

THE PLACE TO BE

Matthew 28:1-10

*Easter is the victory that empowers us to live fearless,
forgiven, forever.*

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
April 16, 2017

One of the things we do at the Reeves household is to watch the 10:00 news in the bedroom. This is reportedly a bad habit. (Don't judge!) If we are still awake when the news is over, we will watch a few minutes of the Tonight Show starring Jimmy Fallon. He's a funny guy. I've noticed that he always starts his show with the same words. He comes out to music and cheering; he's clapping; and he says, "Welcome!" about 5 times. Then he says, "This is it; you made it; you're here; this is the Tonight Show!" And the crowd goes crazy.

I've often thought about starting worship that way: "Welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome! This is it; you made it; you're here; this is First United Methodist Church!" And the congregation goes crazy!

Probably not going to happen. But we are glad you're here today. You made it. You're here. This is the place to be. You're here today because God turns sorrow to joy. God transforms tragedy to triumph. God makes life out of death. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

After Lent and Holy Week and Good Friday and the cross, this is good news! This is a great place to be. And I know, for many of you, it has been a tough road to get here. There has been a lot of pain along the way.

Palm Sunday of 1994 was supposed to be a special day at Goshen United Methodist Church in Piedmont, Alabama. They had put together the biggest production they had ever tried, and the church was packed to see the children perform. Under the leadership of pastor Kelly Clem, the church had more children than ever, and they were all looking forward to an Easter like they had never experienced before.

Kelly dropped her two-year-old daughter Sarah off in the nursery. Her husband Dale, also a pastor, was away on a mission trip. Their four-year-old daughter Hannah was in the production. Final preparations were made, and just as church started, a horrible thunderstorm broke loose. The singers could hardly be heard over the pounding rain and wind. Then hail began to beat on the roof and

windows, and Kelly began to think about calling the service off until the storm passed.

Suddenly there was an eerie pause in the weather. The air pressure changed, and without warning a stained-glass window shattered into the worshippers. Somebody screamed, "Get down!" just as the tornado hit the church. The ceiling began to fall, then the whole roof lifted off the building and crashed into the center aisle of the church—onto the congregation, onto the children.

As Pastor Kelly lunged toward the pew where Hannah was sitting, a falling brick knocked her unconscious. When she came to, rescue workers were already there, digging people out of the rubble. She saw the nursery room was still standing, and someone held up her daughter Sarah. But Hannah was nowhere to be found. After several minutes of digging, Kelly came to a strip of cloth that looked like Hannah's costume. After a few more minutes, they got Hannah out. She was not breathing. Immediately they began CPR, and when they rushed her away in an ambulance, Kelly turned to comfort the people in her congregation.

Twenty people died that Palm Sunday morning at Goshen United Methodist Church. Eighty-six were injured, many severely. When Kelly Clem finally reached the hospital that evening, a pastor friend confirmed what she already knew. Hannah, too, had died.

As Holy Week wore on, the phone at the parsonage kept ringing. Church members wanted to know if they were going to have Easter services somewhere ...anywhere. They were longing for Easter. So Kelly decided they could have a sunrise service at the church. Someone had erected a cross out of two of the roof beams, and they would just meet there and worship on Easter morning. On Thursday, Kelly woke up with a Scripture in her head, and she knew that the Lord was giving that word to her to share with her people.

So on Easter Sunday, 1994, about 200 people gathered on the grounds of Goshen United Methodist Church, still strewn with debris from the tornado. As Pastor Kelly stood to begin the service, the

sunlight spilled over the horizon and lit up the sky and the faces in the crowd. With her face swollen and bruised and her arm in a sling, Kelly stepped up to the makeshift podium and said, “I can’t think of any other place I’d rather be, can you?” Then she began to read the Scripture the Lord had given her. We read it here on Palm Sunday. *“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 these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, ...nor things present, nor things to come, ...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*¹

When Kelly looked up, she saw people with tears in their eyes. But she could tell from the look on their faces that they would go on. And they did. In 1996, Goshen United Methodist Church moved into a new church building. They built a memorial to the twenty people who lost their lives in the tornado. Kelly is now a District Superintendent, and Dale serves a church in Huntsville, Alabama. The daughter that survived has graduated college, and the daughter they had after the tornado is out of high school. Life goes on.

On this Easter Sunday of 2017 in Fort Smith, Arkansas, I can’t think of any other place I would rather be. Can you? We are God’s people. It’s Easter! Christ is risen! This is the place to be. Not just because you look so fine and everyone else needs to see you today. Not just because Mama’s cooking dinner, and you have to go to church if you want to eat. Not even because everyone who is Christian who is able goes to church at least on Easter. No, there are some deeper reasons that make this the place to be today.

Easter doesn’t mean the cross didn’t happen. We can’t just forget Good Friday. Easter doesn’t mean that the Son of God or the people of God do not suffer. There is still sorrow and tragedy and sickness and tornadoes and divorces and drug overdoses and gun violence and all manner of suffering. Easter is at best a “wounded joy.”²

The good news is, “*In all things God works for good.*”³ The good news is, because of Easter, God can transform the worst experiences of our lives into experiences of grace and glory. The good news is that the cross is always paired with the empty tomb, so life is not just a burden to bear. It is a resurrection to celebrate!

