Sunday's Here

John 20:1-9

An African American pastor was preaching on Good Friday. The pastor began his message by quietly saying, “It’s Friday and my Jesus is hanging dead on a tree. But it’s Friday, and Sunday’s coming.”

One of the deacons yelled, “Preach, brother, preach!” It was all the encouragement that preacher needed. He grew a little louder.

“It’s Friday, and Mary’s crying her eyes out and the disciples are scattered like sheep without a shepherd. But it’s Friday, and Sunday’s coming.”

And he keeps working that one phrase over and over again. “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming. It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming. It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming” until he reaches the climax of that great message. And he shouts out, “It’s Friday!” and the whole congregation stands up and with one voice shouts back, “But Sunday’s coming!”

Well, friends, it is my great privilege to stand before you this Easter Sunday 2016 and to declare to you, Sunday’s here! Easter Sunday’s here! Our greatest fears have been proved groundless and our greatest hopes have been realized. Death has been defeated. Hate has done its worse and love has forever triumphed. Sunday’s here and Jesus Christ is risen from the grave.

You know the story of the first Easter. The details vary from Gospel to Gospel.

In John’s account, it was early Sunday morning. It was still dark. Mary Magdalene is making her way to the tomb. Mary Magdalene loved Jesus so very much. Mark tells us that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary (Mark 16:9). We don’t know what that means--the casting out of demons. The “seven demons” may refer to a complex illness, not to any form of sinfulness. Whatever the seven demons referred to, it was life-changing for Mary Magdalene when she met Jesus, as it is for most people. She became one of Christ most devoted followers.

Mary Magdalene was present at Christ’s crucifixion even though most of Christ followers had scattered. Now she is the first to come to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning. She is unprepared for what she finds there. The stone that had sealed Christ’s tomb has been removed. His body is gone. Not knowing what else to do Mary runs to find two of Jesus’ closest disciples, Simon Peter and John, and says to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” Perhaps, they thought, grave robbers had stolen Jesus body, or the Roman authorities, or some misguided religious zealots. Who knows who it might have been? But his body was missing. It’s interesting. Notice that none of them suggested that he could be risen from the grave.

That’s one sign that these stories are authentic. These were honest reactions of people very much like you and me. Later Jesus’ disciples would recall how many times he had said to them things like, “I am the resurrection and the life,” but when it actually happened, they were just as shocked as anyone else. Such things as people rising from the dead were not part of their reality, just like it is not part of ours. We would like to believe that the dead live on . . . that the grave is not the end. But until Christ rose from the dead, it was not something that we could count on.

 But on that Sunday long ago a man emerged from a tomb . . . and then we knew beyond a doubt, death had been defeated. Friday was over; Sunday was finally here.

But do not be misled. The Bible is very forthright. Fridays are still very much a part of life.

Imagine what Mary Magdalene felt on Friday as she stood at the foot of the cross and watched her beloved Jesus be put to death. She heard the jeers and mocking of the crowd. She had been there when they cried for a known murderer to be set free, but the innocent Jesus to be crucified. And there he was . . . stretched out on a cross with nails pounded through his hands and feet. His naked body hung between two common criminals. The soldiers mocked him, spat upon him, pierced him and left him exposed to the elements to die. The Bible is very forthright in acknowledging life’s Fridays. They are part of living in this world.

British author Malcolm Muggeridge once wrote a letter to his friend Bill Buckley. In it He makes this profound statement: “As an old man, Bill, looking back on one’s life, it’s one of the things that strikes you most forcibly--that the only thing that’s taught one anything is suffering. Not success, not happiness, not anything like that. The only thing that really teaches one what life’s about--the joy of understanding, the joy of coming in contact with what life really signifies--is suffering, affliction.” He’s talking about life’s Fridays. He’s talking about every dark night of the soul. The Bible is very forthright in acknowledging life’s Fridays.

But the Bible is equally clear that Friday is not God’s final word. Sunday is God’s ultimate answer to life’s most profound questions, Easter Sunday! Death and darkness have been defeated. Christ is risen from the grave.

On that first Easter Sunday, Mary Magdalene, Peter and John were confused. Where is his body? Peter and John run to the tomb. John outruns Peter and arrives first, but, for some reason, is reluctant to go in. He bends over and looks in but he does not enter. Maybe it’s his fear of defilement. Maybe he doesn’t want confirmation of what the women had reported. Maybe his heart cannot take the reality of Jesus’ missing body. Something holds him back.

When Peter arrives at the tomb, he plunges right in. He sees the grave clothes and the burial cloth. After a period, John goes in, too, and also sees the grave clothes. The scene has a different effect on John than it did on Peter. It may be that John perceived the missing body and the position of the clothes as a sign that this was not a robbery. Whatever the reason, Luke makes a point of saying that “John believed.” It may be that John was already beginning to remember the things Jesus told them.

The ordered grave clothes should serve as a metaphor for us, too. It should remind us that while we are mourning, God has already ordered things for our good. Christ triumphed over death and the grave. He has defeated our final enemy. The reality of the resurrection instructs us that there is victory on the other side of our pain--that it is not over until God says it is over. God in great love is coming to redeem us.

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And that brings us to today. We are those who live on the other side of the resurrection. We are those who have the privilege of knowing that God is with us and that neither life nor death can separate us from God’s love. How is that being lived out in your life?

So many people nowadays are filled with hopelessness and despair. So many are filled with anger and fear. Are we not Easter people? Have we not gotten the word that, though there will always be Fridays, Sunday is coming? God loves us so much that God will not leave us in grief or the grave.

Remember this whenever you are going through a sorrowful time. This is only Friday. Friday is not God’s final word. Sunday is God’s final word. Easter Sunday! Jesus Christ is risen from the grave! Hallelujah! Amen.