

2019 Easter

Pastor Tim Burchill

Matthew 28: Utterly Relentless

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

The Human Condition

The followers of Jesus must have all thought the same thing: “We were sure he was the One who was going to save our people. He was going to be the One to triumph over our enemies. We hoped for victory, instead we got tragedy.”

I suppose that’s how tragedy works. You are minding your own business and then—when you least expect it—the terrible breaks into your life in devastating ways.

Take for example, this news story from **March 25, 2008:**

Man loses worldly goods after Craigslist prank

“An American man is coming to terms with losing most of his possessions because of an internet prank.

The hapless Robert Salisbury was away from his Oregon property when he got an ominous call from a woman checking it was OK to make off with his horse.

And on returning to his house he soon realized that losing the horse was the least of his worries – as a fake ad on popular classifieds site Craigslist had said everything was up for grabs.

On the way home the man stopped a truck which was jam-packed full of his property, including his lawn mowers, work ladders and a weed eater.

But rather than realize the error of their ways, the drivers gave Salisbury short shrift when he asked for his belongings back.

"I informed them I was the owner, but they refused to give the stuff back," Salisbury said.

"They showed me the Craigslist printout and told me they had the right to do what they did."

Jacksonville police and the Jackson County sheriff department have warned anyone caught with Salisbury's property that they face prosecution.”

What a tragic homecoming **for poor Robert Salisbury**. We gather together lots of things that we rely on every day—tools we use, books we read, technology we’ve made part of our lives, as well as all the collect-ibles that give us joy. I want you to think for a moment: if something like this happened to you, **what two things would you move heaven and earth to get back?** And while you’re at it, **what two things would let go without a second thought?**

Tragedy has a way of showing up unannounced. But then again, you’re minding your own business and—when you least expect it—incredible joy breaks into your life in unimaginable ways.

Sermon

Sometimes you go and do something, and what you discover when you get there isn't at all what you expected. [**Four Photos of Weird Animal Events.**] You might say the same thing about that first Easter. The women come to give the body of Jesus a decent burial and what they find when they get there isn't at all what they expected.

In fact, when Matthew describes the resurrection of Jesus, everyone around that empty tomb has the same response. **The guards** are so terrified that they shake uncontrollably and keel over. **The angel tells the women** *not to be afraid* because Jesus has risen from the dead—and yet they can't help themselves, they too are shaken with fear. And it's not just Matthew's version either. **In each of the gospel accounts** the people who are on the scene '*quake with fear,*' are '*utterly astounded,*' or are simply '*filled with terror.*'

I just don't get it. These women were heart-broken thinking that Jesus was dead. Now they are told he is alive and instead of being ecstatic, their first response is fear, before they finally find joy. **Why wouldn't they be immediately thrilled that the Master has come back from the grave?**

Let's think this through.

For these women—who, by the way, don't have the benefit of hindsight—if Jesus is dead as in a dead-and-still-buried kind of way, then they are going to feel grief and sadness. **If he's dead-and-gone, then Jesus couldn't possibly be the One they thought he was.**

But if Jesus is alive again, then he really IS who he said he was; and that means that they—meaning the Jewish people—had **just taken the law into their own hands and killed the Son of the living God.** Though these women weren't responsible for his death, they would have felt a collective sense of responsibility—as in 'we' were the ones who did this terrible thing.

The people of God took Jesus and humiliated him. They beat him within an inch of his life, and then executed him. Now these women are faced with irrefutable proof that Jesus is the Christ and then some. They shudder to think what God has in store for His people who had just perpetrated this monstrous evil.

