

**"AN UNEXPECTED HIGH ON LOW SUNDAY"**  
**Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**April 11, 2011**

This is a common scene in American households. Someone comes into the kitchen at breakfast time; his or her partner is standing over the stove and asks, "How do you want your eggs today – fried, scrambled, or poached?"

Last Monday, the morning after Easter, one of my favorite cartoons, "The Family Circus," had a different take on this question. The husband and father of the family rushes into the kitchen, still putting on his necktie. His four small children are already sitting at the dining table, eagerly consuming their breakfast. They look up and ask him, "How do you want your egg this morning, Daddy? Purple? Green? Yellow? . . ." It's obvious that the kids are still on an Easter high! They have extended their Easter celebration to the next day and invite their father to join them.

You and I would do almost anything to prolong our own Easter high. Last Sunday's worship service was spectacular by any measure, a miraculous mix of artistry, technology, and theology. The risen Christ was here, along with many of our friends whom we hadn't seen since before the last Easter. You and I want to cling to that deep sense of gratitude, that feeling of sheer joy. But the best many of us can hope for is a breakfast of leftover dyed eggs. On the Monday after Easter, we quickly return to business as usual; and now, on the Sunday after Easter, the "Hallelujahs!" are but a distant echo.

You may be aware that the Sunday after Easter is known by tradition as "Low Sunday." It is probably so named because of its relative unimportance in contrast with Easter Sunday, and because worship attendance tends to bottom out from one Sunday to the next. Pastors who are on Cloud 9 preaching to a large crowd on Easter come crashing back to earth in a span of only seven days. I suspect there is a letdown for people in the pews as well.

Today's reading from the Book of Acts gives us a remarkable picture of the early Church in the aftermath of Easter. They are united in heart and soul, in mutual caring and support. They have differences among themselves just as we do today, but they somehow overcome those differences and become one body. If they see someone in their fellowship who is need, they say to that person, "What is mine is yours." One wonders what on earth could prompt these people to set their differences aside, unite around a common cause, even share their property with one another? Well, the Book of Acts makes it clear: such love and unity and generosity spring directly from their assurance that Christ has been raised from the dead and has given to them his resurrection power. They are on an Easter high.

But it has not always been so – certainly not in the hours and days immediately following the resurrection. Most of that first Easter Sunday is a "Low Sunday" for the disciples. As the sun sets that evening, the only thing they know for certain is that Jesus' body is missing from the tomb; they have it only on hearsay that Jesus is alive again. They are hiding behind locked doors, terrified that the religious authorities will do to them what they have done to Jesus. Whatever hope they have is grounded in their own survival tactics and wishful thinking. Their behavior is reminiscent of how many of us have lived for the past year – quarantined in our homes, trying to ward off the

intruder of disease and death, hoping that our own personal caution and the skill of human scientists will finally set us free.

Notice that on the first Easter evening, the disciples do not rescue themselves from their prison of fear. Someone else sets them free – someone from beyond the strictly human realm. The risen Christ himself walks into their bolted room, offers them a word of peace, shows them his hands and side, and breathes into them the power of the Holy Spirit. Hope does not come to them from the inside – inside their locked doors and fearful hearts. Hope comes to them from the outside – in the astonishing appearance of Jesus.

A similar scene is repeated a week later. Now it's the Sunday after Easter, and it's clearly "Low Sunday" for the disciple Thomas. For whatever reason, he is missing when Jesus appears to the disciples on Easter evening. He has heard their glad testimony but remains unconvinced. You and I may want to single him out for criticism, to caricature him as "doubting Thomas"; but remember that it's no different for the other disciples a week before. For them, too, hope based on mere hearsay is a flimsy hope. On this Low Sunday, the disciples are gathered again, this time with Thomas present. Again, they are inside shut doors; and again, hope comes to them from the outside. Jesus enters the room, appears to Thomas, and invites him to feel the wounds from his crucifixion. Thomas believes and bursts into adoration: "My Lord and my God." Thomas gets an unexpected high on "Low Sunday."

The Christian Church needs to remind itself, on this Sunday after Easter, that we have hope, not because of something we have created, or decided, or discovered on our own. We have hope based upon the stunning act of a God who hears, who cares, who moves in among us. If there is to be hope for us as humanity, it must be from some power that manages to be both with us and yet beyond us, from a force that is for us yet not arising out of us. You and I believe this hope is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus. We believe, not on the basis of our wishes, our emotions, our insights, but on the basis of God's act in raising Jesus from the dead.

