

Today we celebrate that Christ, the light of the world, defeated sin and death through His resurrection! We serve a God who is always bringing forth life from death.

This week we experienced a different kind of light burning in the world. On Monday many of us watched the news and saw the images from the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France. We may have even watched as the iconic spire fell from the sky. In the ashes a miracle was found. Although items were burned in the sanctuary, the thing that remained unscathed was the cross.

The cross is a beautiful symbol of our faith. It is a reminder that through our faith in Jesus Christ we can always find hope and new life.

This year has been a difficult year for the church. With all the scandals in the Catholic Church and the division in The United Methodist Church resulting from General Conference, many commentators shared that the burning of Notre Dame was a symbol for the state of the church.

During this past month three African American Churches were burned down in Louisiana by a young man who had hatred and racism in his heart. And while these communities and the congregation of Notre Dame do not have their buildings to worship in this Easter morning this fact remains...the church cannot be burned down...Christ cannot be defeated.

Just as the song “We are the Church” reminds us, “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people.”<sup>1</sup> What was so moving while watching the footage covering the fire at Notre Dame was how people on the street came together singing hymns of their faith. They were unified, even though many of them were strangers, because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

As the people of God, we have always been called to rise from the ashes to continue to do the work of the people of God. In the Old Testament book of Daniel, we see that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would not bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar. Their allegiance was to God. Due to their disobedience they were thrown into the fiery furnace which scripture tells in Daniel 3:19-20: the king “ordered the furnace to be heated up seven times more than was customary,<sup>20</sup> and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire.”

Then something amazing happened. The three men were not burned up and when King Nebuchadnezzar looked in the furnace there were not three men, but four; one “with the appearance of God.”<sup>ii</sup> God was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that day in the fire. God is still with us today bringing forth new life from certain death.

We hear this same promise in Isaiah 43: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”<sup>iii</sup>

The very same ashes that marked us for death, as sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace on Ash Wednesday, are the same ashes that we rise from today knowing that God has saved us through Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins. Through Jesus’ resurrection, we too can rise from the ashes of our grief, our pain, our guilt, our anger, and whatever else it is that keep us from surrendering our lives to God. We too, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are called to continue to do the work of God.

This is what the women who came to care for Jesus’ body were doing. They still wanted to show their love to God by caring for the body of their Savior, Jesus. In our Scripture for this morning, we find the women who went to Jesus’ tomb: Mary Magdalene who was there at the foot of the cross, Mary the Mother of James, and Joanna, a woman who had experienced healing from Jesus earlier in the Gospel of Luke. This was a sad day for them, a day where once again they would be reminded of Jesus’ death. To pay their respects they took spices to anoint his body.

When they got there the stone was rolled away. They went inside to see what was going on and Jesus’ body was gone! Then they experienced two angels who told them that Jesus had risen! They went back and told the 11 disciples, but no one believed them. Peter decided to check things out for himself.

Peter went to the tomb and saw the linen that Jesus’ body was wrapped in cast to the side. It really was true. Jesus had risen! The grave clothes, the trappings of death, could not hold Jesus in the tomb.

Many times, in our lives we may find ourselves wrapped up in sin, we may feel trapped, we may feel like there is no hope. We may feel that evil may conquer us. In these times, we must remember that Christ is the only one who can defeat death and we are not alone. We too are called to participate in this life of resurrection.

No one knew this story better than Lazarus. Jesus was good friends with Lazarus and his two sisters Mary and Martha. One day Lazarus became very ill and passed away. Jesus was traveling and did not reach Lazarus’ house until after he died. Jesus immediately asked the sisters of Lazarus to take him to the tomb. Martha warned him that it had been four days since Lazarus died and that it was probably very stinky by now. Jesus said, “Lazarus come out!”

What happened next was the foreshadowing of Jesus’ resurrection: “<sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go” (John 11:44). Jesus called for Lazarus to be unbound from the trappings of death. The very same linen cloths that were found on Lazarus were just like the cloths that Jesus left behind after his resurrection.

