

March 31, 2013
Questions for Holy Week

Why Hope?
Matthew 28:1-10

Opening words: There are 52 weeks every year. Each one is important and not a single one should be wasted. Have you ever stopped to consider how many weeks have occurred in the history of the world? However, there is one week that changed our world forever, Holy Week! On the Christian calendar Holy Week is the last week of Lent, beginning on Palm Sunday and ending at dawn today. It is the week the church remembers the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry. During this Holy Week we have been asking the questions that accompany each day.

This is Easter morning and on this day we remember Jesus' final victory, the resurrection. May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, Matthew 28:1-10. Let me call this message *Why Hope?*

Matthew 28:1-10 ¹ After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Jesus had a wild week. Recall that week with me one more time. According to the Gospel of Mark it went this way.

One week ago, Palm Sunday, he rode into Jerusalem, the Golden City, on a donkey. He was fulfilling prophecy and announcing to his generation he was the Messiah. He had reached the point of no return.

On Monday, Jesus cleansed the temple. It has nothing to do with the youth fundraising in the hallway. It has nothing to do with selling dinner tickets to aid the budget. However, it is about religious leaders abusing their position for personal gain.

On Tuesday, Jesus cursed the fig tree. It was the only thing that Jesus ever cursed. It was dead the next day. The fig tree symbolized Israel itself. It is like anti-American protesters burning an American flag. Without uttering a single word we get the message and so did they.

On Wednesday, Jesus taught in the temple courts about the Kingdom of God. They are some of Jesus' most memorable words. I would encourage you to read them.

On Thursday, Jesus washed the disciple's feet, observed his last Seder, went to the garden to pray, was arrested and was tried by his own people, the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.

On Friday, Jesus stood before the Roman governor Pilate, was reject by the crowd and died on the cross. That was Friday; this is Sunday. To be more exact, this is Easter Sunday and you know what happened.

We remember Easter for two things. First, we remember the resurrection of Jesus. How important is the resurrection? It is one thing that separates us from the rest of the world. We serve a risen Savior. Second, we remember that there is always hope. The Easter story is one of taking complete defeat and turning it into absolute victory. It is the story of turning victims into victors. Easter is our annual reminder that with God there is always hope. That is the Good News for today. Can I state the obvious?

Our world needs a good dose of hope. Our world, country and state are facing some big issues. If there has ever been a time for unity then it is now. The truth is our society is so divided. I never remember our country being more divided. Yet, let me just give you a few examples. The Supreme Court is now wrestling with same sex marriage. Both sides are passionate. I can't turn the television on and not see a man kissing a man or a woman kissing a woman. It is a complex issue. What is your opinion about same sex marriage? At the same time, the federal government is wrestling with the Second Amendment, the right to bear arms. How can you ever forget the victims of Newtown, CT? Something has to be done. The question is what? It is possible it is too late? Is it possible our society is already saturated with guns? How do you feel about gun control? However, everyone agrees we must do something about our national debt. The problem is no one wants to see taxes increased or their programs cut. It is OK if others pay and sacrifice, but not us. There is even division at the state and local level. In both Columbus and here in the Mahoning Valley people are divided over this new economic boom. How do you feel about the shale industry? It will shape our future one way or another. Do you think the shale industry is a good thing or a bad thing? Do I have to go on? Do I really have to go on? Ours is a time of both tremendous problems and tremendous division. Generally speaking, one of the things our society is lacking is hope. Have you ever felt like our world is hopeless? But, Easter reminds us there is always hope with God.

This morning I want to be practical. The resurrection of Jesus and the ripple effect of that morning have changed our world. It is still offering our world hope. If God can bring a dead man back to life, then God can handle any man-made situation. On this Easter morning let me remind you that we have hope from three sources. Let me list them for you. First, we have hope because of the Christian influence. Second, we have hope because we have the church. Third and finally, we have hope because we have the resurrected Jesus. Pope John Paul II said, *"Do not abandon yourself to despair, because we are Easter people.* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** I will be quick because we have ham to eat.

The Christian Influence

Several weeks ago, I was on a mission trip to Russia. We were in St. Petersburg working with the wonderful children of orphanage Number Ten. This was not my first trip to Russia. I have been there numerous times. Through the years I have seen some amazing things. It is a land of rich history and culture. The city has seen everything from Peter the Great to the fall of communism. I thought I had seen everything in St. Petersburg but I was wrong.