This is an important distinction, because we live in an age when human actions are the only actions, when it is up to us to help ourselves if we are to be helped. In our current national crisis, we look to government to protect us and bail us out; we look to the medical community to get us vaccinated; we look to each other to act responsibly; we look within ourselves for strength to carry on. In sum, we rely on human ingenuity and courage to give us hope.

Now, make no mistake about it: self-reliance is a good thing as far as it goes. It appeals to our desire for personal freedom and prompts us to take charge of our own destiny. "God helps those who help themselves," we say. Self-reliance has brought us a long way as individuals and as a nation. But self-reliance also creates the illusion that we can meet every challenge, solve every problem, and right every wrong on our own head of moral steam. History suggests otherwise, and Scripture confirms it: when our hope for progress lies only in our own efforts, it is a fragile hope. The only hope worth having is a hope that arises from some event outside of us, some hope not utterly dependent on us, and at the same time a hope reaching toward us.

The Church claims that such an event has happened. When we speak of the origin of our hope, we are not talking about a new idea hatched by a politician, a new program for self-improvement, a belief that human beings are basically good and getting better. We are talking

about the very basis of our faith – not faith in ourselves, but faith that there is hope beyond ourselves.

In our New Testament, the early Christians try to describe how, in Jesus of Nazareth, God has come so close to us that the course of our lives is radically altered. They speak about this event in the language of their time and culture. Some of that language is strange to modern ears. The Gospel stories of Easter speak of the risen Christ as if he were a ghost, as if he could just mysteriously show up out of nowhere, as if he could walk through doors, as if he could do all kinds of things we cannot. We need not be put off by their testimony; it isn't just fantasy or gibberish; it is their way of affirming that, in this Jesus, God has met us decisively. In these resurrection appearances, the veil is pulled back and we see God – God with us – in fullness and glory.

Some people say that the resurrection is just a symbol of hope – a symbol that the cause of Jesus lives on in the hearts and lives of his followers. With all due respect, this is not an adequate explanation for what happens after Easter. Resurrection as a mere symbol will simply not account for the miracle of the Church. Christian hope is not the result of our human aspirations, a projection of our longings for a happy ending. Hope is the result of being met by the living Christ.

Something happens in Jerusalem after that last terrible week, after the disciples run screaming for the exits. Something happens that compels them to return even to the place of danger. You cannot get from this ragtag gang of disheartened, disillusioned, frightened disciples crouching behind locked doors to the great apostles who preach, witness, suffer and die – unless you posit some “X,” some unknown reality that intrudes in among them and drastically changes their world. That “X,” that unknown event, we believe to be Easter, the reality of the risen Christ. If you say that the resurrection is not real, you have to say that the early Church is not real; you have to say that our own church is not real.

Today's Gospel lesson spans two consecutive Sundays, and they are both “Low Sundays.” The disciples cower behind bolted doors, fearful of what tomorrow might bring for them, terrified of the forces of evil that threaten to overwhelm them. Jesus comes and stands among them – risen, triumphant. He says to them, “Peace.” Easter is not about manufacturing springtime in our hearts; Easter is about Jesus coming to us, reaching out to us across that great, dark abyss of death, and telling us to be at peace. And because of him, because he comes back and speaks to us and breathes upon us, death can have no dominion over us. We have great things to fear in this world, but in the resurrection, Christ has overcome the world.

This is why we have hope. Here is hope that is greater than us or our methods of dealing with the world, hope not based on us or what we can do, but hope based on God and what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead. This is what distinguishes Christian hope from secular hope. This is what makes the Church countercultural.

Yet how easily we forget this. An illustration, dearly loved by preachers, is the “Christ has no hands but our hands” story. The story goes something like this. In a little European village, there was a church that had a statue of Christ with his arms outstretched to the world. During some battle of war, the statue was damaged. Both of the hands were broken off. The church made the decision to place a sign beside the statue that read, “Christ has no hands but our hands.” The sign implies that if we do not do the work of Christ with our hands, the work will not get done. Christ has no means of impacting the world other than us and our efforts.

Whether or not there is actually a statue of Christ somewhere in Europe with no hands, this story is heretical in the light of Easter. The hands of Christ have not been blown off. The forces of evil try to end the life and work of Christ; and on the cross, they think have done so. But Easter vindicates Jesus. He is raised from the dead. God will not be defeated by the work of our hands in doing evil or by our lack of work in doing good. God is not utterly dependent on us for righteousness to prevail. Our hands may join with the hands of the risen Christ, but our hands will not replace his hands.

Friends, embracing this truth would give us exactly what we need in the aftermath of Easter. It would give us a large dose of humility and a big shot of hope. It might even give us an unexpected high on Low Sunday.