Jesus called Lazarus to come out of the grave. Today Jesus calls to us and gives us this same command, “Come out and receive new life! It is here for the taking! We are called to see the signs of new life all around us. We are called to point to these signs for others.

### **Church today more than any other day we are called to wake up.**

We like Lazarus may feel very dead spiritually. This is not a new phenomenon. The brother of the founder of our denomination, Charles Wesley spoke about this very same thing in his sermon “Awake Thou That Sleepest” which he preached on Sunday April 4, 1742. Charles explained what it meant to be asleep, he said, “Sleep signifies the natural state of people, that deep sleep of the soul that Adam’s sin has cast all of his descendants into, that lying down, laziness, and ignorance, that lack of awareness of their real condition — the condition of all people when they come into the world and that continues until the voice of God wakes them.”<sup>iv</sup>

The Apostle Paul echoed this notion in 1 Corinthians 15:21-22: “For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being, for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”

Our faith in Jesus Christ is the thing that wakes us up from our sin. Charles Wesley calls us to this moment of justifying faith when he quotes Ephesians 5:14: "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light."

Today we too are called to wake up and receive the light, that is Jesus Christ. We are called to wake up and be thankful. Just as Psalm 118 calls for praises to God, today more than any other day, we are called to be thankful for Christ's death of the cross and for his resurrection. We are called to claim our identity as the church, the people who have been called out of the ashes to continue to worship God. We are the people God has called to wake up and accept the gift of grace that has been offered to us every day.

**The good news for our lives today is that Christ has called us to experience resurrection life every day, if only we choose to wake up and accept it.**

The beautiful thing about living a resurrection life is that this life with Christ begins right now. It is not something we have to wait for. Through our faith in Jesus Christ we begin a relationship with God that never ends. We are sustained in this relationship by the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I know this to be true in my own life. The Holy Spirit stirred in my heart from the ashes of a church that had been burned down due to racism and hate. There in the ashes, God called to me ministry. The experience that led me to this decision was not the sight of seeing the building that was burned down, although I recognized the sight before me to be the physical embodiment of injustice.

The experience for me, was when the people of Antioch Baptist Church in Gadsden, South Carolina, shared the love and joy of Christ with me even in the midst of their sadness and brokenness. Their faith in Jesus Christ could not be burned down.

They continued to be the church even when they were wounded deeply. They continued to build into me and my youth group, even when they could have decided to distance themselves so they could deal with their own grief. I was blessed to attend their rededication service years later when the church had been rebuilt and was more beautiful than ever. There were signs of resurrection all around. I still have a picture of that day.

It is of a picture of two little girls, one black and one white skipping down the street as they walked to the service of rededication holding hands. This was a beautiful resurrection sign that I was blessed to witness in my own life.

Resurrection is all around us, but we have to wake up and pay attention so we don't miss it.

When we wake up we realize that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is vital to our faith and our lives today. Death has been swallowed up in victory so not matter what happens to the people of God today, tomorrow, and years from now, we are called to continue to be the church come what may.

We will always be people who rise from the ashes of sin into the new life with Christ. Never give up. There is always hope. There is always joy through our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

He is risen. Alleluia. Amen!

#### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The United Methodist Hymnal. P. 558

<sup>ii</sup> NRSV Daniel 3:25b.

<sup>iii</sup> NRSV Isaiah 43: 1b-3a.

<sup>iv</sup> Charles Wesley “Awake, Thou that Sleepest.” <https://teddyray.com/john-wesleys-sermons-for-today/awake-thou-that-sleepest-sermon-3/>

#### Resources

<http://www.bibleresearch.org/observancebook5/b5w79.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/us/louisiana-black-church-fire-hate-crime.html>

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/notre-dame-cathedral-on-fire-crucifix-altar-cross-paris/>