

**Opening Day***Spring Training Series # 7*

Luke 24: 1-8

Easter Sunday

04-12-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

**Introduction**

After months of preparation and anticipation, the Big Day has finally arrived. **Opening Day** for Major League Baseball was held last week. The *Atlanta Braves* played the very first game of the season against the 2008 World Series champs, the *Philadelphia Phillies*. The *Braves* returned to Atlanta on Friday night to play their home opener against the *Washington Nationals*.

**I. Opening Day**

I vividly recall Opening Day of **Little League** baseball during my childhood. We dressed in our Tide-white uniforms, complete with matching cap, belt, and horseshoe socks. The day began with a parade followed by the opening ceremonies. Each team lined up for group and individual photographs. Then the all-day schedule of games began.

Regardless of age or level of play, there's always something magical about Opening Day. In the moments before the first pitch, all things are possible. Every batter could hit 1000. Each fielder could win a golden glove award. Every runner could steal 30 bases. Each pitcher could win 20 games. Every reliever could earn a perfect save record.

Before the first game, all the teams share the same record of no losses and unforeseeable wins. The future is filled with potential. This is last year's next year when we said, "There's always next year." Next is NOW and anything might happen. This could be the year our team goes all the way.

Opening Day is played on a *field of dreams* with limitless possibilities. The time of expectation has passed. Now it's time to "Play ball!"

**II. Spring Training**

After months of preparation and anticipation, the Big Day has finally arrived for the church, too. **Easter Sunday** is THE highest and holiest of days in the Christian calendar. Today Christians gather around the world to celebrate the Easter good news: *Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!*

During the forty day period of **Lent**, our worship series has been entitled **Spring Training**. Like athletes preparing for competition, we have prepared our hearts and souls for the central events of **Holy Week**: Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Today we come to recall the first Easter Sunday morning.

Thursday night Jesus shared his last supper with the disciples. Afterwards, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane. His disciples betrayed, denied, and deserted him. After a kangaroo court, Pontius Pilate sentenced him to death. On Friday, Jesus of Nazareth was *crucified, death, and buried*. Because the Jewish Sabbath began at

sundown, they placed Jesus' body in a nearby tomb hewn out of rock. A large stone sealed the entrance and Roman soldiers guarded the grave.

Early on Sunday morning a small group of women approached the garden in the predawn darkness. In a final act of devotion, they brought spices to anoint Jesus' body for burial. They spoke softly to one another, worrying how they might move the large stone from the entrance. Sometimes we worry about the wrong things!

They found the **stone** had been rolled away from the tomb; but when they entered, Jesus' body was gone. Suddenly two men in lightning-bright clothing appeared. The angelic messengers asked, "*Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!*" Then the men recalled Jesus' words: "*The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.*"

THEN the women remembered the Lord's words. They hurried away to share the news with the other disciples. The good news continues to echo down the years in our ears today: "*Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!*"

In *The Apostles Creed*, we proclaim that Jesus Christ was: "*crucified, dead, and buried; on the third day, he rose from the dead!*" On Easter Sunday, we gather with believers of every age and place to celebrate the Resurrection.

### **III. Opening Day**

Easter is the church's **Opening Day!** We are invited to join the women at the tomb on Sunday morning. Feel the dew-wet grass under our feet. Hear the crash of thunder and rending of rock. See the stone rolled away and the open, empty tomb.

Easter morning was Opening Day in a **literal sense** as the stone was removed from the tomb to reveal the empty tomb. God rolled the stone away not to let Jesus out but to let us in! With the women, we are witnesses of Christ's resurrection.

But Easter was also the Opening Day of a **new reality**. History has been bisected by the Crucifixion and Resurrection. All of creation and the cosmos swings on the hinges of the cross and empty tomb. After Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the world has never been the same again.

The cosmos fundamentally changed on Easter morning. The rules forever changed. All things are new. We are invited to live in this new reality.

Have you ever wondered why we worship on **Sunday mornings**? The Christian faith grew out of the Jewish religion. The Hebrew Sabbath begins on Friday's sunset and continues until Saturday's sunset. However, the early Christian church began to worship on Sunday mornings in remembrance of Jesus' resurrection. Each Sunday was a "*small Easter*" that celebrated God's triumph over sin and death.

Sunday also marks the beginning of the new week. According to the Genesis account of creation, the Lord God Almighty made the heavens and the earth in six days; and on the seventh day, He rested. Easter Sunday is the eighth day of creation—the first day of God's NEW creation. In Christ, all things are RE-newed. The old has passed away and the new has come.