I was in a grocery store. There was nothing archaic about it. It was very modern. I was walking toward the check-out down the aisle with the fish chips and vodka. I was just about ready to buy my item when I saw it. It was a square clear box with a slit on the top. Inside of that box were rubles. It was the Russian version of the United Way. I stared at that collection because it would not have been there ten years ago. This is why. After seventy years of communism, people learned to trust no one. People learned to care about no one but themselves. That box told me the times were changing. That box told me the church was beginning to influence that society again. One of the core lessons of the church is to love and care for your neighbors.

First, we have hope because we have the Christian influence. In America, it is second nature to care for the needy. It is part of our DNA. It comes out of our Christian heritage. Even non-believers see value in caring for those less fortunate. It is the Christian influence. How much food and money have you given to Second Harvest? How many meals have you cooked for an ailing neighbor? How many benefit dinner tickets have you purchased but never attended? We have hope because we have the Christian influence. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

The Church

There is an old preaching story about King Xerxes. You may have heard me tell this story in the past. (After so many years, it is hard to be original.) According the story, he came back to life and wanted to see something new. His guide took him to a bar, a casino and a brothel. Xerxes was not impressed. He said, "We had these things in my time. I want to see something new!" This time his guide took him to hospitals, schools and soup kitchens. This time Xerxes was impressed. He said, "This is new! Who made all this possible?" His guide simply said, "The church!"

Second, we have hope because we have the church. In the history of the world, no organization has responded to human need more than the church. It is not just true in the past; it is true in the present. Did you know one of the strongest arms of the United Methodist Church is UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief. UMCOR provides humanitarian relief in the United States and internationally. Their efforts are targeted in places where natural disasters, war, or conflict have done so much damage that communities are unable to recover on their own. It is your apportionment dollars at work. You can be proud to be part of a church that is responding to human need. We have hope because we have the church. And all God's people said, "**Amen!**"

The Resurrected Jesus

According to the Gospel lesson, the Sabbath is over. It is dawn on the first day of the week, Sunday! Two women go to the tomb of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. The crowd that had cheered for Jesus one week earlier had melted down to these two. Their task is an unhappy one. They are going to treat the body of Jesus. It was the first century form of embalming. They think it will be the last thing they will do for him. After all, Jesus is dead! They are grief stricken; they have no hope. When they woke up that morning they had a mountain of questions. This is the most challenging of the questions. How will they live without Jesus? By noon that question had disappeared. They discover that Jesus had been resurrected. In other words, the once dead Jesus had come back to life! I can't explain how you bring a dead man back to life, but I do know his resurrection changed everything.

Third and finally, we have hope because we have the resurrected Jesus. Your belief in the resurrection is not optional. It is indispensable. As a matter of fact, the salvation of your souls depends on it. The Apostle Paul understood the significance of the resurrection. In Romans 10:9, he gives us the very first creed of the church. It says:

That is, if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

In other words, the resurrected Jesus gives us hope even in the face of death itself.

Several months ago, I was visiting someone in the hospital. I have known this individual for almost twenty years. He is a person of integrity and I respect him at every level. His future in this world is not bright. He is fighting the brave fight but the disease is winning. When I walked into his room I was pleased he was awake. He spends most of his time sleeping. He was weak, so I prayed with him before he dozed off again. After I said, "Amen!," he looked at me and said, "Russ, I have had enough. I am ready to go home." I looked at him and responded, "I am sure you are." Without the resurrected Jesus, there is no journey home. Without the resurrected Jesus, there is no great reunion. Without the resurrected Jesus, there is no hope of heaven. Do you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord? Do you believe in your heart God raised him from the dead? If you answered those two questions with a yes, say, "**Amen!**"

This is Easter morning and we are Easter people. We have hope in all things. We have hope of a better world because we have the **Christian influence**. Christianity is part of our national DNA. We have hope because we have **the church**. No organization is better at meeting human need. We have hope of eternity because we serve a **risen savior**. Rick Warren once said, *"The Bible tells us Jesus came to do three things. He came so we can experience forgiveness. He came to give us a give us a purpose for living. He came to show us the way home."* May God bless you on this glorious Easter day. Will you please pray with me?