

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Alleluia People: A New Reality”

Rev. Dr. John Judson

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Isaiah 25:6-9; Luke 24:1-12

He stared at the columbarium plaque. At the age of 104 it was not something Fletcher had ever wanted to see; the plaque on his wife Bea's niche. She had died a year earlier and at the memorial service he had refused to go outside and watch her ashes be interred. But a year later, on All Saints Sunday, Fletcher was willing to have his son wheel him outside to see her plaque. As his son tells the story, his father stared for a long time in silence, seemingly taking in the reality of his wife's death. Then, slowly he looked up at this son and said, “I guess nobody gets out of here alive, do they?” Smiling, the son replied, “No dad, they don't.” Less than two weeks later Fletcher died. After the memorial service and the placing of his father's ashes in the niche beside his wife's, the son turned to me and recounted that moment. Then with a wry smile, he said, “Yeah, I think my dad thought he would be the first one.”

Nobody gets out of here alive. It is the one reality with which human beings have been dealing with since, well since, there were human beings. And yet, for almost the same amount of time human beings have lived with this remote hope, that there is something on the other side of death. I say this because archeologists have found evidence of religious grave goods, meaning items that are placed in graves with the deceased, dating back at least 30,000 years. Some eastern religions talked about and believed in reincarnation, while others believed that their ancestors became ghosts. Egyptians talked about a person's ka, or spirit moving to the Kingdom of the dead. Greeks and Romans talked about Hades. Jews talked about Sheol. Norse religion had Valhalla and other realms of the dead. Native Americans spoke of the dead going into the Spirit world or perhaps becoming stars. Though many civilizations didn't believe in an afterlife, most had some remote hope that there was something on the other side of death.

It was into this living with this struggle between the reality that no one gets out of there alive and the remote hope that there is something more, that the prophet Isaiah's words came pouring out and offering something completely new. He declared that a day would come when God would defeat death itself. Listen again. *“And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.”* It was a remarkable thought. Could it be true, the people wondered that this God of creation could indeed change the rules of the game and create a new reality in which death no longer ruled. Slowly out of this prophetic vision arose the idea of resurrection, meaning that even after death, people would be raised and live again. That's when people said, “Alleluia” because death might lose. Time passed. People died. No resurrection. No one got out of here alive. All they had was a remote hope.

The hope though lived on. With each new generation there were those who hoped and prated that Isaiah's words would become more than a remote hope. The people looked for the one messenger of

God, the messiah who might make this possible. Who would usher in God's kingdom in which the last enemy, death itself would be defeated. Jesus of Nazareth was one of those on whom many placed their remote hope. People flocked to hear him, to be healed by and hopefully to become part of that new kingdom over which death had no power. When he came into Jerusalem they cried out, "Alleluia" because they thought that the kingdom of God had come, death had lost and life has won. But all of that ended one Passover night. The authorities came for him. Arrested him. Tried him. Crucified him. And he died. And he was buried. All the remote hope remained nothing more than that, remote hope. One more time, the possibilities of Isaiah's vision becoming a reality, faded away.

On the first day of the week the women who had followed Jesus came to his tomb. All they had was a remoter hope than when they had first begun. They were there to mourn their friend, their teacher and the loss of their hope once again. What they found however, stunned and frightened them. There was no body to be anointed. There was no body to mourn over. Instead there were two men in dazzling clothes standing beside them. Speaking to the two terrified women, the men asked why they were looking for the living among the dead? Jesus, they continued, was not dead but was alive, resurrected. In that moment the women began to make sense of so much of what Jesus had taught them, that he would have to die in order to be raised. That he would have to die in order to defeat death. The women ran to tell the other disciples saying to themselves, "Alleluia" death is defeated and life has won. Without expecting it, without realizing it, what these women had stumbled into was not a new hope to replace their remote hope. What they had stumbled into in that empty tomb was a new reality; the reality predicted by Isaiah, that death had been swallowed up forever. They had stumbled into an alleluia life.

This my friends, is the gift of Easter. It is a reminder to all of us that we no longer live simply with a remote hope. We live in a new reality. We live in an alleluia world in which we are alleluia people. What does that mean? As Alleluia people, we live with gratefulness. We live with the gratefulness that God keeps God's promises and especially this promise to defeat death now and forever. We are grateful that death is no more; no more for ourselves and for all we love. As Alleluia people, we live with joyfulness. We live with joy because we know that we are loved; that we matter. We matter so much to God that God was willing to die and rise for us and for all whom we love. We have joy because we know that God's love does not end at death, but gives us life eternal. Alleluia people live with fearlessness. We are fearless in the face of all that comes to us because we know that in life and death we belong to God; that God has given us a life that no one can take from us, and so we can live faithfully in every moment never fearing what might transpire.

Nobody gets out of here alive. That is what Fletcher saw. That is what we see. But that is not what we know. We know that we live in a new reality as alleluia people, living gratefully, joyfully and fearlessly because God has raised Jesus from the dead.

My challenge to you then is to ask yourself, how am I living each day as an alleluia person.