

**“And I Hope” – Luke 24:1-12**

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**March 31, 2024 (Easter)**

Weddings. They are such joyous occasions. Raise your hand if there’s a wedding in your past—either your own wedding or that of somebody you were close to—that stands out as one of your most joyful memories.

I remember mine back in 2002. It was an absolutely fabulous affair. Hundreds of people—from our families and from the congregation I was serving at the time—gathered together to worship and then have great fellowship and time spent together. Despite the fact that I’m divorced now, the joy of that moment for me will never be erased.

Speaking of weddings, did you hear the news this week? It was sort of a first: two pieces of bread got married! Yep, that’s right. For the first time ever, two pieces of bread tied the knot. And everything was going great at the ceremony and then at the reception, UNTIL somebody decided to toast the bride and groom.

Weddings, in fact the whole wedding event, from the pre-wedding parties to the ceremony to the reception to the dinner and dancing are huge celebrations. Everybody is in a good mood (usually). The whole affair is uplifting, and a new life has taken shape—that of the union between a bride and groom.

We should liken it to the mood we find today on Easter. Celebratory. Filled with praise, because new life has also taken hold in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s worth witnessing, it’s worth running toward to be a part of.

You know, first responders like firefighters, EMTs, police officers, and others like them are known for their distinguishing characteristics of bravery, service, and devotion to their communities. In short, we can say that these public servants run *toward* danger when the rest of us run *away* from it.

When the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed in Baltimore this week after being hit by a cargo ship that had lost power, workers on that bridge

that had been doing maintenance work were plunged into the cold waters of the Baltimore Harbor below. And what did rescue workers do? Shrug their shoulders, stay safe on dry land, and say, “Well, those waters are freezing and there’s no chance for them to survive anyway?” Of course not. Divers risked their own lives to save the lost. And while there were fatalities that day, it didn’t come from a lack of effort on the part of these first responders to rescue them.

First responders run to danger at great personal risk for one reason: they have hope that all are not lost. They believe there are lives still to be saved. Even when the odds are low, they trust they can still make a difference.

On the morning of that first Easter, the disciples were convinced that the report of the women that Jesus was alive was simply a tall tale. They didn’t believe them. They had seen what had happened to Jesus—the gruesome execution on a cross just a couple days earlier. His writhing in pain, his last breath breathed, his body taken down, prepared for burial, and entombed. The story was over. He was dead. How could the story not have been over with all that visual evidence that it was?

So when the women showed up and said the stone had been rolled away and Jesus’ body was not in the tomb, well, the disciples may have just rolled their eyes. His body was stolen maybe? Ok. Unfortunate, sure. But nothing more than that.

They stayed right where they were, except for Peter. Peter didn’t remain still. He got up and ran to the tomb. Why did he go at all, let alone run?

There was something inside Peter that, despite all odds, gave him hope. Jesus was dead! He had seen it with his own eyes. And yet, this report of the women caused him to sprint to the tomb because something inside him made him believe that an alternative to Jesus’ death was still possible.

That’s what hope does. Hope makes us run to the places where we believe the impossible is possible. Hope makes us run to the tomb like Peter did when we have at least a sliver of hope that new life in Jesus Christ is possible. We have hope that there is life and not just death.

Back in 1993, the Hyde Park Bank in Chicago came up with a marketing idea. The executives wanted a public relations brochure that would describe the bank's community re-investment program. So, they had an agency create a lively poster to be displayed in the schools, inviting children to submit pictures and essays on the topic, "My Neighborhood." The winning entries would be used in the bank's brochure. The bank president said, "The responses we received stunned us." The bank expected "brightly colored, childish drawings of trees and houses, and funny little stories about the postman and the people on the block." The first essay submitted was by an 8-year-old, Gail Whitmore. Her first sentence indicated that the project was going in a different direction than the one the bank intended.

"In my neighborhood," Gail wrote, "there is a lot of shooting and three people got shot."

"Hello, my name is Charlie. I live in a slum. Some people call it hell on earth and so do I." Charlie was 12.

The pictures were deceptively innocent. "In colorful pictures of buildings and trees and kids playing, one might see, on closer look, people shooting at each other, or a drug deal ...; two bright suns are shining over a playground with smiling people, one of whom is shooting a gun."

That year, 1993, there were 915 murders in Chicago, 70 percent of which were committed with handguns. 60 children were murdered. By the time they were 5 years old, the majority of the children of the inner city would have had some personal encounter with handgun violence (see James Garbarino et al., *Children in Danger: Coping With the Consequences of Community Violence* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992]). Birthdays for these children were noted, not by the phrase "He turned 10," but by "He made 10." (Today, thirty years later, I suspect that reality is largely unchanged.)

The pictures and essays from 1993 were published in a fine little book, *My Neighborhood: The Words and Pictures of Inner-City Children* by Linda Waldman (Chicago: Hyde Park Bank Foundation, 1993). And to read it, says then-pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church John Buchannon, is profoundly moving and disturbing but ultimately inspiring, because

somehow, in spite of all they have seen and experienced, these kids are full of hope: not despair or cynicism, but hope.

Again, little Charlie Williams who knew that he lived in hell on earth concluded his essay, "People say my area is the worst place on earth, but I'm surviving. I have a roof over my head, a bed to sleep in, a T.V. of my own and a nice family."

Despite the death and darkness, there was still life there in 1993, and there's still life in Chicago and other major cities today despite the continued threats and ailments they face. There's hope.

All of us have varying degrees of hope surrounding the matters that reside in our hearts. Regarding that relationship that is hanging by a thread, or that health situation that is so fragile, or that workplace environment that is filled with so much tension, or the outlook we have about our kids' or grandkids' future that is clouded with so many unknowns, something keeps us going. Something keeps us running to what's possible. In our hearts, we latch on to the even smallest glimpse of light that pervades the darkness.

That's what Peter did. Against all odds, he believed the ending could be different than what he knew just days earlier: the slight possibility that the women's story could be true, that Jesus could in fact be alive.

And his hope became reality. Christ was alive. Death had been defeated. Life and the goodness that comes with it had won.

We're all here today for varying reasons: tradition, family connections, a love of music, wanting to hang out with friends. Deep within each of us, though, are varying degrees of hope: the hope that resurrection happened, and that it can happen again when the odds are stacked against it.

Christ makes it possible. He is risen. Alleluia!