

Sunday, March 31, 2024

Morning Message

Will you pray with me? God of abundant grace, redeeming love, and life eternal, we gather today to hear again the story of Easter, and to sing again the hymns of Easter and new birth. Open our hearts as we hear and sing, that we might know your glorious truth. We travel with you on this journey that leads to resurrection life and eternal hope. Be powerfully in these words you have given me to share, I humbly pray in our Risen Savior's name. Amen.

Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia! That's the first and foremost thing that must be said. And now, let me say that any pastor that tells you that Holy Week is not tiring is, well, lying. And yet, all of the preparation work, all of the special services planned and led, it's all redeemed when the musician strikes up the opening measures of "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." And those familiar emotions – the goosebumps and the lump in the throat come again. There is great joy in the moment, there is joy for the future, and there is joy in remembering the celebrations of Easter Sundays past, and those who celebrated them with us – especially those who are eternally celebrating their own resurrections. Charles Wesley, the author of "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," spoke in his hymn lyrics the message that the whole earth – past, present, and future – is caught up in God's redemption in Christ, and Christ's redemption in us. The phrase, "Love's redeeming work is done...Alleluia" is about the restoration of nothing less than the entirety of God's creation.

On this Easter Sunday, we have reached the climax of our Lent worship series, "Unrevealed Until Its Season," in which we have been guided by beloved hymns that hold messages for us in this holiest of seasons. The best hymns are profound poetry that hit at more than what they state on the surface; they are ones that stir our spirits and our emotions – smiles, goosebumps, and even, at times tears. Certain hymns sung over a lifetime instill godly wisdom and dramatic insights for living, sometimes without us even realizing it. Hymns can imbed faith into our souls more impactfully than words that are merely spoken, or read, or heard. When you hear or sing your favorite hymns, your soul awakens and rises up to memories, moments, dreams, a special love, an inexplicable sense of God's presence and peace. Something previously unrevealed is revealed first in the tune, and then in the words. Hence this has been the theme for our worship experiences in Lent, taken from the last line of the "Hymn of Promise" – "Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

It had been hard to imagine an Easter service without singing the powerful and uplifting verses of “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” until we had to endure it within the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. It. Was. Awful. For two Easter Sundays, we were not able to sing together safely. And so, ever since, we’ve cherished anew this glorious hymn of Easter. Did you know that until three centuries ago, sung music in a majority of Protestant churches came only from the book of Psalms? And the psalms were set to just a handful of tunes. A congregation might well have sung three different psalms in one service, but all to the same melody. As a teen, a young Isaac Watts saw a need for a musical revolution. He wanted to change the spirit of worship, to energize it. After young Isaac complained to his father about lackluster music in church, his father said, “Give us something better, young man.” And so Isaac did. Others, including Charles Wesley (brother of John…) soon followed, bringing the New Testament into worship music and revitalizing the church worship experience for millions ever since.

In May 1738, early in Charles Wesley’s ministry journey, he grew suddenly sick – so sick that it was thought he might die. A group of Moravians offered him their home for his lengthy recovery. These dedicated Christians were considered extremists by the Church of England, and yet Charles was deeply moved by the humble concern and gracious charity of his hosts. The way they chose to live their lives seemed, to Charles, to mirror Christ. Observing this rekindled a passion for Christ in Charles; his soul was set aflame and his physical strength returned. He instantly felt a strong call not only to serve God, but also to write music that reflected his newfound passion for preaching the Gospel. Because the Church of England would not accept their worship methods, John and Charles Wesley created a new church in a deserted iron foundry in London. When The Foundry Meeting House was dedicated in 1739, the first song sung was “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.” Along with a few others, this Charles Wesley song was part of a movement that changed gathered worship forever by capturing the uplifting nature of Christian faith. Therefore not just Easter was greatly impacted by this beloved hymn, but so was the way in which Christians proclaim the victory found in this glorious day.

In a short while, we will sing our closing hymn – “Hymn of Promise.” It’s the promise of Easter and the season of Spring, all wrapped up in one song. And here it is, on this day, “Revealed in Its Season!” Of course, there’s a story behind it. Its composer, Natalie Sleeth, began publishing choir anthems in the late 1960’s and she composed more than two hundred in her lifetime. Two weeks from today, the choir will share another of Natalie’s choir anthems, titled “Joy in the Morning.” Her song titled, “In the Bulb There Is a Flower,” is the hymn we know as “Hymn of Promise.” It

sprang from a season in the mid-1980's when Natalie was, in her words, "pondering ideas of life, death, spring, winter, Good Friday, and Easter," and also pondering T.S. Eliot's intriguing poetic line, "In my beginning is my end," which she, of course, reversed to "In our end is our beginning." The words and music she wrote were simple, eloquent, and beautiful.

And then, just a few days after putting the finishing touches on it, her husband, Ronald, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. When he heard her play the song for him, he asked that it be sung as a hymn at his funeral. So it was, when he died shortly thereafter at the young age of 63. It is a perfect way to sing our faith, which makes it a perfect hymn for a funeral or memorial service. It was the perfect hymn for my dad's memorial service which was on the first day of Spring in 2017. On its surface, the hymn is about natural beauty. But just as the apostle Paul tried to explain the resurrection of the body by pointing to the way a seed falls into the ground, Natalie draws our attention to a flower bulb, an apple seed, a cocoon. None of these three things are anything close to beautiful, and yet, what amazingly beautiful things come forth from them! Each of them is, truly, "Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

Let us be reminded, by Natalie's words, to recall that a cold and snowy winter eventually yields to the warmth of spring. Can a song transport us from a cold, still, desolate place into a warm, holy place? In a word, yes. The dawn does come; spring does arrive; that apple seed really is transformed, if you wait long enough, into a sturdy tree that produces delicious fruit for eating. When Natalie Sleeth died at age 61, she ceased being productive. But her work is still bearing much fruit. And isn't this the goal each of us pursues? We only produce for a finite time. But our love, our words, and our being can be fruitful long after we are gone from this world. God, even and uniquely in the hour of death, can already see our redeemed, eternal life of joy, love, and light. And so it is that we hope for that which is "Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

"From the past will come the future, what it holds, a mystery." We do not know what will happen next. We aren't entirely sure about the shape of a reunion with our loved ones gone before us, or a regathering to come. It all truly is "something God alone can see." "In our end is our beginning..." That's how hope works. It's not logical, it's not within our control, and it's certainly not automatic or even something that works according to laws of nature as we know them. "In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity; in our live eternity; in our death, a resurrection." This victory is "something God alone can see." It is "unrevealed until its season." In the meantime, in this season, ours is to grieve, and ours is to sing, and ours is to always, always hope. Christ is risen, indeed!