

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Third Sunday of Easter- April 18, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 30:4-5, 11-12 & Revelation 5:11-14

WHAT IS THIS?!

Charles Spurgeon was one of the great preachers in the history of our faith. In one of his sermons, he said: “Any fool can sing in the day. When the cup is full, (we) draw inspiration from it; when wealth rolls in abundance . . . any(one) can sing . . . praise of a God who gives a plenteous harvest . . . Let all things go as I please- I will weave songs . . . with the flowers that grow upon my path; but put me in a desert, where no flowers are, and (with what will) I weave a chorus of praise?. . . Let this voice be free, and this body be full of health, and I can sing God’s praise; but stop this tongue, lay me on the bed of languishing and it is not easy to sing from the bed and chant high praises in the fires. Give me the bliss of spiritual liberty, and let me mount up to my God, get near the throne, and I will sing . . . but confine me, fetter my spirit, clip my wings, make me exceeding sad. . . then it is hard to sing. It is not in (our) power to sing when all is adverse. It is not natural to sing in trouble- “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless God’s holy name.”

And who among us would argue with that? Things are going great for me. My work and money are secure; my health and that of my loved ones is fine; my most important relationships are solid and I see no problems on my horizon. With everything good in my life, I’m happy and ready to sing. But change any of that, have anything significant go sour on me, and it’s a different story. It’s not natural to sing praise in times of trouble. If my life turns hard, I don’t want to sing, “Bless the Lord, O my soul.”

And yet, we still can and must do it. We can if we keep our hope alive even in our roughest days. Lately, I’ve been on a roll with film references in these sermons, so this morning I’ll keep at it with *The Shawshank Redemption*. It’s a great story of hope maintained in the midst of awful cruelty. Based on a work by Stephen King, it features a remarkable character named Andy Dufresne.

He’s sentenced to two back-to-back life terms for crimes he did not commit. Everything about Shawshank Prison then conspires to destroy him. The abuse he suffers at the hands both of the warden and of his fellow prisoners is severe. Yet we get glimpses of how he works to sustain his hope. Those moments are like pinholes of light in his harsh, dark valley.

For example, *every week for six years* he writes a letter to the state legislature requesting money for the prison’s woefully inadequate library. Those letters go completely unanswered, until one day a shipment of used books and records, along with a check, arrives in the warden’s office. Dufresne is almost reverent as he explores the stack’s treasures and finds a recording of Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*. He’s especially smitten by the beauty of its duet, Sull’ aria, and wants everyone else to hear it. He manages to lock a guard in a bathroom. With brief access to the prison’s loudspeaker system, he plays the song for all.

The warden gets furious and puts Dufresne into solitary confinement for two weeks. He suffers it with no regrets. As he explains to his few inmate friends, “I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company.” Pointing to his head and his heart, he says, “The music was here . . . and here. That’s the one thing they can’t confiscate, not ever. That’s the beauty of (music) . . . (It helps us to remember that) there are things in this world not carved out of gray stone, that there’s a small place inside of us they can never lock away . . . (the) place called hope.”

Great music, whether present or remembered, kept Andy Dufresne hopeful. It kept him confident that his long, cruel, and unjust imprisonment would not be the last word on his life. Music couldn’t be taken from him and its beauty stoked his anticipation of better days.

Preacher Will Willimon tells another story of hope sustained in a wicked time. A member of his congregation had been held in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp during World War II. It was a grim and

nasty hellhole of degradation where the prisoners were treated brutally. Many of them were tempted to a suicidal despair.

But one of them, a strong and clever chap from Illinois, showed them a way through. As he and his fellow prisoners were being led out to the fields for yet another day of grinding and grueling work, he would hum to himself. He'd be sweltering, hungry, hurting, and dirty, but still he would sing. He'd often hum, "America, the Beautiful", and since the Japanese guards didn't know the tune it didn't mean anything to them.

Yet to the other prisoners it evoked sweet memories of home. It called forth vivid images of amber waves of grain and purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain. Home came to life for them again through this song and it renewed their hope of someday returning. Before long all the prisoners were humming "America the Beautiful", and in the midst of their misery it helped them look ahead to better days. Its vision of home kept their hope alive- which brings us to the book of Revelation.

Both last Sunday and today our lectionary's second Scripture reading has been from it. It's by far the most bizarre and difficult book in our whole Bible. When you read it, you have to wonder, "What in the world is this?!"

It's one of Scripture's most powerful and dynamic gifts. Piling strange symbol upon strange symbol and unforgettable image upon unforgettable image, it teems with songs and shouts and curses and acclamations. It gives St. John's portrayal of the new world that God is bringing to be, this world healed of all its tragic pain and division, this world re-created so that everything at last is set right and true. Revelation gives us the vision of God's *whole* new world in which all of God's creatures finally are fully *at home*.