One of the more powerful symbols of the season is **the budding cross**. The ends of the cross are depicted budding with new life. The emblem of death has been transformed into the symbol of life. Jesus called his disciples to take up their cross daily

and follow him. When we take up our cross, we die to self and live for Christ. We are born again into God's kingdom.

Easter occurs in the spring when new life is all about us. The dyed eggs, baby chicks and ducks, and even the Easter Bunny himself—herself—are all symbols of new life. In our culture, I don't think it's a stretch to say that even baseball reminds us of God's ability to make all things new.

John Fogarty, former lead singer for *Credence Clearwater Revival*, sings a familiar song entitled ***Centerfield***. The first verse declares:

*Well, beat the drum and hold the phone—the sun came out today!  
We're born again, there's new grass on the field.  
 A-rounding third and headed for home, it's a brown-eyed handsome man;  
 Anyone can understand the way I feel.*

The chorus echoes with a sentiment that any child of the game understands:

*Oh, put me in coach, I'm ready to play today.  
 Put me in coach, I'm ready to play today.  
 Look at me, I can be, centerfield!*

The Learning Center at our church hosts about 125 children. When I'm feeling cynical or depressed, it is good medicine for me to visit the children's classrooms. The preschoolers are a picture of potential personified. Most of their life still rests before them. The future beckons with unknown potential. Everything is possible.

They remind me that we are all God's children. Regardless of age, our future is filled with endless possibilities. The Lord is not done with us yet. The same power that raised Jesus Christ from the grave is active in the world today.

#### **IV. New Creations**

God's transforming power is at work in each of our individual lives. We are invited to come to the cross and the empty tomb to receive forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. All those who profess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord enter into the new reality of God's kingdom. In Christ, we are new creations in which the new has come and the old has passed away.

At the cross, the power of **sin** was broken. Romans 3: 23-24: "*There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*"

One of the most powerful moments of Holy Communion comes after the confession of sin when the minister acts in a priestly function to proclaim God's forgiveness. The words echo in our ears today: "*Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!*" And the congregation responds to the minister: "*In the name of Jesus Christ, YOU are forgiven!*"

At the empty tomb, the power of **death** was broken. Jesus Christ was *"the first born among the dead."* In 1 Corinthians 15: 54-56, Paul exclaims:

*"When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable  
and the mortal with immortality,  
then the saying that is written will come true:  
'Death has been swallowed up in victory!  
Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting ?  
The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.  
But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through Christ Jesus our Lord!"*

John Donne in his poem, *Death be Not Proud*, exclaimed: *"One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And Death shall be no more: Death, thou shalt die."* We sing the Easter hymn:

*Sing with all the saints in glory, sing the resurrection song!  
Death and sorrow, earth's dark story, to the former days belong.  
All around the clouds are breaking, soon the storms of time shall cease;  
In God's likeness we, awaking, know the everlasting peace.*

## **V. Our Heavenly Home**

Easter reminds us that we are pilgrims passing through this land. As Christians, we are strangers in a strange land. The earth is not our home or death our destination. We are heaven-bound to a place where all of God's dreams for our lives come true. In grace-filled moments, we experience a foretaste of heaven-on-earth.

In the climatic scene of *Field of Dreams*, we are reminded that heaven is both a future promise and a present reality.

*"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'"*

(Revelation 21: 3-4)

When we enter heaven's gates, most of all it will be like going home. Jesus said: *"There are many homes up there where my Father lives; and I am going to prepare them for your coming. When everything is ready, then I will come and get you, so that you can always be with me where I am. "* John 14: 1-4 (Living Bible)

Arthur Schopenhauer said: *"Every parting gives us a foretaste of death; every coming together again a foretaste of the resurrection."* Our homecomings give us a glimpse of heaven itself.

## **Conclusion**

During our *Spring Training* worship series, we have spent the past seven weeks preparing our lives for this day. Today is **Opening Day** for the church. Easter proclaims that fresh starts and new beginnings are always possible in Christ.

Someone once pointed out that baseball is the only sport where the object of the game is to get back home. Today we are invited back home to our heavenly Father's house. And we are called to live in expectation and anticipation of the day when we will arrive at our heavenly home forever.

Christ IS risen—He is risen indeed. And we have risen with Him.