

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 27, 2016

Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12

## Giving Up Death

This morning I want to address a very profound and important theological question. I first heard it a number of weeks ago here from a very bright and eager young student — faithful in worship and engaging.

Here's the question: Since Jesus came back from the dead, does that make him a zombie? Great Question!

Well, if zombies are the dead brought back to life, the re-animating of a corpse, then perhaps yes, Jesus is a zombie. If by zombie you are thinking crazed, out-to-get-you, flesh dripping, mindless bodies roaming the countryside (or the city) looking for victims to hurt or devour... then no, Jesus is not that.

But still the question is a great question! And our wise kindergartener is certainly not the first to express how bizarre it is for Jesus to be brought back to life.

We heard it in our reading this morning... The women went to the tomb — expecting to find a body / corpse — and found nothing; and when they explained this to their friends — all of a sudden they were crazy — it was nonsense, an idle tale.

And it does sound crazy. The only time when I've known people to come back from the dead is on soap operas.... Right? One character on *Days of our Lives* has died of a stroke, car crashes and explosions, a drowning, getting shot, a plane explosion, and many other death-defying adventures.

And I always had mixed feelings about the "resurrection" of a character — glad that they were back (usually) and interested in how the story would change; and at the same time, INCREDULOUS at the RIDICULOUS story line they come up with for how they are now NOT dead!

But then, pretty soon, the silly story fades away, and they're back in the family, in the boardroom, as if it never happened.

But in real life — people just don't come back. When someone dies, no amount of grieving, crying, sleeping, drinking, hoping, wishing, praying or kindness... will bring them back. This poem expresses just that:

### **What People Give You** (Kathleen Sheeder Bonanno)

Long-faced irises. Mums.  
Pink roses and white roses  
and giant sunflowers,  
and hundreds of daisies.  
Fruit baskets with muscular pears,  
and water crackers and tiny jams  
and the steady march of casseroles.  
And money,  
people give money these days.  
Cards, of course:  
the Madonna, wise  
and sad just for you,  
Chinese cherry blossoms,  
sunsets and moonscapes,

and dragonflies for transcendence.  
People stand by your sink  
and offer up their pain:  
Did you know I lost a baby once,  
or My eldest son was killed,  
or My mother died two months ago.  
People are good.  
They file into your cartoon house until it bows at the seams;  
they give you every  
blessed  
thing,  
everything,  
except your daughter back.

HEAVY — Death is — HEAVY

And there is no escaping it — try as we might to delay it — there is no detour around death. And so, this morning, by “giving up death” I don’t mean denying or minimizing its impact on our lives. I don’t mean pretending it doesn’t hurt. Sadness is undeniably painful — and necessary!

This truth was beautifully expressed in the Pixar movie, from earlier this year, *Inside Out*. The director, Pete Docter, is not only a brilliant, Oscar-winning writer, but he is also a Christian. I am not sure how conscious he is about weaving his faith into his writing, but this movie has an important insight for us this morning.

The premise is that each of us has an emotional Control Room inside our brains where emotions like Joy, Sadness, Disgust, Fear, and Anger are in constant conversation (if not competition) with each other to help each person navigate their way through life. In the film it is the Control Room of the 11-year-old girl Riley that is front and center as we watch—in flashbacks—highlights of Riley’s growing-up years.

Riley loves her family, adores playing hockey, revels in being a bit of a goofball, and likes hanging out with her friends. And as she grows up, each of these favorite areas of life not only builds up wonderful memories but even whole sections of her brain called “islands” in the film. So “Goofball Island” becomes active when Riley is clowning around with her dad and “Hockey Island” lights up when she is enthused about her favorite sport.

As she grows up, Riley is known to her parents as a particularly “happy girl” such that even if she shows slight signs of being sad or upset, her mother or father will say “Come on, where’s our happy girl?” and Riley then usually responds with a smile.

Well, each of her individual emotions are characters in their own right. And so, Joy feels it is her duty to keep Riley happy, to make each day’s worth of memories happy ones, and to do all in her power to keep especially Sadness at bay. It turns out that if Sadness so much as touches a memory (basketball-sized spheres) the memory begins to turn blue. Thus Joy makes sure Sadness knows her place and keeps her distance from Riley’s memories. Each memory must glow golden with joy. Joy must win the day. Every day.

But, of course, life doesn’t work that way. After Riley is uprooted at the age of 11 from a lovely life in the countryside of Minnesota to a smelly and cramped apartment in San Francisco, events conspire to make her world fall apart. Sadness can no longer be held at bay. And through a series of events, Joy comes to understand that she cannot rule the roost or be the bottom line of all Riley’s past memories.

Sadness, it turns out, is utterly necessary. And so in one of the latter scenes in the movie, Joy takes Riley’s so-called “core memories”—the golden orbs that Joy had been zealously keeping as far away from Sadness as possible—and hands them over to Sadness, turning each core memory a shade of blue.

Adults know this as nostalgia, of “the pain of the past” (which “nostalgia” means). Our past memories—even the joyful ones—will always be touched with a bit of longing, a bit of sadness. People come and go, stages of life pass, loved ones die.

And so it is that Christians who are rooted in the Good News, who celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus, know the truth of what John Henry Cardinal Newman once said, that “Joy is a last feeling, not a first.” At Easter, he wrote, we don’t just whoop it up over the resurrection—no one in the Bible does either. Because the cross came first, suffering came first, death came to defeat death because there was no other way.

And so we greet our resurrected Lord with deep Joy but not without recognizing what made the Joy possible. We are not merely “happy” at Easter. We are joyful. There’s a difference. “Only the heart that hurts has a right to joy” Lewis Smedes once wrote.

Joy is a last feeling not a first. Sure, we’d all love it, in one sense, if Joy could rule every day, if every memory in our storehouse glowed in the golden hues of happiness and goodness. But the truth is they all catch a blue hue eventually.

Of course, this does not eliminate joy—far from it! Rather it makes true joy deeper, richer, and for this very reason more lasting. This is what the power of the resurrection does - not IS - but DOES. This is what “giving up death” is all about: Believing that the worst thing is NOT the last thing.

Amen.