

“IT’S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD”

Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

A Sermon by John Thomason

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The cartoon appeared a couple of weeks ago in the Republican-American, not in the funny pages but in the editorial section. The caption read, “March Madness,” referring to the NCAA men’s basketball tournament, which is always full of crazy surprises. The cartoon depicted a long line of office workers holding copies of their “brackets” – that is, their predictions of which teams would wind up playing each other in the tournament and who would win each game. However, these folks were standing in front of the shredding machine, preparing to have their brackets chewed up into confetti. March Madness had just begun, and every person in the office had already guessed wrong!

Some of you know that the biggest bracket-buster in this year’s tournament occurred in the opening round. For the first time ever, a number 16 seed defeated a number 1 seed. The lowly Retrievers of the University of Maryland Baltimore County upset the top-ranked Virginia Cavaliers, and did so by a wide margin. After the game, one of the Virginia players, still in state of shock, spoke to the press. What he said was: “It feels like the end of the world . . . but it’s not the end of the world.” I was struck by this young man’s raw honesty, and also by the truth contained in both of his statements.

The first truth he affirmed was obvious: when you’re regarded as the best team in the country and lose to a school most people have never even heard of, “it feels like the end of the world.” God knows, this is a feeling many of us can identify with at certain points in our lives. When you lose a game you’re supposed to win, when you lose a job you found fulfilling, when you lose a marriage you assumed would last forever, when you lose the good health you’ve always taken for granted, when you lose a chunk of your retirement savings to the whims of the stock market, when you lose your self-esteem through some humiliating public failure, when you lose a beloved family member to a premature death – then feelings of despair and hopelessness are not far behind. “It feels like the end of the world.”

Two different times across my 69 years, my life came to an apparent dead-end. In both instances, I experienced massive losses from which I thought I would never recover. This past week, I re-read an entry in the journal I kept during the first of those dark periods. One day I actually wrote these words: “My life is over – not finished, not completed, not fulfilled, just over.”

What I was expressing, of course, was a feeling. Some might say condescendingly that it was “just a feeling,” as if my feeling had no correspondence to the real facts of my life. But in that moment, the feeling of despair was my emotional truth. A feeling should never be discounted as an exaggerated reaction or dismissed as something false or wrong. If something terrible happened to you and you were to say to me, “John, it feels like the end of the world,” I would never say to you, “You shouldn’t feel that way. Things are bound to get better for you.” The fact is, things probably would get better for you, but I have no right to deny your emotional truth in that moment.

When the Virginia basketball player surveyed the wreckage of his promising season and said, “It feels like the end of the world,” he was speaking the truth of his heart. Then in his next breath he gave voice to another truth: “But it’s not the end of the world.” Somehow, this young man was able to do a reality check on his feelings in his moment of defeat. He was able to take a longer view and conclude that this one loss would not define forever either him or his team. In a situation that felt like a death, he was able to affirm that life would go on.

Friends, it occurs to me that Good Friday and Easter present all of us with the ultimate reality check. In today’s lesson from the Book of Acts, the apostle Peter is preaching a sermon in Caesarea where he reminds his readers about “the great event that took place throughout the land of Israel.” He says: “You know about Jesus of Nazareth and how God poured out on him the Holy Spirit and power. He went everywhere, doing good and healing all who were under the power of the Devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to everything that he did in the land of Israel and in Jerusalem” (Acts 10:37-39a). You talk about a glowing tribute to Jesus and a cause for his contemporaries to be filled with hope! Peter praises Jesus as one who is empowered by God to perform wondrous works for the children of God. But in the very next sentence Peter adds, “Then they put him to death by nailing him to a cross” (v. 39b).

In this sermon, Peter doesn’t spell out his feelings at the time of Jesus’ death, but we can be sure that “it feels like the end of the world.” It feels like the end, not only of Jesus’ life, but of everything Jesus has stood for and worked for. It feels like the end of his kingdom mission and its promise of a new world of justice and peace. It feels like the end of Jesus’ relationship with Peter and the other disciples. How could they feel otherwise? Jesus spends three years making friends through acts of love and forgiveness; and then, what do his enemies do? “They put him to death by nailing him to a cross.”

