

From Crown of Thorns to Crown of Glory
Romans 5:1-5; Mark 16:1-8
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
Easter Sunday
April 8, 2007
Dr. Brent Beasley

For each of the weeks of the season of Lent, we have been talking about the surprising connection between the thorns of suffering and the roses of glory, the connection between “Crown of Thorns” and “Crown of Glory.”

Jeremiah Wright is pastor of the largest United Church of Christ congregation in the country, an African-American congregation in the South Side of Chicago. He tells the story of seeing a painting by a man named Watts.

It is a painting that seems at first glance to be a study in contradictions, because the title of the painting and the painting itself seem to be in direct opposition to each other. Dr Wright said that when he first saw the painting he wanted to protest to the artist for playing such a cruel joke on people who might see this painting.

You see, the painting is entitled, *Hope*. It shows a woman who is playing a harp sitting on top of the world. Now that by itself would be all right, for what more enviable position could any of us ever hope to be in than being on top of the world with everyone dancing to our music?

But when you look closer at the painting it becomes clear that the world on which this woman sits—our world—is one torn

by war, destroyed by hate, decimated by despair. The world, in fact, is on the very brink of destruction.

Yet the artist dared title his painting, *Hope*.

When you look more closely you can see that this harpist sitting on top of the world is sitting there in rags. There is a bandage on her head with blood beginning to seep through. Scars are visible on her body and the harp she is playing has all but one of its strings torn, ripped out, dangling down.

Yet the artist dared title his painting, *Hope*.

And so, Dr. Wright recounts, he wanted to protest this offensive painting, this desecration of hope. But then, he confessed that he had missed something in the painting. He had looked down on the painting and had seen the war, the hunger, the distrust, and the hatred on top of which the harpist sat, but he had not looked above her head.

When he looked over her head, he saw some small notes of music moving playfully and joyfully toward heaven. And it was then that he understood why Watts had called that painting, *Hope*.

He said that it reminded him of the Spiritual, *Over my head, I hear music in the air. Over my head, I hear music in the air. Over my head, I hear music in the air. There must be a God somewhere.*

In spite of being perched on a world torn by war; in spite of being on a world racked with hate; in spite of being on a world

devastated by distrust; in spite of being on a world where ignorance and apathy reigned supreme; in spite of being on that tangled, torn and tormented globe, with her body bruised and her harp all but destroyed except for that one string that was left—in spite of all of these things, the woman rejoiced in her hope.

A person of hope can still hear the music in the suffering.

For weeks now we have focused in our worship and in my preaching on this “Crown of Thorns, Crown of Glory” series. We’ve talked about the thorn of betrayal, and the thorn of loss, the thorn of rejection, the thorn of weakness, the thorn of sacrifice. We have thought about the thorns that Jesus faced and that you and I face and the way that, in Christ, even those thorns are transformed.

And we’ve learned that in Christ a person of hope can hear the music even in the suffering.

A person of hope knows that the world is broken and that suffering will be a part of his life; but the person of hope knows that what we most need and long for is assured, even though it might be just beyond view.

A person of hope knows that, as Paul said, suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

See, it is a rhythm of life: It’s the rhythm of suffering giving way to patience, patience giving way to perseverance, and perseverance giving way to hope.

The confidence of a person of hope is not based on what he or she sees in the world. As Paul elsewhere reminds us, *Hope that is seen is not hope*. Instead, hope is based on the unseen reality of God.

In fact, the person of hope sees the whole picture, because, in addition to seeing hard reality, that person also sees the ultimate reality that is God. Now, we do not boast in suffering, as Paul says, because we like it, but because the love of God in our hearts makes us believe that the trials we go through are not meaningless.

Our lives, especially our sufferings, are not tragedies to be fixed, not problems to be solved, but mysteries to be lived with hope in a God who loves us enough to suffer for us, in our place. And then to transcend that suffering and rise to new life out of the suffering.

So today, Easter, resurrection is the reminder, the witness, that all of our hopes are not in vain. That our hopes are profoundly true. Here is what I think I’ve been trying to say for all these weeks leading up to today: With God, the worst things are never the last things. Resurrection is the reminder that the worst things are never the last things.

Our Gospel text for this Easter comes from the Gospel of Mark. In typical fashion, Mark tells the story with a straightforward brevity that leaves us wanting more. In fact, many scholars have pondered Mark's unusual telling of the

story because of the way he ends it. The best manuscripts we have end with verse 8.

