

SERMON: Life Wins!

TEXT: John 20:1-18

We were all moved, shocked, and hurt to watch the flames topple the majestic and iconic spire of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris this week. People who have seen it will cherish more dearly their memories and photographs of this magnificent work of art and architecture. People who have never had a chance to see it perhaps felt the death of a dream. For people around the world, regardless of age, religion, or nationality, a tiny bit of each one of us has died along with the almost 900-year-old structure. Art lovers, architecture enthusiasts, history buffs, travelers, photographers, faith leaders, Roman Catholics and Christians of all denominations – even those who claim no religion but understand the spirituality of place – are grieving a great loss.

But once the flames were doused and the shock had worn off, the fundraising began. As of Friday, one billion dollars had been raised for rebuilding the cathedral. Furthermore, the Notre Dame fire brought greater attention and increased fundraising for a group of primarily black churches in Louisiana that have recently been destroyed by arson. More than 37,000 people have chipped in to reach that fundraising goal of \$1.8 million.

What does any of this have to do with Easter? LIFE WINS. “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

Another news story I heard this week, that brought me to tears, was around the 20th anniversary of the deadly shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado. On April 20, 1999, 12 students and one teacher were killed by two of their classmates, who then took their own lives. The mother of Rachel Scott, who was 17 years old when she was shot and killed, talked about choosing forgiveness over bitterness, anger, revenge, or hate. “Forgiveness isn’t saying it’s okay that this happened; forgiveness is giving yourself permission not to make that your life sentence.” Rachel’s mother also made a connection with the mother of one of the shooters, remembering that she lost a child as well. Rachel’s brother Craig now preaches compassion to teenagers around the country. He said, “The shooters wanted to make a negative impact on this world, but I decided that I wanted to make a bigger impact, but in a positive way. Four students who survived the shooting have come back to Columbine as teachers. And the Principal tells of how he had to learn how to replace the images of death with images of the students’ lives. He said, “Each morning I awake by reciting the names of my beloved 13.” And he remained as Principal at Columbine until those who were kindergarteners in 1999 graduated, fulfilling a vow he made. Shown speaking to a gymnasium full

of students, he said, “I’m going to love you for the rest of my life and the rest of your lives.”

Most of us see the news about tragedies like this and think that we would never get over it. Never stop crying. Never get out of bed. Never forgive. Never be able to resume our lives. But LIFE WINS! And these people who have suffered such loss in such a terrible way are making sure that LIFE WINS.

The people had been driven out of their homes and out of their land. They had lost hope that they would ever return. They prayed for a hero who would come and raise up an army to defeat the powers that oppressed them. Finally, he came. Someone they hoped would liberate them. He had compassion for people and healed the sick. He brought new meaning to the scriptures. He sought out those who had been shunned and pushed out to the margins of society; he brought them in to relationship. He welcomed them. He sat at table with them. He forgave their sins. He gave all the people hope for a new way of life. He was gentle, and lowly, and humble.

But those in power were afraid of him, that so many people were following him and hailing him as a king. He spoke against the status quo and advocated for

change. Political and religious leaders felt threatened that he would take over and they would lose their positions. So, they crucified him. Nailed him to a cross along with two others who were criminals. He died a slow, agonizing death.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, his friends found that the tomb where his body had been laid was open, and his body was gone. They were afraid that someone had stolen it. His close friend, Mary, felt as though she had lost him all over again. She was weeping outside the tomb, and suddenly, she saw two angels sitting where his body should be. They asked her why she was crying. Then she saw someone else. A man was standing there. He also asked her why she was crying and who she was looking for. Then, he said her name.

It was him – her friend, her Lord, her Teacher. It was Jesus. She ran to tell the others. “I have seen the Lord.”

LIFE WINS! “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

The resurrection of Christ teaches us that God desires life. And any way that we can rise up out of death and the depths of despair to live and to bring life to others shows that we believe in resurrection.

Just as the earth bursts forth in the spring with green grass and beautiful blossoms, we are called out of the dark and cold of winter into sunshine and warmth. Nature has demonstrated in an unusually profound way just this weekend, with the gloom and cold of Good Friday and the brightness of God's glory today. As we welcome the springtime and the abundant life we have from God, we are called to welcome one another into the warmth of God's light and love. We are called to promote life in all the ways we can, for as many people as we can. In fact, we are called to promote life in all the ways we can for all living things, all God's creation.

Tomorrow, April 22, is Earth Day. The theme this year is *Protecting Our Species*. According to the Earth Day Network, "the world is facing the greatest rate of extinction since we lost the dinosaurs more than 60 million years ago. But unlike the fate of the dinosaurs, the rapid extinction of species in our world today is the result of human activity.... All living things have an intrinsic value, and each plays a unique role in the complex web of life. We must work together to protect endangered and threatened species: bees, coral reefs, elephants, giraffes, insects, whales, and more. The good news is that the rate of extinctions can still be slowed, and many of our declining, threatened and endangered species can still recover if we work together...." (earthday.org)

LIFE WINS! Love wins! Love never dies. When an object of beauty is destroyed, we honor it by rebuilding it, restoring it, or creating something of beauty in its place. When someone we love dies, we keep that love alive by sharing it with others who need to receive love as much as we need to give love.

LIFE WINS! Resurrection happens. But the victory does not come without great struggle and sacrifice.

Someone once said, “Infuse your life with action. Don’t wait for it to happen. Make it happen. Make your own future. Make your own hope. Make your own love. And whatever your beliefs, honor your creator, not by passively waiting for grace to come down from [on] high, but by doing what you can to make grace happen... yourself, right now, right down here on Earth.” (Bradley Whitford, www.brainyquote.com)

As his disciples and as his church, as those who believe that the tomb is empty, as those who proclaim that Christ is alive, we are called to carry on Christ’s ministry. The work of steadfast love. The work of amazing grace. The work of giving hope to those in despair. The work of bringing new life to places of death. The work of abundant life and everlasting life. The work of Resurrection.

Christ is risen! (Christ is risen, indeed!) Alleluia! (Alleluia!)

AMEN.