

## Sermons from Park Hill: March 23, 2008 - Easter

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**Sermons from  
Park Hill Congregational UCC  
Denver, Colorado**

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**March 23, 2008**

**John 20: 1-18**  
**“Don’t Hold Me Back”**

While Gene Robinson was preparing for the service at which he would be consecrated the Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, preparations of a different kind had already long been underway in case anyone tried to assassinate him during the worship service. He was asked his blood type so that if he were being rushed to the hospital, treatment could begin immediately. He wrote, “As I strapped on my bulletproof vest just before [worship], I remember feeling blessedly calm about whatever might happen. Not because I am brave, but because God is good, and because God has overcome death, so that I never have to be afraid again.”<sup>1</sup>

God is good; God is greater than death; I don’t have to be afraid. That’s a really good affirmation of faith for Easter morning. I can let go of whatever fear I may have. God has transformed it.

But too often, our excuses run deeper than our faith; our list of reasons for not doing something is often much longer than our determination to go as far as we must; our fear is often greater than our passion. We stop short of transformation. All of these, however, run counter to the reason I think we are here today: I believe we want a deeper faith; we desire a stronger determination to fearlessly pursue our purpose – as well as a need to better understand our purpose; and I know we yearn to have a greater passion for the things that will fulfill us and give our life meaning. And yet... What holds us back?

Gene Robinson’s two grown daughters were, of course, very worried and anxious about his well-being. Who wouldn’t be? There were plenty of people – both supporters and those opposed to him – who tried to convince him it wasn’t worth the risk. But Robinson told his daughters, “You know, there are worse things than death. Some people actually never live – and *that* is the worst death of all. If something does happen,” he reminded them, “remember that the God who loved me my whole life, will be still be loving me, and I will have died doing something I believe with my whole

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<sup>1</sup> “What Can You Expect?”, V. Gene Robinson, *The Witness*, 3/18/2005

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heart." But can't you imagine them still wanting to hold him back?

In the garden that morning, so soon after the dreadful execution of Jesus, Mary Magdalene came to express her grief. She sees what she thinks is the gardener and asks him for Jesus' body. He says her name and immediately she recognizes that it is really Jesus. She responds with excitement, or maybe relief. But Jesus must have read something else on her heart. Why else would his immediate response be: "Don't hold on to me."

But, what does that mean? To hold on to someone might mean to embrace them – to hold me in your tender care. But it can also mean to seize someone – holding on so tight you squeeze the life right out of them. To hold on to someone can mean you want to possess them, or contain them, or even keep them by force. Or, let me hide you so that this never happens again.

But I think the translation that speaks most powerfully to me is from the New International Version: "Don't hold me back." Don't hold me back because I've got more to do. And so do you. The Resurrection has changed things. But, fear often still holds us back.

Mary called him, "Rabbouni, Teacher," but that's his old name, his Friday name. Maybe it's in her voice, or Jesus could see it in her eyes, a sense, an almost-desperation, to do anything not to see the horror of Friday repeated. But, it's the light of a new day. It's the first day of the week. Now what? "Don't hold me back." You and I have got more to do. And we have to let go to what "can't be anymore" – hope that died on Friday – in order to say yes to what now "already is" and what "must be" tomorrow and next week. Things have changed, limitations have been broken, and there is more we can do now.

We often hear more about what "we can't do or what can't be" instead of what God's grace and love has already done and is doing. We have to let go of past expectations of what is possible – what never will be, what will never change – to embrace what God has been up to. And "what's next?"

So Jesus said, "Don't hold me back." Isn't it ironic that that's often what modern Christianity does to him. We try to shave off the rough edges, clean him up, tame him down, and make him more respectable. But he constantly made outrageous statements that were offensive and insulting – religiously and politically. I can't imagine how we would respond to endless clips of his carefully chosen, most incendiary sound-bites on the nightly news. "In three days I can tear down the stones of the temple."

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He's disrespecting our religion and blaspheming God! And his followers called him "Lord and Savior." But only Caesar was to have those titles and be called Lord. He was committing acts of treason against the Roman Empire. He frequently spoke of love, but love for him wasn't a gentle feeling but a radical action – love that neighbor you can't stand, stand up for that group *you* despise but God loves. Speak out.

Instead, we make Jesus a figure of history to be studied. We wave our hands and praise his name and promptly forget that if he were living among us today, he would probably scare the living daylight out of us. He would make us frightened and angry. "How dare he...!?"

Instead, we make him a nice, agreeable guy. And we make his influence in our lives a mere choice – a little here, a little there – not a commitment to a different way of life. We tend to think of him holding the children, not chasing the money changers. But this guy was a trip! If we really paid attention to all the radical things he did and said, half the Christians in this country would remove their names from the membership roles of churches across the land.

Let's look back at what got him into this predicament in the first place – what prompted his crucifixion. If you'll recall our journey through Lent, the gospel of John

kept challenging, pushing the buttons of the powerful – and us. First, a member of the elite religious establishment couldn't understand that the kingdom of God Jesus was proclaiming is so unlike what most people expected that this respected man would have to be born-over to get it. And he walked away empty.