It begins on Easter morning with Jesus raised from the dead. The aftershocks of that creation-quaking event continue to reverberate as St. John attests. It brings us the Risen Christ, the One who was dead but is alive again, the One who is with us now in the power of the Holy Spirit. It brings us the start of God's re-creation, God picking up the pieces and beginning again, God making *everything* fresh and new so that *everything* at last becomes as God means for it to be.

How can we speak of a world becoming so new? After all, we live mainly in a flat and prose world of facts and figures, calculations and projected trends, government reports and press releases. But for the coming of a whole new world we need language that opens up much wider, farther, higher and deeper. We need visionary words that pile strange symbol upon strange symbol and unforgettable image upon unforgettable image. We need poetry that teems with songs and shouts and curses and acclamations. We need the book of Revelation.

In its first chapter, the Risen Jesus appears. He comes to John with snow-white hair, eyes of fire, feet of polished bronze, a voice like a waterfall, and a face like the sun. John is scared stiff at the sight of him and falls at Jesus' feet like a dead man. The sheer awesomeness of the Risen Christ has overwhelmed him, but Jesus reaches down to touch him. He assures John that he doesn't have to be afraid.

In Revelation, chapter 5, from which today's reading comes, we see why that's so. In chapter 4, John has entered heaven's throne room. As his vision of this develops something strange happens. The one on the throne has a sealed scroll in his hand. The scroll contains God's redemptive plan, God's saving design for the re-creation of all things. Someone has to open the scroll, but nobody is able to.

John writes, "I began to weep bitterly, because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. (But) (t)hen one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'" John says, "Then I saw . . . a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered" (5:4-6).

The Lamb is the Risen Jesus. The One whose overwhelming presence at first had knocked John down is revealed to be the sacrificial Lamb, the One who for the sake of all things had set his power aside. He had become one of us, living our life, suffering the full weight of our world's brokenness in sin. He had submitted himself to death, even death on a cross, and by his sacrifice had secured final victory over every sin and all its powers. By him, God's plan of salvation, the design scroll of God's rescue operation for the whole cosmos, can be unrolled and put into action. The scene in Revelation 5 concludes with

every creature singing, “(T)o the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (verse 13).

Just as weeping Mary Magdalene had been met and comforted by the risen Christ on the first Easter Day, so now is John, weeping in his vision, met and comforted by the risen Jesus revealed to be the Lamb who can open the scroll. As it’s opened, Revelation continues with its torrent of symbols and images. John keeps them coming as his vision depicts the amazing course of Christ’s ultimate triumph.

The middle chapters portray a wild and tumultuous cosmic battle that leads to the Lamb’s victory over Babylon. Babylon stands for everything evil, tyrannous, and deathly, for everything that is opposed to God and God’s purposes. Then in the final two chapters, John gives the climactic vision of God’s new heaven and earth that arrive after Babylon has fallen. It’s the full Easter vision of all things made new.

John writes, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more’” (21:1-4a).

So we ask again, “What in the world is the book of Revelation?!”

It’s the best recording of the greatest music that keeps our finest hope alive even when we’re locked up behind the gray stone of our roughest days.

It’s the supreme song with the most inspiring vision of the true and ultimate home of everyone and everything, the coming of God’s reign on this earth as it is in heaven.

It’s the most moving homecoming melody that keeps our biggest hope pumping as we hum it through even the most grinding and grueling days of our swelter, our hunger, our hurt, and our dirt.

It’s the most powerful, dynamic, and unforgettable picture of creation’s final destiny, a vision of the End so compelling that it keeps us singing even when everything else goes harsh, dark, and threatening.

So we keep on singing, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless God’s holy name.” We sing, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain . . . to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing forever and ever!” Amen!

Kurt Kirchoff

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Living Lord, we thank You for the vision You’ve given us of the world not only as it is, but as it will be. When our lives turn sour we are tempted to lose hope. The powers of sin and death can seem so strong that we’re inclined to stop singing. We become prone to despair.

Yet with Your Easter gifts You remind us that this is Your world and that You’re determined to have it as You’ve always intended it to be. What You started in creation, You will bring to glorious completion in Your new creation. You have come to us in Jesus. You are working in, with, through, and around us by his Holy Spirit. You will keep re-creating until finally You have brought all things unto Yourself, until at last You are all in all.

Renew in us the vision of Your loving reign established completely in our hearts and throughout Your whole creation. Keep that vision before us always, especially when the going gets rough for us, especially when we’re plagued by death and mourning and crying and pain. Keep us singing the song of Your Kingdom come on this earth as it is in heaven. We pray for this again in Jesus’ name and in the way he has taught us, saying together, “Our Father. . . Amen.