



LESSONS for LIFE

MARCH 23, 2008 11:00 a.m.
EASTER SUNDAY
BECOMING YOUR TRUE SELF PART III
AT THE CORE
Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes C.M.

SACRED READINGS

HAPPINESS NOW, ROBERT HOLDEN

Gospel: MATTHEW 28: 1 – 7

Today is a very special day for us, not just because it's Easter Sunday but also because of the dedication of our Sanctuary lamp and what it means to us as a congregation. But today is also a very special day for all of you who are under the age of ninety-five. Now I first want to recognize anyone who might be here over the age of ninety-five. Is there anyone this morning? Okay. For all of us then, today is the earliest Easter any of us will ever experience in our lives. The last day Easter was this early – and it can only be one day earlier – maximum. The last time Easter was this early was 1913, that's why I used ninety-five. The next time Easter will be this early is two hundred and twenty years from now in the year 2,228, so we are at a very historic day – the earliest ever; and for some of you this is the earliest you've ever shown up for something, and then on time! (laughter). All the spouses are clapping as they nudge their partners.

We're at the end of a sermon series called Happiness Now and if you go to the Web-site of our church, www.mcctoronto.com then you'll be able to go to the area where the sermons are archived and they are typed in by faithful transcribers and you'll be able to see sermons from the beginning of the series and eventually each sermon will be added and you'll be able to catch up with us. The series is based on a book by a man named Robert Holden, a book called Happiness Now. Holden is from the Positive Psychology Movement. At the beginning of this series we talked about how happiness is not found outside of us and we continue to search in the wrong place for it. Happiness is found within; but there are lots of positive and negative influencers but we make the decisions about whether to be happy or not. The essence of who you are, your birthright, what you were given at birth is love and peace and joy and no one can take that away from you unless you let them; and no circumstance can take away your love and your peace and your joy unless you let it. So today we look to Easter and its meaning for guidance. The scripture says, *Rejoice always*. Jesus said, *I want my joy to be in you so that your joy may be full*. Jesus said, *I am come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly*; and yet how many of us can say that we rejoice always. For many folks happiness is a momentary thing occasionally and not a way of life. So in this series and particularly today at Easter we look for some guidance for how indeed we can rejoice always.

Now, some of us will look to Easter in a very factual perspective, believing that Jesus actually lived and died and that God raised him from the dead. It is this perspective that I personally adhere to; however, here at MCC Toronto we practice a kind of Christianity called Progressive Christianity, so that means that there are also folks here today, full members of this congregation, full participants – even Deacons, even staff – who hold a more metaphorical perspective: some not believing in a factual resurrection but looking at the Biblical story using a metaphorical perspective believing that it is not important to debate whether the account really



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happened or not; believing instead that we should spend our energy searching for the deeper meaning and that that's more important. So, some of us believe in the factual account of the resurrection; others of us don't believe in it and others, maybe even most of us, aren't quite sure one way or the other. What makes this congregation not only unique but a great spiritual movement, a sign of hope for our times, is that all of us, whatever our perspective we are joyfully and peacefully and respectfully traveling this journey together. One church – united in our commitment to live in our love for another – to pursue justice with a passion, to experience a deepening of our spirituality and to be ever evolving into the church God wants us to be: transforming lives and transforming our world as we travel together. While celebrating this diversity belief you have in your wisdom or in your lapse of judgment chosen me to be your Pastor, so I get the opportunity and indeed I have the responsibility to share my perspective on events and ideas while hopefully doing so respectfully.

