

April 4, 2010 “Love Unleashed” Rev. Rusty Butler

John 20: 1-18

It is, as always, good to see so many people here on Easter Sunday. It warms the cockles of a preachers' heart to see all the people who want to get the Easter message. It is also a corrective for preachers who know or at least should know that people are not coming to hear us! Instead, they are coming to get the message of Jesus, to get the message of the church. The preacher never brings people in on Easter, it is the message that brings people in. Someone once said to a preacher, when the preacher was fretting over the Easter Sermon, “***Just get out of the way and let Jesus do his work.***” That is a pretty good reminder to preachers about what this day is about.

You are probably all aware though that there is a marketing push at Easter. We want people to come and know that they are welcome here not just at Easter but all the time...so we put advertisements in the paper and put a banner out on the street and get the word out on email, and post it on our website. We go all out or at least try to do a better job of getting the news out that something big is going on at church this week. We don't do that every week. We do our thing but there are other churches who do something a little different.

This morning at a large church in Corpus Christi, Texas, there will be a big give away at their Easter service. Flat-screen televisions, skateboards, Fender guitars, furniture and 15 cars will be given away at the Easter services this morning. Now, granted they are used cars...but still! They expect 15,000-20,000 people to come to that church this morning. Now is it just me or does it remind you of an Oprah show?

I applaud the ingenuity of the pastor, what an idea! But at the same time, I'm appalled at the idea you have to bribe people to come to church...something about it that just doesn't sit right.

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I told another pastor this week about the church in Texas and he said, I'm going to tape an envelope under someone's pew with a prize in it. I thought to myself, oh no! Not with all that used up chewing gum under there?

Today is Easter, and however you came to be here, we are so glad you came to share it at Arvada United Methodist Church. There will be no free cars. Sorry.

Would you pray with me?

God, we are here today, Easter Sunday, to appreciate and show our gratitude for the message of the risen Christ, we are here to be surprised once again at how love can spring forth unexpectedly from places and people we never thought could be sources of love. We are here to renew our wonder again at the ever deepening mystery of life. What better day is there O God, than Easter Sunday to show our appreciation and to join together in searching for the new? Amen.

## **“Love Unleashed”**

Now, we may not all agree about what Easter is, but I think we can all agree that Easter is not about getting free prizes. For most of us, Easter surely is about celebration and joy. But then I read about Easter in the southern hemisphere, and one theologian from down under said, “Easter is a strangely reflective, even melancholy day...because unlike our cousins in the northern hemisphere, Easter is not associated with the energy and vitality of spring but with the more subdued spirit of autumn.” (Hugh Mackay)

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I suspect for most of us, we celebrate Easter in some similar ways as our families and friends do. You probably have some traditions that you carry on from year to year. Rev. Brunner from Applewood Valley told me the other night that he and his wife and some friends have made a tradition to have hotdogs on Easter Sunday. To each his own! You will come to church, you may have family gather around, you might have certain things you eat on Easter, maybe you will follow a certain ritual, maybe you will fly a kite, or have an Easter Egg hunt.

At our house, our youngest son is back from college and bringing his fiancé with him and our oldest son will be with us also. So we'll have our whole family there and the dog will try to eat something off our table and oh...today promises to be a great day.

Easter takes me back to days growing up in South Dakota. My mother would dress my brother and I like little Morman Missionaries...black pants, short sleeved white shirts, black ties, polished black shoes, she would try to make sure our cowlicks were fastened down using a variety of methods which never seemed to work. My little sister would have a new dress, usually pink or yellow or light blue with white gloves and white shoes and a matching purse. Oh, on the way into church, if we'd have stopped even for a moment and Norman Rockwell was there, we'd have been immortalized in one of his paintings, but alas, he never showed up.

I'm not sure we ever talked about the resurrection when we were at home. If we did I can't recall it.

Maybe it's because our family tended to think, when we did think about it like so many others that the Easter message was a message for the end of life. I don't know why it came to be that but I think it does for a lot of people.

But the more I think about it now, the more I think the Easter message is a message for **right now**. Today. This morning. This moment.

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Look, we all know people who are physically alive but just have dead spirits. There are all sorts of reasons for that...it reminds me of that little boy with his head in his hands staring at his math book saying, "I wish my arithmetic was done and that I was married and dead." Maybe you've felt like that some days.

There is just so much in our world that can kill our spirit.

The events of the days deplete our spirit in so many ways.

There will be days when all we get is the hurt and pain and injustice and suffering, and the difficulties of the world.

There will be days when there is nothing but sorrow and loss. You know there is a family praying for a little girl who has gone missing since last Sunday in Greeley.

There will be days when what comes is frustration, misunderstanding and confusion.

There will be days when we think that the church has lost it's way and forgotten about us and doesn't care for us.

There will be days when we feel the human institutions which we have trusted for years from our government to the schools, to well, you name it, will not seem worthy of our trust.

