

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson Easter Sunday: 3/22/08
Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

“It Ain’t Over ‘til It’s Over.”

I just could not believe it! The game was actually over, done, complete. No time left on the clock. No chance for a do-over, one last Hail Mary pass to save the day, a miraculous grab in the waning seconds. After waiting for two weeks to watch that super game, expecting like millions of others that my team would come out of it with a big fat “W”, triumphant, I just couldn’t fathom we had lost. We were vanquished. That it was final. What had begun in so much hope and optimism five months before on a warm Sunday afternoon ended in defeat. OK: so do you remember that game? New York Giants 17, New England Patriots 14. Ouch.

It is hard to recall those kinds of memories of being let down. Yes it is only a game but: if you’re a lifelong or transplanted New England sports fan, especially a Red Sox fan, or just a fan in general you’ve known that disappointment. If you’ve ever pinned your hopes on a political candidate then seen them lose on election night, you know. Ever had your heart set on that long hoped for job and then not gotten a call back. Ever dreamed great dreams for a child then seen her stumble and struggle and fall. Ever given your all in a relationship then seen it crumble--you know. We all know what a heartbreak it is to feel as if “the game” is over and that we have lost.

I imagine that’s what the Mary’s must have felt that dark dawn 2,000 years ago, as they walked through early morning fog to check upon the body of their friend and rabbi, Jesus. They knew he spoke of somehow living again, but for them that day, I imagine, all they must have talked about was ...”We lost. We lost. All the work we did during those exciting and wonderful three years is over. The Jesus movement is dead. He’s dead. The friends we made ran away in fear. Even Peter denied Jesus, not just once, but three times! Judas betrayed us. And we’re flat broke. We left our families and jobs to follow Jesus. We may even be arrested, imprisoned, put to death.”

That Sunday morning must have felt like one big mournful hangover. No options. No do-overs. Just a cold tomb filled with the dreams and hopes of their radical preacher, prophet and companion. Would anybody even ever remember this Jesus guy after such a humiliating ending?

But: there’s always a “but” with our God...well...in the immortal words of that wise theologian Yogi Berra: “It ain’t over ‘till its over.” In the resurrection God turns back the game clock, tears up the rule book, changes the game of life and declares in the risen Christ: God 1, Death Zero! Love 1, Hate Zero. Hope 1, Despair Zero. In a convulsive cataclysm of earthquakes and angels God wins. Game over...and game just beginning again!

Here is our rule-breaking God, smashing into human history; God: refusing to play by human rules. That’s what makes God, God. God makes the rules. God can break the

rules. So although natural law and logic argue that the dead can never live again, that Jesus must have died on the cross along with everything he stood for: God ruled otherwise. In the resurrection God reminds us that when we walk with the risen Christ; take seriously the demands and the rewards of Christian discipleship, the game of life is never, ever over, my friends. With this God we don't lose. We can't lose. We won't lose. Because: it ain't over 'till it's over. On this side of heaven and earth. On the other side too.

Even the finality of our physical death was beaten by God on Easter. This past week I spent time with a 97-year old beloved church member, who after a string of physical ailments, knows in her heart that her body is weakening. None of us knows when our time will come to die, but as I spoke with her about the next step in her spiritual journey, as I held her wrinkled and strong hands, as I gazed into her twinkling blue eyes, she spoke about how ready she was to face her mortality: to one day be reunited with the loved ones she lived with and outlived and misses terribly. She knows that with her resurrection God the game is not over, that death is but the next chapter in her beautiful story.

“It ain't over 'till it's over.” So this Easter morning: God's resurrection question to us, the living, is simple: do you think the game is over for you or—are you ready to get back on the field of life and try, try again? To love even though your love has been rejected. To forgive even though your trust has been broken. To hope even though your dreams haven't yet come true. To be courageous even though your two o'clock in the morning fears sometimes seem like demons that just won't go away.

Resurrection isn't just a dusty doctrine, a throwaway line in a hymn we sing once a year. Resurrection is a fierce attitude, a belief that though day to day we play and sometimes win, and play and sometimes lose, in the big picture, God is working through us and all Creation for a final Divine victory.

At my last church I worked on issues of poverty with a woman named Linda, a 60-something year old deeply faithful woman of God, and a fierce advocate for the poorest of the poor. Every single week for the seven years I was her pastor, Mary would pile into her beat up old Ford Escort, fill it with donated clothes and children's books, and drive into Rosie's Place, the largest shelter for women and children in Boston. Every Thursday night she'd drive a van that picked up folks on the streets. She was always running letter-writing campaigns in coffee hour. A few found Mary's advocacy just too much, didn't want to hear about “those folks” in a wealthy place like Concord. Can't someone just tell her that the poor will always be with us? But Mary is a Don Quixote, forever tilting at human windmills of indifference and inequality. She passionately believes in God's resurrection dream: that one day kids and Moms won't have to live in cars or under highway overpasses, or the mean streets of the city. For Mary, the game of God's care for the poor is never, ever lost or over. The game goes on.

The game goes on! For volunteers who serve street folks week after week after week at the Salvation Army, who believe one day all the hungry will be fed. For those who build

Habitat homes in New Orleans, who with their hammers declare one day all God's children will have a decent place to live. For the millions of young people who have re-entered the electoral process in record numbers this election year, who by their civic passion declare I will make a difference! I can change the world! To live in the resurrection means that we will work for the seemingly impossible, for peace, justice, hope, love, even, especially, when it seems as if all those ideals are sealed up in a stone cold tomb.

Sisters and brothers: Jesus was raised from the dead to teach us that when we play in God's game, that competition is never, ever over, globally or personally. That with this tenacious God who refused to allow love to be nailed to a cross, we can't give in. We must not give over: to despair, to cynicism, to apathy, to a defeatist attitude that says, "Well that just the way things are." As Winston Churchill once said in a speech to college graduates, "Never give in--never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in...Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."

Never—because we can be afraid like the Mary's, afraid to believe that we can go on in spite of defeat, that we can pick ourselves up from all the crosses in life. That we can live again, play again, love again. We've come here this day, in the midst of all the lilies and the bonnets, aware of places in our lives that need resurrection, that need to believe our game is not yet over. I hear those fears in my office, over coffee, in prayers. From single Moms who wonder if they have the strength to do it all alone. From addicts who wonder if they can finally get sober. From the sick who wonder if they'll ever get healthy, the burnt out who wonder if their work will ever have meaning again.

So let us live in resurrection hope. Our risen Saviors call to us from beyond that empty tomb. To stay in the game, whatever the struggle. "It ain't over 'till its over!" For on Easter God won. God wins—and we do too, as God's resurrection people. Let all the people say, "Amen!"