But the angel says, "**Do not be afraid.**" Jesus himself appears, says the exact same thing, and makes it clear that he has returned not to punish & judge, but to forgive his people and lead them back into the arms of the Father. **Despite the very worst we could dish out, God still wants the best for us.** Even when we rejected *him*, he refused to reject *us*. Jesus came back to do more than just prove he is who he said he was. Jesus came back to make it clear that **God is utterly relentless in his desire to lead us back to where he always intended us to be—into a relationship with Him of love and trust.**

The best analogy I can think of is Sam of *Sam-I-Am* Fame, from Dr. Seuss's great children's book, *Green Eggs & Ham*. If you remember Sam-I-Am tries to get an unnamed person to taste Green Eggs and Ham. He says, *No*. So Sam comes back again and again with new and different circumstances that might make this guy more prone to try this rare delicacy.

He suggests trying them in the **rain** or on a **train**,
In the **dark**, in a **tree**, in a **car (Sam, let me be!)**
In a **box with a fox**, or in a **house with a mouse**,
Here or there, or anywhere.

Sam tries everything he can think of and the answer is the same: "No, No, No. I do not like green eggs and ham, I do not like them Sam-I-Am!" Then finally, the poor badgered person sighs and says, "Look, if I try them—if I take a small taste—will you leave me alone?" And surprise, surprise, he loves green eggs and ham!

Now, in the context of Easter, we do more than just say 'No.' We grab a hold of Sam and try him on trumped up charges, we spit in his face, we hang the ham around his neck and make a crown of his green eggs. Then we whip him within an inch of his life and kill him in the most painful way we could possibly imagine. We take *No* to the Nth degree. We do the worst we could imagine in the dark places of our hearts, not to Sam and his Green Eggs but to the innocent Son of God. **But our God did not and will not give up. Jesus refuses to quit on us as he comes back with nail scarred hands and pierced side**, saying, "Won't you try my grace? Won't you return my love? Won't you follow me *now*?" **Our God's persistence puts Sam's to utter shame.**

Think about poor Mr. Salisbury and that vicious Craigslist prank. How hard would you work to get back what was taken, if it were you? What was on the top of your list? What was on the bottom? What would you think of Mr. Salisbury if he spent the rest of his adult life seeking out and reclaiming every single item that was once his?

"Come on, brother," we'd say, "let it go. Hunt down the irreplaceable treasures and forget the rest. Insurance will take care of it. It's time to move forward and get on with your life."

That's what we would say, but it's not what God would say. It's not what Jesus would do.

For instance, I have a **floor lamp** next to my 'reading' chair in my living room. Its origin is uncertain but I have a sneaking suspicion that it came to us via a garage sale. It's got a veritable Olympic Logo of water rings stained into its finish. It's supposed to be able to adjust for multiple heights but is now deeply committed to just the one position. And the switch takes a safe cracker's feel to

get into the ‘*on position*’ and keep it there. If that lamp were taken as part of a Craig’s List Hoax, I would miss it. I rely on it almost every day. At the same time, it probably would get me off my rear-end and buy a lamp that didn’t make my living room look like furnishing section of the local Goodwill. In the end, I’d be better off with a better lamp than the one I’ve got.

Me, I’ve got about three years’ worth of good sermons and I will have been at this church for 4 years this July. *Sorry but it’s only going downhill from here!* I used to work almost exclusively with youth and had parents and their kids marvel at my patience. I can neither sit still for an entire church meeting—even the interesting ones—nor do I have the slightest patience with my own kids now that they’ve grown and have got lives of their own. I used to be six foot two inches tall with a vertical jump of 2 to 3 inches. Now gravity has done its work and I haven’t measured 6’2” at the Doctor’s office in years, and my current girth means the only thing I jump at is seconds at mealtime

So, when I consider Mr. Salisbury’s dilemma in light of what our God does on Easter morning, I realize that I must be a lot like that lamp. And if the powers and principalities of this world or the good folks who play ‘pranks’ on the internet came and took me away, I have not the slightest doubt my family, friends, and church would truly miss me. But with all false humility aside, I also have no doubt that—in time—each and every one of them would *trade up*.

And the saddest part is that the schmuck who took me out of my house could only have taken me as an afterthought. He was much more excited about the I-pad and the vintage comic books he also got his hands on. And befitting an afterthought, I’m probably sitting in this guy’s basement, shoved next to the wall to illumine the far corner of his work bench.

