

Death Is The New Life

Luke 24: 1-11

Several years the film industry started to feel some desperation over declining ticket sales – a trend which has continued over the past few years, but has become progressively worse. Normally, in solving problems like this, industries will look for solutions to reverse the trend, but we are talking about Hollywood, the one industry that has perfected the art of illusion. Hollywood's solution to their declining ticket sales was simple – they declared Thursday as the new Friday, and rolled the Thursday ticket sales into the weekend totals. Of course this did not reverse the trend, but the numbers looked better, and since most films increase their sales by word-of-mouth, Hollywood's hope was that the higher numbers would increase the buzz for particular films

Hollywood is not the only industry that makes these kind of “existential” changes in the hope of creating a new reality. You might have been reading articles in magazines and in ads declaring, in regards to age, “60 is the new 40.” What does that mean? Comedian Lewis Black's response to this phrase is both an explanation and a critique: “My generation is afraid of getting old. They're always saying 60 is the new 40. No, it's not. 60 is 60 and 40 is 40. That's why they're different numbers. And 40 isn't the new 20 and 20 isn't the new embryo” I agree with Lewis Black, although there are many times, especially after a long day, that I fervently wish 60 was the new 40, but my body won't let me get away with it.

My wife tells me that in the world of fashion, every year a different color is declared the “new black”: “pastel is the new black,” “orange is the new black,”

black being the foundational color theme that influences designers. Just this past week I read an article about education declaring that “college is the new high school.” I think if you ask a college student, or a high school student, or – more importantly – a parent if college is the new high school, they may disagree.

It is only the arrogance of our human nature that makes us think that, just by declaring that something is so, it is so. Today there is a growing atheist movement declaring, sometimes hysterically, that there is no God. Hearing these words always make me laugh. We have barely gotten off this planet – only as far as a few visits to the moon. 150 years ago we didn’t have indoor plumbing – yet we believe we know enough about the universe to reach such an absolute conclusion about God’s existence. The recent discoveries in deep space observation by the Hubble telescope, some of which are completely baffling scientists and physicists, only increases the mystery of creation rather than solving the question of God’s existence.

If this is true, what gives US the right this morning to not only declare that there is a God, but that this God loves us so much that God came to us as Jesus Christ, who was judged, crucified, and rose again. Well, much like science, we partly base this declaration on observation – on people who were there that first Easter and in the days that followed and said, “We saw this happen. We saw the risen Christ” But it has to be more than just the observations of people who lived 2000 years ago, doesn’t it? In those days there were many religions, many myths, many messiahs, and many supposed resurrections. Yet this one story, the one we have shared, has done more to change the world than any story ever told.

By the end of the first century there were 40 known Christian churches, most of them in Asia Minor. Today, 20 centuries later, there are 300,000 Christian churches in the United States alone, with 67,000 Christian denominations around the world, and 50,000 new Christian congregations added to the world each year. The only phenomenon that comes close to this kind of explosive and organized creation is also found in the Bible, in the opening words.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep...then God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light.’” So often we get hung up on the details of the creation story instead of getting the point – “And God said....and it was.” We have all kinds of words for creative actions that we humans perform everyday – illustration, manufacturing, design, writing, imagining – but there is no word in any language for the kind of creation that we see in the first chapter of Genesis, because we can’t do it.

In theology we have a fancy Latin term, “creatio ex nihilo,” creation out of nothing, which simply means that when God says that something is, or that something that was this now is this, it is not a perception or a trick of language – it is an existential reality. If God were to say “60 is the new 40,” not only would everyone who was 60 actually become 40, but the number 60 would now be the number 40. Of course God would never say this, because it would be pointless. We do not have a pointless God.

God did have a point on Easter morning when, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God declared, “Death is the new life.” God’s point should be obvious and

easy for us to understand; it is at the heart of our Easter celebration and our lives of faith and discipleship. To put it in the simplest of terms, God said, “Since death has divided me from you, since the fear of death has caused you to fear me, I’m just going to get rid of it. Here is my Son – believe in him, and believe what he has shown you – death is the new life. And oh, by the way, it should be obvious why I am doing this – because I love you.”

It is obvious to YOU that God loves you, because if it is not, this morning is a complete waste of time. In fact, life is a complete waste of time, if we do not believe that we have a heavenly Father who not only made us, but loves what he has made. When Jesus walked among us, everybody tried to make him into something – some tried to make him into a political leader; some tried to make him into their personal possession – a secret not to be shared; some tried to make him into a magician; some tried to make him into a divine fairy godparent who grants wishes. (political) You know what? We still try to make him into those things. Others try to make him into a myth, a fantasy of deluded minds. But in resurrecting from the dead, in overcoming the final word in human reality, Jesus made his point very clear – “I have risen to make you into a new reality, a new person – a person of faith, a person of love, a person of purpose.”

Before that morning, a morning which we, with millions of others, celebrate 2000 years later, humanity was like a pilot, lost in the fog, with nowhere to land. We would desperately search for a light below or the stars above, but we would just circle endlessly in the fog of our ignorance, until we ran out of gas and crashed. But on Easter day we received a vector through words never heard before and never

heard since – “He is risen.” At last we had a way through the fog, and a place to safely land. At last, life had a point. Life did not depend on one’s number of years, or one’s possessions, power, or status. The point of life was perfectly summarized from the one who changed death into life – “This is my command – that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Where would we be if that day had not happened? Where would we be if God had not spoken, just as he did on the first day of creation, and said, “Behold my Son, my beloved. And see what I have created for you - death is the new life.”? The fog has lifted. Jesus has risen. Life has a point. Anglican theologian and author NT Wright helps us to understand the point of the resurrection for us and for the world when he writes: “The point of the resurrection...is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die...What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it...What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable..... They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom.”

This Holy week, as we celebrate the resurrection of the Son of God, let our embrace the reality that Jesus’ death is our new life, and in that new life we are transformed from despair to joy, from resignation to hope, from indifference to action. Death truly is the new life, and it is our life to live.