

"What a Difference a Day Makes"

I Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-7

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus
March 27, 2016 – Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

Good days. Bad days. Johnny Carson said in one of his monologues: "You know it's going to be one of those days when your twin sister forgets your birthday."

"Some days are born ugly," wrote John Steinbeck in *Travels with Charley*. "No one knows what causes this, but on such a day people resist getting out of bed and set their heels against the day. When they are finally forced out by hunger or job, they find the day is just as lousy as they knew it would be.

Steinbeck continues: "On such a day, it is impossible to make a good cup of coffee, shoestrings break, cups leap from the shelves by themselves and shatter on the floor, children ordinarily honest tell lies. This is the day the cat chooses to have kittens and housebroken dogs wet on the parlor rug."

Good days, bad days, all the same days. Days we wish could be longer and those we hope will soon be over. There was a time when days were labelled by the major function we did: laundry day, shopping day, yard day, church day. We may be more flexible now but, to some extent, we still follow some of these patterns.

Days are also noted by the weather: cloudy days, rainy days, windy days, clear days. You can evaluate a day by what you accomplish. We've all had what we considered wasted days when we didn't seem to get much done, but we also have had our share of exhilarating days when you fall into bed dead tired, but with a sense of fulfillment.

There are special days, too, like birthdays and anniversaries and graduations. They mark significant transitions in life. In a similar way we look forward to holidays, for they each have a distinctive feel. Often they're spent with families and friends.

For Christians the day of days is today...Easter. While we revere Christmas, it's really not as central and significant as this day of resurrection. All other Sundays radiate out from this one and find their place accordingly.

Easter, to early Christians, was known as the Great Day. It was the day which changed all days. It was an occasion for worship and celebration, for reading relevant scriptures, retelling the familiar stories. And it brought a feeling of hope for people, even at times when the world seemed most bleak.

Easter has been making that difference for centuries and is still doing it today. It is the time when we get together and wish each other a blessed day. It is a time of singing and celebrating, of acknowledging and acclaiming. It's a time for new outfits and new outlooks. It's an occasion for brightly colored eggs and chocolate rabbits and marshmallow chickens and jelly beans galore.

But what does it mean for us in the larger picture, in a spiritual sense? How do we regard this day in a scientific and technological age? How can we explain this mystery of faith in a meaningful way that might connect with others? How might it bring about a difference in the way we live?

To discover its present relevance let's start with an old source. The apostle Paul taught that resurrection begins in this life. He writes: "We were buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we, too, might walk in newness of life ... Yield yourselves [then] to God as persons who have been brought from death to life ... "

Here Paul brings that word "resurrection" into human life, life as we know it, saying that it has meaning for us right now. It begins where we are, where we can see it, feel it, know it. Its true place for us is not somewhere past, somewhere out there, somewhere far away; rather it is nearby and close at hand.

"As Christ was raised from the dead ...," Paul says, "we, too, might walk in newness of life." He makes the case that there can be a sense of resurrection before the end of life in the same way that there can be death before the end of life.

Let's take a look at the latter first. A living death is like a hollow existence, where a person is reduced to a mere shell of what it is to be a vibrant, living, human being.

This death is often experienced as separation. It creeps between the members of families doing its silent work. It tears deep wounds in the human fabric as people of one race pull away from those of another, one nationality looks askance at some other. It rears its head any time when good people lose hope for a better future.

Wherever pride keeps God away, there death is working. Wherever one person's prosperity depends on the exclusion of another, death holds sway. Wherever an individual's personal advancement is brought about in callous disregard of others' rights, there death is present. Whenever one derives strength and importance from deriding and demeaning, there death prevails. Wherever systems or profits or institutions come before people, there death does its work.

There is death all around us, all the time, and it works its ways even into the deep recesses of our own souls. Sometimes its presence is so strong that it seems to make it impossible to accept and forgive and love others, or even ourselves.

So, in reality, Paul would say that there is death before the grave. We have seen it and likely experienced it to some degree; yet, he goes on to affirm that resurrection begins in this life, too. God is continually at work bringing new forms out of the old, new life out of lifeless existence.

I have known persons who were almost fully drained of life, who walked around and talked as if they were in a daze, for whom the blackness of despair almost totally engulfed their existence. Yet slowly most of them found a turning point where they could finally return to life from the nothingness of their recent situation.

Some of us have seen this in our own lives. Some of us have experienced a similar feeling of rising from despair to hope. We have seen ourselves come back from the pit of agony and pain and futility to again enjoy the warmth of the sun on our skin. We have had pleasure and meaning return where we previously felt only numbness. We have found ourselves anxious to get up again in the morning where we had only desired to sleep life away.

And most often faith, or an emerging sense of it, has been a vital part of that restoration. We found our resources for change by experiencing the depth of our relationship to God, and that made all the difference. We can readily identify with the psalmist when he says: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters, he restores my soul."

Yes, the words are right: "He restores my soul." He brings me new life out of old, promise out of futility. In a sense one doesn't have to explain resurrection to us; most of us have felt it for ourselves. And if you haven't yet, hear the witness of others that can be a real possibility for you, too.

Resurrection is not so much about regaining the life we lose to physical death, though our faith holds wonderful promises for us there as well. Resurrection is first of all the beginning of hope experienced now, a restoration that makes us alive again. Resurrection brings us a quality to life that is akin to the eternal. It is the freest and most fulfilling aspect to our existence. It's like feeling dead, then coming back to life.

To be honest I don't understand the "how" of Jesus' resurrection and I doubt any of you do either. But we can believe in the reality of resurrection because we have experienced it firsthand. For me, every time I have given God the chance, life has overcome death, love has healed my brokenness, Christ's spirit has filled the gaps of alienation and rejection within.

The pain of Good Friday has passed. The uncertainty of Saturday is over. The joy and assurance of Easter is now with us, and what a difference a day can make! It's more than something which happened once and back then because it says that God so loves **me** that whatever had to be done, whatever had to be sacrificed, brings me new life today and new possibilities and new hope for the future.

Now if that's not a reason to celebrate today, then I don't know what is! May you have a most blessed Easter day.