

**April 21, 2019 (Easter)**

**TEXT: [Matthew 28:1–10](#)**

**TITLE: A Definitive Victory**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Easter Sunday is a Victory Sunday. We celebrate Christ's victory won by rising from the dead that first Easter morning. As Pittsburghers, we love a good victory celebration. But to say Easter is about victory begs the question: Victory over what or whom? Who lost? Did the Romans lose? They were the ones who accused Jesus of being a revolutionary and condemned him to die on the cross. Matthew's gospel even tells us that Pilate made arrangements for a squad of soldiers to be stationed around Jesus' tomb to guard it at all times. Surely Easter was a victory over Rome—over governments that oppress—over earthly authority built around military might instead of God's love, God's justice, and God's merciful power. That's one answer.

Another answer is to say that on Easter, God won and Satan lost. The Devil made a bad bargain accepting the death of an innocent Jesus as payment for the debts incurred by our human sins. Jesus paid that debt but then was victorious over the devil by rising from the dead. We love stories where the devil gets tricked. There's a great story about the old city of Segovia, Spain, which is famous for its ancient aqueduct that brings the town its water. Legend has it that a young girl was tired of carrying water up through the city's steep streets so the devil promised he would get water to her house before dawn in return for her mortal soul. The devil labored all night, building an aqueduct into the city and almost won the bet, except God caused a storm to erupt that slowed the devil's work just enough so that as the devil was prepared to put in place the final stone, the sun's ray dawned over the horizon and the girl's soul was saved.

Another story of tricking the devil comes from none other than Homer Simpson, who was so hungry for a raspberry donut that he traded his soul to the devil for one. Just as he finished the last bite of the forbidden fruity-pastry, Homer was cast down into the fiery abyss of hell. But soon Homer's wife Marge showed up and proved that Homer had long before given his heart and soul to her, therefore rendering the devil's claim null and void.

We love stories in which the devil gets tricked. But there's a problem with building our theology around this approach. It simply gives the devil too much power. It makes the devil out to be an equal with God; and while that may play well with medieval theologians or cable television preachers, God doesn't have a rival who is equal to God or a legitimate threat to God. Protestant theology has long professed that human sin is the barrier between ourselves and God's ways of righteousness, and that Jesus' death atoned for our sins, paid the debt we'd incurred. But that doctrine has no need for a devil with pitchforks and unholy bargains to be included in the equation. That's why Easter must be about something more than a victory over the Roman government or bargains with the devil.

So let's come at this from another angle. Two photographs made a huge impact on our world in the past few days: the tragic images of the burning cathedral of Notre Dame and the amazing scientific picture of a black hole out in the universe. Notre Dame has been a beloved symbol of Paris, France dating back to when it was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. To see it burn, to imagine what of this sacred treasure has been lost and damaged fills us with grief. It reminds us that, in this day and age of cheap plastic, planned obsolescence, and disposable everything, some things are worth protecting. Some ancient things need to be preserved so we don't lose sight of what is precious and beautiful in this life.

And to see a photograph of a distant black hole—something that first entered our scientific vocabulary over 100 years ago through the theories of Albert Einstein and others—fills us with amazement, because this is something that seemed impossible to ever literally see. The photo confirmed the old theories. Even more, it sparks our creativity to keep looking up at the night sky and to never grow complacent about the wonders that exist in God's universe all around us.

Why do I mention these two photographs on Easter Sunday? Because they remind us of how easy it is to lose sight of what is most important in life. How easy it is to become distracted by the small stuff, pulled down the rabbit holes of the internet, filled with indignation about social media controversies, or simply become numb from the barrage of information hitting us every day. We stop dreaming about tomorrows and put all our energy into surviving the messiness of today. That becomes our human world, our human reality, our human-sized gospel. And that is what Easter specifically challenges.

The apostle Paul put it quite bluntly in I Corinthians 15:19—*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied*. If everything we do is only about what we can see and understand, we are missing out on so much. If all we trust and believe is what we can grasp and rationalize, we are blind to much of what exists around us. If what gives our life meaning and joy is limited to this momentary physical existence, then we are most to be pitied and sorely in need of a bigger story—a transcendent, mysterious, wonderful story of resurrection, of life beyond death, of grace and love refusing to be defeated by our shortsightedness.

That's the answer to the question I asked earlier. Easter Sunday is a victory Sunday—but over whom or what is Easter victorious? It is victorious over us—over our flesh and blood and fears and doubts, over our anxieties that lead us to stockpile weapons and wall ourselves in; that lead us to eat, drink and try to be merry before tomorrow comes. Easter shatters that false narrative. It says, "You imagined a small world, but I'll show you a world that stretches to eternity. You focused on limitations, but I offer to you true freedom and possibility. You expend so much energy running away from death. Christ was raised so you will finally run toward life." Easter Sunday is victory over us and victory for us.

So what do we do with this Easter victory? In the verses we read from Matthew 28 we're reminded that more than half the people who experienced that first Easter didn't get it at

all. When the stone was rolled away, a squad of guards passed out, failing to grasp what happened. Luckily two women were there who were made of stronger stuff and who heard the angel's message about Jesus' resurrection and had the faith and fortitude to go and tell the others. And when Mary Magdalene and her friend actually saw the risen Christ, the message to them was still the same: *"Don't be afraid. Don't be captive to fear any longer. Don't settle for this world's version of things. Go now and tell the others, that they too may see and believe."*

"Go and tell others." Those are instructions that can make Presbyterians squirm in their pews. There's a New Yorker cartoon that says if you want to guarantee you'll never have someone sit beside you on a crowded subway train, just wear a t-shirt that says "Let me tell you about my religion." Both the angels and the risen Christ delivered the same message on Easter – "Go and tell the others." That act of telling can take a hundred different forms. Here at ELPC we use social media to tell the Easter message—through friends on Facebook and church members who literally organize "watch parties" of up to 100 friends who follow the live-stream of our worship services together. We tell the Easter story through the images flashed on our electronic signboards outside—photos of diversity, acceptance of all ages, gender identity, and economic status. We tell the Easter story through prayers that name racism, that denounce inequities between the rich and the just-getting-by, and the rampant incivility in our political arena. We tell the Easter story in silence at Taizé services, in clapping hands at Journey worship, in loud brass and harmonious choirs in these services. We tell the story in youth programs, in mission work, thoughtful adult education classes or spiritual retreats. We tell it every Sunday at 11:00, even when it's not Easter (just saying). And we all tell it—yunz tell it—when you walk outside these walls as Easter people: praying, caring, inviting folks to join us, saying be not afraid because the one who was dead is alive.

That's the definitive message of Easter. Sometimes we are drawn to the other version of Easter. We like the idea of God and Satan as dueling deities with God winning so we don't have to do anything else. We even like it if it's a little girl in Segovia that beats the devil, or Marge Simpson who renders Satan's contract null and void. But then we see a picture of a black hole in outer space and remember that there is so much more to this life than our own zip code and idiosyncrasies. We see a picture of a cross still hanging over the charred sanctuary of Notre Dame cathedral and we remember that there is so much sacred beauty all around us. The Easter victory was a definitive victory because it redefines everything. The One who was dead is now alive. The One whom the world thought had been defeated has risen from the grave. The good news of Easter changes us, redefines us and gives us life—real life—meaningful life now and for always. That's the amazing definitive victory of Easter. Thanks be to God!