There will be days, won't there?

It started out that way in the Gospel of John. It was one of those days...

Mary Magdalene goes to the cemetery...to the tomb. What kind of spirit do you think Mary carried up there to the tomb? Can you imagine that her spirit was flagging some on that day? Going to the tomb to care for Jesus body? Just a hard day. A day to carry an empty feeling in the stomach and a lump in the throat, tears in the eyes.

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It was one of those things she had to do...going over there to the cemetery, just like on one of those days that some of you go out to the cemetery's here in Arvada or over there to Wheatridge or down to Fort Logan, where your loved ones have been taken. I've been there with some of you on those days. And I know how on those days your spirits are just so tender. And sometimes you don't want to be there but you have to...you just have to. Don't you imagine it was a day like that?

It was that kind of a day for the friends and followers of Jesus.

There will be days like that...for us. And if you haven't had those kind of days, just keep living. You will have days like that.

When we read the story about that day, we can easily "see" the change in people, when they get what they don't expect. They race to the tomb, they bend down, they look around, they turn around. They can't understand what's going on. John puts it like this..."for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." John is trying to tell us, those first few are the first ones to wonder what is going on with Easter. It's ok to wonder what's going on at Easter.

The focus in the last part of the gospel of John is not about proving that Jesus rose from the dead, the focus is not about a theological discussion of who Jesus Christ is. The focus is on Jesus' revelation of himself to his followers.

One person has said that the story suggests that one can see the resurrected Lord only when he shows himself.

It's been said that we preachers too often try to recreate the surprise of Easter. But now, in our time, in these days, we have heard the story too many times to be surprised by Jesus' resurrection. I think that is true.

We do, however, find ourselves surprised when Jesus Christ is revealed to us in our everyday lives.

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We are reminded about this and invited to experience that each week at church. Do you think you are going to see some kind of vision or hear some voice so you'll recognize the risen Christ? I don't know, about you, but that kind of think has never happened to me, it may happen to you. But I settle down into the idea that I'm not the first to have problems with figuring out what the church meant when it started talking about the experience of the risen Christ. Because I remember, don't you? This line, "whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." What the gospel writer is telling us, is that even in those days...people wondered about the experience of the risen Christ.

Well now, can you see a body, look around you? We all say where is Christ's body? Where is the body of Christ? **We are Christ's body.** I know that will not be enough for some people. I can assure you of that.

But for some of us, it will be just enough.

You may say, I know the church and I know what kind of politics go on in a church...and I don't know if you can experience the risen Christ there. I hear you. I know that sometimes the church fails, sometimes people just fail at being what they should be. But I know that in most of us, there is a hope a glimmering hope that there is something that will restore and resurrect our spirits.

We all want that.

You see, I think we were meant for more life.

My youngest son is 24. His name is Jared, he may not appreciate me telling you this, but when he was young his favorite movie was Mary Poppins. He was not an easy child to care for but we had an automatic baby sitter whenever we'd pop in Mary Poppins. Sometimes we'd have to watch it with him, but usually he was content to just watch it by himself. Do you remember that scene where Uncle Albert starts laughing in that sterile bank vault? He keeps laughing and laughing, and

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he begins to float up to the ceiling. The laughter and life he felt brought him a lightness that made him float right up off his feet. And everyone around him began to laugh and they started to float too. Michelle Odell is the associate pastor at Applewood Valley UMC and she went to see the recent production of Mary Poppins downtown and she said in that version, Bert the character played by Dick VanDyke in the movie is hooked on to wires and walks up the side of the theater and then upside down starts walking across the ceiling and starts tapdancing.

Those scenes speak to an elemental human truth: we have spirits that yearn for joy...spirits that yearn to soar, spirits that yearn to tapdance on the ceiling.

Here is what the church has always said, Easter, the Easter story, the risen Christ story, can take lives that are sinking, where's there no laughter, no life and it can change it around. That's why I think the Easter story is really about these days, these days of living and not necessarily the end of life.

God is in the business of **restoring us to life**. I do not know what restores you to life, but I know that God works in many different ways. On Thursday, I was driving home for lunch. On a bridge over a canal, on this little side street, there was a grandfather holding his baby granddaughter. I would never have noticed it usually but I noticed it this day. There was the grandfather, he was dressed in an old green faded tshirt and had on some jeans and boots. Dark and dreary. And I noticed this little bundle he was holding from way off when I got closer I realized it was a little girl who he held in his arms like she was the first and last person in his life. She had on a bright yellow windbreaker the color of yellow daffodil's. And she was holding onto him like he was the first and last person in her world. It was to me like this little bright spot in a world that on Thursday seemed like a tomb.

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I don't know how God works in your life, but I know this we have to be ready to look for God moments every day. Every day. I hope you are looking for it every day. Even days like these.