

"In Your Easter Outfit"

I Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-16

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 5, 2015 – Easter Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

We all agree that Easter is more than the commercialism and trappings which often go with this day. Perhaps you don't know, however, that wearing new clothes has a long history in the church. This custom goes back to the practice of mass baptisms common in early Christianity on Easter. Converts were given flowing white garments to put on immediately after their initiation rite into the church. The white robes signified joy and new life and they were worn all that first week.

The Easter Parade on New York's Fifth Avenue, likewise, has roots in the Middle Ages. In Europe entire congregations took a walk on Easter Sunday through the towns and the surrounding lanes. The people wore their best clothes—new ones, if possible. Sometimes a candle or crucifix led the procession and hymns were sung. The new clothes, the blossoming spring flowers, the greening of the grass all reflected the newness of life symbolized in the resurrection.

Henry David Thoreau, writing in *Walden*, tells of a practice among the Mucclasse tribe which is somewhat similar. Known as "busking," it was an annual housecleaning festival. Thoreau describes it this way: "When a town celebrates the busk, having previously provided themselves with new clothes, new pots, pans, and other household utensils and furniture, they collect all their worn out clothes, and other despicable things, sweep and cleanse their houses and their own town of their filth... [Along with] other old provisions, they cast [all] together into one common heap, and consume it with fire.... On the fourth morning (after the fire), the high priest, by rubbing dry wood together, produces fire in the public square, from whence every habitation in the town is supplied with a new and pure flame."

We see a common theme. Out of the old comes the new. From the past comes the future. Today is a day of resurrection we proclaim. It is a time of celebration. Neither the power of evil, nor death itself, could contain Jesus. Try as they might, little minds with selfish purposes could not constrain him. Those who sought to erase him from memory found his strength far outweighed theirs. His was the last word in the end.

We can never know the full extent of Jesus' suffering. Yet we, too, have known enough pain of our own that we can feel along with him. We have experienced many little "deaths" which have laid us low. We have had our share of losses and disappointments. We have all felt, on occasion, that we weren't sure if we would be able to go on. Some of us may even feel that way now.

But you see the good news today is that there is a new beginning for each of us in Christ. What was yesterday is indeed past and gone. What counts is now, and what may come tomorrow. Instead of standing on the threshold of the future by ourselves, uncertain and unsure, we again receive the assurance that Jesus is with us, our companion along the way.

If we allow him, he will lead us and guide us. What we cannot do for ourselves is the gift he freely offers to us.

When we trust enough to open ourselves to Jesus at work in our lives, we discover how many of our struggles and how much of our unhappiness is self-imposed. When we put our faith in this power that lies beyond our lives, we find our way becomes clear as when fog burns off with the brightness of the sun. We can see how to go forward.

Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary General of the United Nations, kept a journal of his life and thought. These insightful writings were later published under the title of *Markings*. It's a book of profound reflection from the heart of a true world leader, not like some who simply claim it.

In there is an entry for Pentecost Sunday, 1961, just four months before his tragic death in a plane crash. He wrote in his journal: "I don't know Who—or what—put the question.... I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer 'yes' and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."

Commitment opens the way to further possibilities for us, but with the advent of new life comes change. We cannot hold on to everything from the past. We must necessarily rid ourselves of those things that keep us from moving ahead. Whatever is a drag upon the soul needs to be identified so that it can be left behind as we go forward.

In Colossians Paul says, "If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.... You must put to death, then, the earthly desires at work in you.... You are the people of God; God loved you and chose you.... So then you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant... forgive one another. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity."

This is Paul's way of saying to take off the old, the worn and stained "clothes" of the past, and put on fresh ones. You can't be what you were, and what you will be, at the same time.

Strong voices in life today deny that there is any need to step forward in the Spirit, but those voices echo ancient ones as well. They are evident in all ages, as the Bible illustrates so well. The way of the world says get all you can get, and do it before the next person takes your share. It says look out for yourself first and foremost and don't be hesitant to act. It says don't be afraid to put others down, that you might look good in comparison.

It says cheat a little bit here or there; everybody else does it. It says first attend to your needs, then to your pleasures, and if there is anything left over then give to others—though not in great amounts and make sure to get credit for it. It says there is nothing more to existence than what you see now and no power greater than yourself.

Well, Easter is clear testimony to how shallow worldly wisdom proves to be. It may have the upper hand in the short run, but it will always be proven wrong. Today, especially, we remember how Jesus gave completely of himself to not only tell us, but show us with his life, that we are loved by God. In so doing, the Lord holds out a purpose for each of our lives.

New clothes, beautiful flowers, baby chicks and rabbits, colored eggs, even the sunrise—all reflect starting points. They are all symbols of Easter. This morning to we may look back on the resurrection of Christ as a turning point in history, but truly each Easter is a celebration of new beginnings.

Today we are reminded of the invitation to step into this amazing newness of life which is offered to us. Jesus extends his hand to grasp ours and lead us to places where we have yet to go. We needn't be afraid of where our steps will take us because we don't go alone.

The Gospel of John reminds us so well: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior." Thanks be to God, this Easter and every Easter!