism that would have been eventually crushed by the heavy hand of the Roman Empire. But 2000 years later, two billion people, one-third of the world’s population gather today to hear this story that prompted a small band of close followers to put their lives on the line to say “I believe.” At the time John wrote this gospel, Christians were under persecution, banned from worship in the synagogue; soon they would be subject to death by the Romans simple for calling themselves Christian. All of the disciples are persecuted and all but John are killed for being Christian. Why endure the suffering, sacrifice and death to perpetuate a fraud? I not only believe in the resurrection, I am counting on it!

But what does it mean?

In the resurrection, we see that **good will ultimately triumph over evil**. Just when it seemed that evil had triumphed, that the life Jesus offered and the commandment to love could not possibly prevail – Just when it looked like Jesus on the cross was the end, Jesus lives and resurrection power prevails. Every week we hear the news: from Ukraine, more violence and death; from New York City, 30 people shot while riding a subway train on their way home; from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a week ago 2 people killed and 10 people wounded; across the Twin Cities, car jackings at gunpoint – children caught in the crossfire. So much violence that we hardly pay attention anymore. The message of humanity’s brokenness is relentless.

I want to share with you the photo of another two-year-old whose photo was also taken in the past week. [photo] I call this a cry for HOPE. This two-year-old lives Kyiv Ukraine. Her mother frantically writing her child’s identifying information on her child’s back. So that if she and her husband die, her daughter could find out who she is. This is the world in which we live. You may not find yourself in the middle of a war zone, but you may be in the middle of circumstances that you cannot control. maybe it’s your health or your finances; you are trying to care for a family member but it’s overwhelming; a child is out of control, or you need your parents, but it feels like

your parents don't understand; or you are battling some demon, some addiction, some temptation that has power over your life. The battles and challenges and crises are real – and you need hope – and we all need hope. Easter is the reminder that the God made you, will not let go of you, and if you will let the love of Christ be your core – that life, that love will give you the **power to overcome whatever threatens to defeat you.**

Last week, I went to the Internet and googled the word death. There were over 5 billion hits, and as scrolled through some of them, one caught my attention. **Deathclock.com**. By submitting my age, gender, my overall health and what was called my body mass index, I learned that my life will end on April 12, 2029. Actually, the first time I did it – the year was 2048 and I thought, Hey! Great! Another 26 years! But then I redid it and now each time it comes up with 2029, just 7 years. A window popped up on my screen with a clock that ticks off the seconds. **220** million seconds – but tick, tick, tick. If I want, I can link the clock to my desktop, so every time I turn on my computer, I can watch the seconds slip away. 2029 isn't that far away, getting closer every second. And if I believe this is all there is, I had better run from the inevitable. That was the disciples' initial response - lock the door; afraid of death (what did my grandson say: I don't like it). But because I believe in the resurrection, I know that **this is not all there is** and whether my final day comes in 2048 or 2029 or later today, I will not fear because I know that this is not all there is. The worst thing is never the last thing.

There was a time when our children were young and when we put them to bed at night, Lauren or Bethany would call out for mom or dad because they were scared of the dark. When I came into her room, sometimes it was enough to close a closet door or turn on the light in the hall, but if that didn't work, I remember laying down beside her and reaching over to hold her in my arms and only then could she fall fast asleep. And that's what I am counting on. the God who gave me life will never let go of me. And that's a promise that will carry me all the way to eternity.