

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, April 4, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE STORY IS NOT FINISHED!"

Luke 24:13-35

On Easter Sunday, a woman said to the minister after church, "This church is in a rut, preacher. Every time I come here we sing the hymn "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" and you preach about the resurrection!" Well, even if Easter Sunday is the only time you come to church, you won't hear any words of rebuke from me. I'm just glad you're here. There is no greater day in the church year than Easter Sunday. For the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Christian faith and the Christian church. If Jesus is not risen then our faith is in vain. If Christ is not risen we are still in our sins and we are without hope for ourselves and the world. But today we proclaim that "The Lord is risen indeed!" So our faith and our hope and our works in the Lord are not in vain. And here is the big Easter truth I proclaim today. Jesus is risen and the story is not finished.

In chapter 24: 13-35 Luke tells how two of Jesus' followers were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, perhaps where they lived. They were talking about what had happened that fateful weekend. Along the way Jesus himself drew near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. The stranger asked them what they were talking about. They found this an odd question, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there?" Ironically, Jesus was the only one who really did know what had taken place. But he asked them, "What things?" They told him, "We're talking about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed before God and all the people, and how our chief priests handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

These disciples had never met anyone like Jesus. They had come alive in his presence. He had given them a vision of life in God's Kingdom and under God's rule. His words rang with godly truth. But reality had set in. This Jesus who had been so popular in the countryside met resistance, and finally rejection in Jerusalem. Political power and religious power came together and conspired to put him to death. Yes, the disciples had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. But now he lay dead and buried in a tomb. Three days had passed. His story was finished!

Isn't that the way we often feel? We had dreams about ourselves and those we love. We had hopes for the future, hopes for our community, our country, for our world, even our church. But something comes along and lets the air out of those dreams - death, failure, powers and events beyond our control, poor choices by ourselves or others. Our hopes and dreams quietly gather dust on the shelf. A sadness comes over us that we can't quite explain. We shrug our shoulders and say, The story is over, finished! Forget

about it.

But not so fast. The two disciples told the stranger about something unexpected that had happened, something that caused a glimmer of hope to arise within them. They told him that some women had gone to the tomb early in the morning and come back with some astounding news. They did not find Jesus' body in the tomb, but had seen a vision of angels who told them that Jesus was alive! Some others had gone and found it just as the women had said. But this was not yet enough to keep the two from trudging back to Emmaus.

The stranger said to them, "How foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and the prophets he interpreted to them all the things about himself in the Scriptures." Under God's inspiration, even the prophets saw that Jesus' death was not the end of his story. Friends, this is amazing. On the basis of Moses and the prophets, the Old Testament, you can believe in the resurrection of the Messiah! And now we have the first-hand account of the apostles and the witnesses in the New Testament. There were more than 500 witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Even before you have a personal experience of Christ, you can believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the basis of God's word alone.

Well, as they drew near to Emmaus, the stranger walked ahead as if he were going on! But they said, "Stay with us; it's almost evening and the day is now nearly over." They were fascinated with this stranger who knew so much Scripture. They didn't want him to go. So he went in to stay with them. There at table, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him and he vanished from their sight. They said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?" Now they knew that Jesus had risen from the dead. And though it was late, they rushed back to Jerusalem to find the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were up late, amazed and excited by what was taking place. They said, "The Lord has risen indeed, and appeared to Peter." The two told them what had happened to them on the road and how Jesus had made himself known to them in the breaking of the bread.

In the decisive Battle of Waterloo between the English under Wellington and the French under Napoleon, news was sent back to England by a series of flags being waved from hill-tops. The message came across the English channel from the battlefield, "Wellington defeated." Then a fog rolled across the English channel and nothing more could be seen. The message spread throughout the country plunging England into despair. But when the fog lifted the rest of the message became visible, "Wellington defeated the enemy."

On Easter morning the disciples were shrouded by the fog of despair. But then the rest of the message was seen. Jesus had conquered the enemies of evil and sin and death. Jesus is risen and the story is not finished! That's why we celebrate today. No matter

who we are or where we are, the story is not over. God always has more to do. The final word has not yet been written, and that word belongs to God!

We Christians know that even at the grave side, the story is not over. Where the rest of the story will take place is the only question. And those who are in Christ by faith will be with the Lord in glory, where God will open yet another chapter in our lives.

Have you ever heard of Dorothy, the "fork lady?" Dorothy died and when people saw her body in the coffin they noticed a fork in her hand. When people asked why, they were told, "Dorothy was always the one at the church supper collecting plates after the first course. She would say to people, "Keep your fork. The best is yet to come!" That was the theme at this faithful woman's funeral service, "The best is yet to come!" Jesus is risen and the story is not finished.

You know, sometimes we can get awfully down on ourselves. We become discouraged with our sins and our blunders and our slow growth in Christ-likeness. But don't despair. No sin is too great to be forgiven when it's put into the nail-pierced hand of the Risen One. Recall that Peter had denied his Lord three times and wept bitterly over his failure. But did you notice what they said, "The Lord has risen indeed and appeared **to Peter.**" The Lord graciously came to Peter and restored him. Jesus is risen and Peter's story was not finished! In fact, a new chapter in Peter's life was just beginning as leader of the new Christian church and fearless spokesman for Christ and the Gospel. The old saying is true, "Please be patient with me. God isn't finished with me yet!" When we give our lives to Christ he slowly but surely burns away the chaff and makes us more like himself. Jesus is risen and your story is not finished!

There was a young man, a lawyer, very bright, very worldly with no interest in faith. He took a mistress, had a child with her, pretty much did as he pleased. But his mother prayed for him, 18 years every day without ceasing. One day a small voice spoke to him as his eyes fell upon a Bible, "Take and read." And he read part of Romans chapter 12 which led to his conversion to Christ and a godly way of living. That young man became St. Augustine, the most influential theologian the church has ever known. If you ever become discouraged about a loved one or your children, if you ever wonder what the future holds for them - remember Easter. Whenever you despair that things will always be as they are now, remember that Jesus is Risen and God has not finished writing the story.

Jesus is risen and Jesus' story is not finished. The one who was crucified now lives forevermore. At Easter the story of his church was just beginning. Christ the Victor goes from strength to strength winning people to himself by his suffering love and building his church and God's Kingdom. Whenever you get discouraged about the church and its weakness and slowness, remember that Jesus is risen and the church's story is not finished.

Desmond Tutu, the South African Archbishop who lived for years under apartheid said, "I am always hopeful. A Christian is a prisoner of hope. What could have looked more

hopeless than Good Friday? But then at Easter God says, 'From this moment on, there is no situation which I cannot transform into good.'

No longer can we say, "It's over. There's no hope." Oh, maybe it looks that way from a human perspective, but it's never true from God's perspective. For Jesus is risen and the story is not finished. Not Jesus' story, not your story or mine, not the story of the church, or of God's creation. One day God will write "The End" on this world, but the end will give way to a new heaven and a new earth with Jesus reigning as Lord and King over all. With God endings bring new beginnings.

In a few moments we will share Holy Communion. I pray that like the Emmaus Road followers we too may sense the Risen Lord's presence at the table. "When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him and he vanished from their sight." The Risen One is with us here and by God's grace we may know him in the breaking of bread. May our hearts burn within us and confirm the truth of God's word for us. "The Lord is Risen. He is risen indeed."