At Easter, English theologian Herbert McCabe warns us that, “we should indeed feel that the cross has been turned into joy. Yet we have to beware of thinking that the cross has been replaced by joy.”

Easter isn't a cancellation of the cross. It doesn't, in any important sense, celebrate anything different from the cross. It's the meaning of the cross. Of course, there were two events: a crucifixion and, later, a rising from the dead. But these two events are part of a single story with a single meaning. The resurrection is as inseparable from the crucifixion as the punch line from the rest of the story. Easter is how to look at the cross. It's how faith looks at the cross.

When “seen in faith,” McCabe concludes, “the cross is the best picture of the resurrection.”⁴

So this is it. Easter is the punch line in the story of salvation. Easter is God's grand joke on the powers of evil, sin, and death. Easter doesn't take away our pain, but in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God enters our pain—and overcomes it.

Easter doesn't mean the cross didn't happen, but it does mean that you don't have to be afraid any more. You can **LIVE FEARLESS**. God has conquered the evil forces of this world. They are powerless to defeat you. There is nothing that can happen to you that will separate you from God's love and grace, unless you yourself turn away from God. Do not be afraid.

Living fearlessly is one of the strongest themes in Scripture. Throughout the Bible, God or a prophet or Jesus or an apostle is telling someone not to fear, to trust in God. The Psalmist in Psalm 56 sings, “*O Most High, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do*

to me?”⁵ In our Easter text today, first the angel tells the women, “*Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.*”⁶ Then the risen Jesus appears to the women, and he repeats, “*Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*”⁷

Because of who Jesus is, because of what God has done, no matter what circumstances threaten your life today, you do not have to be afraid. You can live fearless.

Easter means you don't have to bear the burden of guilt any more. You can **LIVE FORGIVEN**. The whole point of the cross, vindicated by the resurrection, is that your sins are washed away. You are clean. You are righteous. You are forgiven. Jesus promised this. Often when he healed people, he would also forgive their sins. On the night before he died, he blessed the cup at the last supper and said, “*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*”⁸

The earliest Christian proclamation appealed to people to accept the forgiveness of Christ. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached the story of Jesus and gave this invitation: “*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.*”⁹ In the sermon at Cornelius' house, Peter said, “*Everyone who believes in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*”¹⁰

Forgiveness is hard to believe. It is hard to accept. When we have messed up, we tend to beat ourselves up with worry and guilt and regret. But if there is any basic belief of Christianity, it is this: Jesus died on the cross for our sins. On the cross, God made atonement for our sins. God bridged the gap; God healed the wound. As Paul said, “*In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*”¹¹ So this is our message to you today: you don't have to bear the guilt. You can live forgiven.

Finally, Easter means you don't have to die. You can **LIVE FOREVER**. Now you will die physically; Jesus had to die, too. But physical death is not the end of us. Death is a transition into a fuller, more glorious, complete life in God for all eternity. Because Jesus was raised, everyone who believes in him will experience resurrection when we die. Paul's message to the Romans was "*we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*"¹²

The apostle's great essay on the resurrection is in I Corinthians 15. It's all good, but it ends with these inspiring words: "*When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' ...thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*"¹³ This is the victory of Easter.

One of the most fearless witnesses and martyrs for the faith in the 20th century was Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. In the midst of political turmoil and oppression in his country, Archbishop Romero was an unflinching advocate of truth and justice. Even when his life was threatened, he did not give in to fear.

On March 23, 1980, Archbishop Romero preached his last homily during Holy Week. He boldly called for the government to stop oppressing the Salvadoran people and for the military to refuse to kill, maim, or torture any more of their own citizens. The archbishop acknowledged "the risk that is run by our poor station for being the instrument and vehicle of truth and justice," but he went on to say that, in the context of the Lenten season, "all of this is preparation for our Easter, and Easter is a shout of victory. No one can extinguish that life which Christ revived. Not even death and hatred against him and against his Church will ever be able to overcome it. He is the victor!"¹⁴

The next day, as Archbishop Romero celebrated mass in a chapel in San Salvador, government soldiers burst into the service and gunned him down as he stood at the altar of the crucified and resurrected Lord. To his last breath, Oscar Romero served God without fear.

Easter doesn't mean that your life will be free of trouble, pain, or suffering. Easter doesn't mean the cross didn't happen. But it does mean that you don't have to be afraid. You don't have to bear the guilt of your sins. You don't have to die. You can live fearless; you can live forgiven; you can live forever. This is the victory of Easter!

This is why you're here today. This is why this is the place to be now and for the rest of your lives.

¹ Romans 8:38-39.

² Mike MacDonald, "Easter a Wounded Joy," *Shade Tree Theology*, March 26, 2005.

³ Romans 8:28.

⁴ Brian Davies, ed., *Herbert McCabe, God, Christ and Us* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 89-90.

⁵ Psalm 56:3-4.

⁶ Matthew 28:5.

⁷ Matthew 28:10.

⁸ Matthew 26:28.

⁹ Acts 2:38.

¹⁰ Acts 10:43.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

¹² Romans 6:3-5.

¹³ I Corinthians 15:54-57.

¹⁴ James A. Harnish, *What Will You Do With King Jesus?* in *A Guide To Prayer For All Who Seek God*, Reuben Job and Norman Shawchuck, eds. (Nashville: Upper Room, 2004), p. 166f.