Our Gospel lesson from John gives us an account of Peter’s behavior three days after the crucifixion. We see no resemblance between Peter and the Virginia basketball player who quickly saw his team’s defeat in a larger perspective. No, in the wake of Jesus’ death, Peter still feels nothing but regret and remorse, grief and despair. He hears from Mary Magdalene that Jesus’ tomb is empty and runs with another disciple to see it for himself. But John makes it clear that neither Peter nor his fellow disciple believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead. They assume as Mary does that insult has been added to injury, that someone has been up to mischief and taken Jesus’ body away. John says tersely that “the disciples [go] back home” (v. 10), presumably more pained and perplexed than ever. In their view, Jesus is still dead, and “it feels like the end of the world.”

And yet, by the evening of this same day, Peter is able to say, “But it’s not the end of the world.” Sometime afterward, in his sermon at Caesarea, Peter explains his change of perspective by putting the crucifixion in context. Yes, he says, “they put [Jesus] to death by nailing him to a cross. But God raised him from death three days later and caused him to appear . . . to the witnesses that God had already chosen” (vv. 40-41). You see, on the evening of Easter Day, Peter’s emotional truth – his sense of defeat and despair – is superseded by the factual truth – Jesus appears to him alive again! He realizes that his world is not coming to a stop; it’s coming to a start!

When you and I ruminate about the “end of the world,” we often engage in catastrophic thinking. We think about the losses and failures we suffer in our personal lives – especially the

final failure, death – all of which can produce feelings of hopelessness. Or, we think in cosmic terms about destructive climate change, or a nuclear Armageddon, or a collision with a meteor that will wipe out planet Earth once and for all. Whatever form the end of the world will take, it isn't good, it's catastrophic. That's the prevailing view today.

But Easter gives us a radically different perspective. The true end of the world is revealed not on Good Friday but on Easter Sunday. In the resurrection of Jesus, we get a preview of the end of history in the middle of history. God raises Jesus from the dead; but even better, God promises that Jesus is not a just one-of-a-kind wonder, but the "first fruits" of a harvest that will include all of God's children. What God does for Jesus, God will do for us and for God's entire creation.

And so, the Easter event has profound meaning for all of us on at least two levels. At the personal level, Easter means that the little deaths we die in the midst of life are not dead-ends. Like the Virginia basketball player, you and I may lose a big game, but by the grace of God we will live to play another day. Easter also means that the ultimate loss we will all experience – death itself – need have no power over us. With even greater certainty than the psalmist, we can affirm, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me" (Psalm 23:4a). You and I lay our dead to rest in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

But notice: the Easter event also has something to say about the meaning of history. We dare not so privatize Easter that it has only to do with individual souls and the life to come. Easter has a lot to say about the here and now and about our life together in communities – local, national, and global. The resurrection affirms God's intention to establish his kingdom here on earth. God's aim is not to evacuate the faithful but to work through men and women who share Christ's vision to bring the kingdoms of this world beneath the rule of God. When Christ is raised from the dead, this transfer of power begins, anticipating God's final triumph at the end of the world.

To live by faith is to believe that this is so. Against Auschwitz and Hiroshima, against Oklahoma City and Ground Zero, against Sandy Hook and Parkland – yes, and against the petty hatreds and antagonisms of your heart and mine – God sets the resurrection of Jesus and invites our trust. In the light of the Easter victory you and I keep busy with our Father's business here on earth – righting wrongs, reconciling the estranged, healing the brokenhearted – knowing that our final future is assured, because it belongs to God.

On Good Friday Peter speaks his emotional truth: "It feels like the end of the world." On Easter Day he affirms the factual truth: "But it's not the end of world." This one day makes all the difference, and this one day can do as much for us.

One of my favorite poems is "Columbus" by James Russell Lowell. The poet feels his way into what it must have been like to have Christopher Columbus' vision and then face the obstacles, first on land and then on sea, that the explorer had to endure. Towards the end of that poem the crew puts the pressure on Columbus to go back. All those days at sea and no sign of land; food supply and water supply diminishing. They beseech him, almost to the point of mutiny, to turn back and head for home. But Columbus begs for one more day. He cries out:

“God, let me not in their dull ooze be stranded . . .
One poor day!
Remember whose and not how short it is!
It is God’s day, it is Columbus’s.
A lavish day! One day, with life and heart,
Is more than time enough to find a world.”