

**The Enduring Power of Love  
Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023  
Matthew 28:1-10 and Psalm 118  
Rev. Laurie Crelly – East Church  
Grand Rapids MI**

Jackie Brewer and her family spent most of Palm Sunday outside following church enjoying the unusually warm spring day. In the late afternoon Jackie's husband was relaxing on the living room couch as Jackie and four children ages two through seven were in the kitchen making caramel apples. Busy, focused on the children and the caramel melting, Jackie did not notice the approaching storm outside. Suddenly, it was very dark outside and there was a terrible noise! At that moment, it woke Jackie's husband, and he ran to the kitchen, yelling for them to get to the basement. With a two-year-old in her arms and, holding the hand of another, she headed for the well pit of the basement. Mr. Brewer was behind her, holding the other two.

The family barely made it into the basement when the house rose up off its foundation. Jackie froze for a moment as she saw the gap between the house and the ground heading down the steps. It was only seconds from the kitchen to the well pit and they realized later that they were in the middle of the tornado at that time. Jackie and her family survived the famous Palm Sunday Tornadoes of April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1965. A record number of twelve tornadoes raced across Michigan killing fifty three people in Michigan alone. In total this outbreak created 47 tornadoes in six states, 271 people died and over 1500 people were injured. This storm caused the National Weather Service to change how they report severe weather, switching out the term forecast to tornado watches and warnings.

Living in the Midwest we know that the changing of the seasons from winter into spring is often accompanied by severe weather as cold weather clashes with the incoming warm air currents of spring. Whenever you have such drastic temperatures clashing you get outbreaks of spring blizzards, heavy rain and High winds and of course dreaded severe thunderstorms and tornadoes.

Here in Grand Rapids, we have had not one, but two Palm Sunday tornadoes clusters. The first was April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1956. The second Palm Sunday storm was April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1965. Many in this congregation most vividly remember the April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1967, tornado that destroyed the South Church sanctuary on the corner of Madison and Alger St SE in Garfield Park. UCC congregations including East Church helped to support and rebuild South Church. It is times like these that we see the true heart of a community as we come together to find survivors, pick up the pieces and try to rebuild lives. For me, that is embodying God's everlasting love, a love that brings about salvation for those who have walked through the shadow of death, like Mrs. Brewer and her family.

Such atmospheric changes occur not just in nature, but in societies as well. We have seen times of oppression and resistance time and again. Whether we look to the stories of the Exodus, the Babylonian exile and eventual restoration proclaimed by the prophets, or we look to the story of Jesus and his ministry of liberation, freedom and restoration. The message is the same. God's everlasting Love is a liberating love, a steadfast love that endures forever and becomes our salvation.

Jesus came to show us perfect Love. A love that casts out all fear. A sacrificial love, a love that is so extravagant and radical that we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. That is the kind of Love that Jesus preached, a love that brings new life, abundant life, even eternal life. It is a transformative love liberates people and a dangerous love. Dangerous because those who oppose it feel threatened by it and will try to stop it.

Sometimes life's disasters come without warning. What begins as an ordinary day can end in disaster with your world turned upside down. I can imagine that the disciples were excited by the warm reception that Jesus received as he entered the gates of Jerusalem. Little did they know that in a few short days the season would violently turn against them. Sometimes the topsy-turvy conflicts in the world can shake you to the core. Life as you know it is altered forever, like a tornado or an earthquake. Again, two tectonic plates clashing, rubbing against one another shifting the earth under us. The

writer of Matthew's Gospel saw Jesus' ministry so life altering that he even included not one, but two earthquakes in the story.

The first one happens in Matthew 27:50-52 as Jesus is dying on the Cross:

“Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.”

This is a powerful symbol occurring at Jesus' death. The curtain that separated the ordinary worshiper from the Holiest of Holies was torn asunder giving us free access to God through Jesus. The writer of Hebrews explains it this way.

Hebrews 6:19-20 “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever.”

The second earthquake happens on Sunday morning as Mary and the women go to the tomb. As they approached the tomb an earthquake shook as the power of angels tossed the stone in the air. The Roman guards, symbols of the empire, fall like dead men, petrified, and scared for their lives. You see human might cannot stop God's resurrection power. Love overcomes hate. “Oh death where is your sting, O grave where is your victory.” “God's steadfast Love has become our salvation. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”

But what does this all mean? Friday at the foot of the cross their hopes and dreams died with Jesus. The earth shook in anger at the unjust killing of this good and innocent man. Now again, the earth shook and they marveled at the news of the angel that Jesus was indeed alive and was going ahead of them. Full of fear and joy they departed wondering marveling how different it all was. Jesus is alive, what does this mean?

Throughout Life's ups and downs. Whether they are sunny days that turn dark, or earth shattering news that shakes us to the core Jesus' resurrection reminds us that he is our Everlasting love of God and he has become be our salvation.

For Jackie Brewer and her family, it was love that sprang into action that pushed them to the safety. After the wind and the rain subsided, they looked up into the clear sky. It was the face of a stranger appearing over the debris that assured them they were not alone and were safe. Jackie said, "I was never so glad to see anyone in my life, because it meant that it was safe to get out and move about."

When the storms of life come Love springs into action within the community. We see Jesus' face in the stranger helping others recover and start life again. It may not be like before, but it is a fresh start in life with the loving care of others. The psalmist says:

"I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Jesus is Risen He is risen indeed. Jesus, the steadfast love of God has become our salvation!!