A disrespected woman with a scandalous past who he met at a well *did* get it, to the disbelief of all those who had "righteously" treated her as an outcast. But even more shocking, she turned around and offered the same living water to the very people who had judged her "lifestyle" unacceptable. This contemptuous, humble woman was lifted up; the rich man sent away empty. The kingdom of God that Jesus was proclaiming was the upending of social relationships and power dynamics – suddenly all the rules about respectability and authority were being challenged by this upstart, activist rabbi – and people were following him, giving up their livelihoods as fishermen and tax collectors – and you know *that* was a problem for Rome!

Then he healed a man born blind, but on the Sabbath, so instead of praising God for such a miracle, the authorities, who feared his healing powers, called Jesus a sinner for breaking the law and questioned whether the man had actually ever been blind. As the influence of this so-called Messiah grew, so did his threat. But then he brought a man who had been dead four days back to

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life. That kind of power broke the proverbial camel's back. Combine all those things with all his other outrageous words and actions, and their only response could be to impose the most extreme form of execution that the Romans carried out – making an example of him by hanging him on a cross. Killing him was the only thing that would maintain their power – so they thought.

We cannot possibly read the story of his life and death and resurrection without putting it into the context of his passionate love for the outsider and his contempt – or disappointment – with those who put them there – and his compassion for them, a chance to repent. Jesus came to set things right – good news to the poor, the outcasts, the prisoners, and anyone oppressed by the powerful. But, this kind of good news is never good news to an Empire. So he was killed. It could have ended there. But by Jesus pursuing his passion and love for all people all the way to the end, to the cross, God showed us how to transform what is possible – to not fear death so much that we don't pursue life.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write in their book, *The Last Week*, "Without God's reversal at Easter, Good Friday [would end with] cynical politics. This is the way the world is, the powers are and always will be in control...[so don't worry about it.] Christianity is about the next world, not this one, and [just let the world] belong to the

wealthy and powerful."<sup>2</sup> And on Friday, that's what it looks like. On Good Friday, the powerful win, faith is reduced to an afterlife.

Easter is God's reversal of what is possible for God's people *this* morning, right now. Easter is God's reversal of injustice. We don't have to be afraid; unless we're acting like the new Empire...

It isn't that God *wins*. It's not about winning in the way our culture would define it, but transformation. In fact, the work that the one man Jesus began becomes even more powerful because he turns it over to us. *We* are now the Body of Christ, his hands, his feet, with the same task of audaciously bringing good news to the poor, welcoming the outcasts, and standing up with anyone oppressed by today's Empires. Don't hold me back – because, he says, you and I have more we can do now.

The Resurrection isn't the whole story on Easter morning. We can't forget what happened first. "Easter without Good Friday risks sentimentality... It [simply] becomes an affirmation that spring follows winter, flowers will bloom again, and its time for bonnets and bunnies."<sup>3</sup> Easter matters not because it's part of an inevitable cycle, but because it transforms what is possible. It overcomes the injustice of every kind of

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<sup>2</sup> Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, p. 209

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

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power: even the insistent and relentless power of fear and the cruel imposition of death. God is good; God is more powerful than death; and we don't have to be afraid anymore. Don't hold him back. Don't take away his power or underestimate ours.

As I said, I believe we want a deeper faith; we desire a stronger determination to pursue our purpose – as well as a better understanding of our purpose; and we yearn to have greater passion for the things that will fulfill us and give our life meaning. With all that God did in reversing Good Friday, should there be anything or anyone that still holds us back?

Are you holding back? On the morning of a new day for South Africa, at his inauguration, Nelson Mandela addressed the fears of his people who may have been nervous, afraid they would never let go of their past:

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?" Actually, who are we not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we*

*let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others."*

The power of the resurrection is not in what happens after death – life after death; some blissful heavenly existence. As Gene Robinson affirms: "I am not worried nearly as much about life after death as [I am] about whether or not there is life before death." The power of the resurrection lies in what happens on earth – actual, real life, full of faith and doubts. But we don't have to be afraid of confronting the powers that would try to make us believe that death is a punishment. God has vindicated the struggle.

If we really want a deeper, more determined and passionate life, take a risk and believe in the power of the resurrection to change what you thought would never be possible – whatever that is in your life. Join me in the litany printed in the bulletin and we'll see what that really means:

- One: Easter means that the story isn't over; that a life lived for others brings new life; that the love that reached out and dared to see all humans as one is not dead but now lives and works in us.
- All: **O Mary don't you weep don't you morn, Christ Our Savior is Risen! O Mary, don't you weep.**

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One: Resurrection means that the forces of exclusion and hatred—the status quo of society and often religion—and the power of death and prejudice cannot prevail.

**All: O Mary don't you weep don't you morn, Christ Our Savior is Risen! O Mary, don't you weep.**

One: Easter means that the courage to bear crosses and risk all that we have to risk is not defeated; that healing shall rise in our bodies and justice shall rise on the earth.

**All: O Mary don't you weep don't you morn, Christ Our Savior is Risen! O Mary, don't you weep.**

One: The resurrection of Christ is not about laws set in concrete but a living presence that moves among us even now, showing us a path and calling us to follow.

**All: O Mary don't you weep don't you morn, Christ Our Savior is Risen! O Mary, don't you weep.**