But get this: even before they manage to catch the pranksters, and even after all the valuable stuff is identified and returned to its proper place, Jesus goes off, leaving the house unguarded, jumps in his pickup truck, and drives across three states in order to rescue me, the dilapidated lamp, from the corner of that dank basement and put me back where I belong. The big screen TV, the antique knick-knacks, the rare stamp collection, the brand-new iMac—all of them he leaves without a soul to watch over them so that he can hunt down and bring back the *garage sale bargain* that is me.

Easter is the moment in human history when it becomes clearer than any other moment how far our God is willing to go to bring his lost children back. It doesn’t matter how long it takes. It doesn’t matter how beat up or worn out we are. It doesn’t matter where we’ve been or what we’ve become. God is coming for us and there is nothing in heaven or earth that is going to get in his way. Not torture, not rejection, not suffering, not even the huge piece of granite rolled in front of a borrowed grave. He will not stop until

every one of his possessions, every one of his lost and broken children, are found, redeemed, and brought back home where they belong.

And if you are wondering ‘Why?’ Why is God so relentless? Why hasn’t Jesus given up on us already? The answer is because **I am not a lamp and you are not a stamp collection or a toaster oven.** We aren’t stuff: we are human beings with eternal souls.

It is because nothing could be worse for our Heavenly Father than being deprived of a single one of His children. Nothing.

It is because forever is a long time.

It is because to turn away from God is to turn in upon ourselves and begin a downward spiral that will end up leaving us utterly alone. For us, not to be sought after or pursued, not to be loved as if we were the only ones being loved—that is literally hell, and God would do anything to keep you and I from that fate. Bringing his children back home to His side, where we rightfully belong, is worth whatever it costs—period.

We might very well look at what we human beings did to Jesus and think, “We couldn’t have done any worse than what we did with that cross. It couldn’t be any worse for God than that.”

Oh, but actually, it could.

God could go to these unbelievable lengths and we could still not get it.

We could leave here this morning impressed by the fact that Jesus is alive but not make any kind of real commitment to follow him more closely.

The worst thing any of us could do this morning is brush aside the relentless love with which God has pursued us.

Instead, I invite you to stand and join with me in declaring our Easter Faith together:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall tribulation or distress,
or persecution or famine,
or nakedness or peril or sword?

NO!

**In all things we are more than conquerors
through the One who loved us.**

**We are sure that neither
death nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities,**

**nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Thanks be to God!
Amen.**

Blessing and Sending Out

Here are some pretty unbelievable truths:

- A ten-gallon hat will only hold $\frac{3}{4}$ of a gallon
- A flea can jump up to 200 times its own height. That is the equivalent of a human being jumping over the Empire State Building.
- Guinness Book of Records holds the record for being the book most often stolen from Public Libraries.
- Some snails have 14,000 teeth and can nap for as long as three years at a stretch.
- There is a waterfall in Hawaii in which the water sometimes runs up instead of down.

These facts are all unbelievable, but they are most assuredly true. And yet **not one of those truths will have any impact on where you decide to go, what you choose to do, or who you will choose to do it with.**

Now whether Jesus is alive or long-dead—that's an entirely different kind of fact.

If he is alive then he is who he said he was. And if he is who he said he was then it means love has the upper hand over death and fear—over violence and anger—over shame and guilt.

It means God's love is the most potent force in the entire galaxy. More potent than all six Infinity Stones of Thanos, more powerful than the super abilities of **Captain Marvel, the Avengers, Black Panther, Shazam**, and all the **Spiderverses** rolled together into one. And if you're not a Super Hero nerd, that's more power than you or I or any major film studio has ever imagined.

And now we know, that it is also a power made available to non-superheroes like you and me through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Any way you measure it, that is the kind of news you wouldn't want to keep to yourself.

Amen.