So here goes. Easter is about then and now. Easter is about new life coming out of death. Easter is about hope rising from despair. Easter is the triumph of God over Fundamentalism. Easter is God deciding to have the last word. Easter is about Jesus and Easter is about you and it's about me. Easter is about Jesus. When God raised Jesus from the dead God did two things: God renewed the spark of life in Jesus; life out of death. Life can come out of even the most deadly of places and life after death. Death is the door we walk through leaving this amazing gift called life and entering the next phase of our spiritual journey; and for those of us who remain behind when a loved one dies, death is the interruption of the relationship; it is not the ending of the relationship; and when we ourselves walk through the valley of the shadow of death personally death becomes for us the door to the reunion with all of those who've gone on before us. That first Easter when God raised Jesus from the dead God renewed the spark of life in Jesus and God rolled the stone away, allowing Jesus to rise up and walk into the light. Now up until now this sermon could be called pretty warm and fuzzy for most of us and yet, when we read the Gospel reading every Sunday, we say – after the reading – may these sacred readings inspire us, comfort us and challenge us. So here's the challenge: Will every one here this morning who is breathing please raise your hand. Thank you. I think I can now assert that God has placed the spark of life in every person present here this morning, so now it's up to us. It's no longer enough to pray to God to rescue you. It is no longer enough to pray to God to change your circumstances. I say to you in the strongest of terms this morning, just as God has already placed the spark in life in you, God has already rolled your stone away and now God waits for you to get up and for you to walk out of your tomb. God waits for you to follow Jesus out of the tomb and into the light. Just as God rolled the stone away so that Jesus could leave the tomb so God has created the same opportunity for you right now to walk into the light of life. Just as God calls us in scripture to rejoice always, so also God has rolled the stone away making it possible for you to rejoice always, making it possible for you to walk into happiness now, making it possible for you to get up and leave the tomb. God has already placed within you your true essence. God has already placed love within you and if you will bear with me with this analogy, that bubble of love surrounds you all the time and no one can take it away. That river of love is meant to flow through you all the time no matter what. God has placed within you the gift of peace and that bubble of peace surrounds you wherever you go, no matter what; and that river of peace can flow from you no matter what. And the gift of joy is placed within you, that bubble of joy surrounds you wherever you go, no matter what; and that river of joy can flow through you no matter what.

The issue is not asking God for more love, more peace or more joy. The issue is us being more and more attuned to the love and the peace and the joy already placed within us.

One of the big problems with Christianity today and with Christians today is that we keep looking for things in the wrong places. We keep looking for things up there or out there that are placed in us and we keep praying for things, asking for things that are already given to us. The gift is already here and we need to be opening



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the gift and not praying for it again and again. You can stay in the tomb and pray for God to roll the stone away or you can accept that God has already done God's part. Accept your responsibility to get up, walk out of the tomb into the light. You can stay in the tomb and search for happiness outside of yourself or you can walk into the light and claim your happiness within. You can stay in the tomb and let circumstances determine your happiness; blame other people, surrender your power to people or to events; or you can walk into the light and change your attitude and reclaim that connection with love and peace and joy within. You can stay in the tomb and focus on what you don't have, what you'd like to have or what someone else has, or you can walk into the light and focus on gratitude and on goodness. Living with the losses, and there will be deep, deep losses and sometimes multiple losses. You can live with the pain of those losses while focusing on the wonderful gift of what was and what remains. You can stay in the tomb out of fear or you can walk forth lead by faith and take risks. You can stay in the tomb with all of your religious baggage or you can leave those grey cloths behind and take up your religious wings, flying higher than ever before, being on the top of the mountain or stuck in the valley. The song says, *You raise me up so I can stand on mountains; You raise me up to walk on stormy seas*. Just as Jesus had a choice that morning: he could have stayed in the tomb, will you? He chose to get up, will you? He chose to walk out of the tomb and to walk into the light, will you? God has already done God's work. God has already placed the spark of life in you. God has already rolled the stone away. Easter then? Yes. Easter now? It's up to you. Happiness now? It's up to you. A world waits to hear that good news. It's up to us.

I conclude this sermon and this series by giving Holden the last word. He talks about – as soon as I can find it...The following story illustrates perfectly the only real key you ever need to walk free. Harry Houdini liked nothing better than digging a hole for himself and then looking for a way out. His ability to free himself from shackles, boxes, strait-jackets, hand-cuffs and all kinds of sealed containers brought the Hungarian escape artist world-wide fame. There was nothing he could not escape from, well, almost nothing. At the height of his fame Houdini issued a challenge to the world to build a jail that he could not escape from. Jail after jail after jail Houdini would escape from within moments. There's a story of one jail, however, when something went very wrong. This jail was like all the rest: concrete floors, concrete walls, a set of bars and no furniture. Harry entered and the door was shut behind him. The stop-watch started ticking and Harry got to work on the lock with a piece of metal that he'd concealed in his clothes. Harry soon realized this lock was unusual. An hour passed by and no luck. Another hour passed by and still Harry was imprisoned. Sweat formed upon his brow and effort upon effort upon effort got the great Harry Houdini nowhere. Finally, out of tiredness and frustration Harry fell against the door in despair – and the door swung open. The prison door had never ever been locked!

That which you are praying to God for and waiting for God to give you has already been given to you. The door was never locked. The gift has already been given to you. The challenge is to accept the gift, open the gift, experience the love the peace and the joy already within you and around you. The challenge is to walk out of the tomb and to stop praying for the stone to be rolled away. Instead, to get up and walk out into the light. Jesus did and so can we.

Amen