Unlike the other Gospels, which tell of the women sharing the Good News with the disciples, Mark ends by saying that the women ran from the tomb with terror and amazement, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

That is a strange ending. The other Gospels have resurrection appearances. In the other Gospels, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene in the cemetery. He shows Thomas the wounds in his hands and side. He serves the disciples breakfast on the beach. But Mark ends on a note of fear. The women say nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

Through the years scholars have tried to come up with all kinds of explanations for this abrupt ending. It's almost as if Mark's account doesn't have an ending.

But in a way I like Mark's non-ending because it reminds us that the first Easter story really doesn't have an ending. The story continues with you and me.

Thomas Hine, the author of *Facing Tomorrow*, tells of his relationship with his grandmother when he was a child. She would take him on her lap and tell tales of her life in Ireland. She spoke of coming to America as a teenager and how she had made her way through hardships and blessings.

Thomas Hine felt that her stories never had an ending. And then he concludes, *Though she never said it directly, I knew the story had no ending because I was an important part of it. It*

was up to me to know the story, make it part of my life, add to it and pass it on
[Paul Larsen, PRCL, 4/18/2000].

This is what I was trying to tell the groups each night at our Way of the Cross performances. My job this year, like last year, is to stand at the end and speak to the groups after the empty tomb scene and before they are taken back to their cars.

After I would speak to the groups for a couple of minutes, Bob Serino would then give them a bag with a little cross in it and an information card about our church and a Second Baptist coffee mug.

Mostly what I said to the groups was something like this:
I hope this experience tonight has helped you to relive some of the joy and the hope of Easter.

This is the end of the performance here. However, the Easter story does not have an ending. It continued after that empty tomb in the lives of Jesus' followers. And it continues on up through today in our lives.

It is wonderful that Easter happened a long time ago, but it's really wonderful when Easter happens in our lives.

It is wonderful that Jesus rose from the grave all those centuries ago, but it's really wonderful when Jesus comes to life in us.

When the story becomes real in us... that's really special. And we hope that this tonight has helped to bring the story to life for you this Easter.

Because Christ did not just come to life a long time ago but is still alive now in the world, we know that even now, not just one time 2,000 years ago, but even now, the worst things are never the last things.

Frederick Buechner is, I think, the finest living Christian writer. He did not grow up in a church-going family. Both of his parents were highly educated and socially prominent New Yorkers, and religion was one of those areas of life about which they had no interest.

Thus, he had very little to fall back on when life began to work him over as it works us all over if we live long enough. He was ten when the innocence of his childhood came to a shattering halt one Saturday morning. His father got up before anyone else, carefully closed the garage door, got in the car, turned on the engine and was asphyxiated before anybody realized what was happening.

The elder Buechner had been a popular and out-going man, an honor graduate from Princeton. However, the Great Depression had made it difficult for him to find and keep the kind of job that he needed to provide for his family as he desired.

Unfortunately, as disappointments continued to mount, he began to depend excessively on alcohol to avoid pain, and this only served to exacerbate his difficulties. Finally, because he had no spiritual resources on which to rely, the only way out seemed to be that dark exit called suicide.

Young Frederick Buechner said that, for years afterward, when people would ask him how his father had died, he would always answer, *He died of heart trouble*, which was at least

partially true, *because he had a heart and it was troubled*. His father's deepest problem was the absence of hope.

As Frederick Buechner grew up and became a man, he began to attend church for the first time in his life at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York and to listen to the famous preacher George Buttrick. Eventually, Buechner's heart was touched by that hope that his father never knew. And he began to attend seminary at Union Seminary there in New York.

Buechner reached out toward that Mystery Who had somehow laid hold of him and, with absolutely no baggage of preconceived opinions, under the tutelage of such luminaries as Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and James Muilenburg,

Frederick Buechner seriously encountered the documents of Holy Scripture for the first time at the age of twenty-seven. He reported later that he was absolutely amazed on two counts.

The first was the unbelievable earthiness and honesty of Holy Scripture. He had seen quotations extracted from the Bible in his education in the humanities, but had had no idea that the Book was as true to life as he found it to be. There was no attempt to gloss over the brutalities and cruelties that make up the human story. Even the greatest heroes, like Abraham, Moses and David, were depicted as the flawed and failing persons they sometimes were.

There was something else even more astonishing to him than all this earthiness, and that was the fact that in this utterly honest account, as he put it, the worst things were never the last things!

He began to sense a pattern that runs all the way from the most primitive chapters of Genesis right through to the final words of Revelation, and that is that when human beings got to the end of their ropes, lo and behold, they discovered they were not at the end of everything.

There was a Mysterious Other in those places of extremity who was somehow able to take one thing and transform it into something else—to take a thorn and transform it into something else. This is the image of hopefulness that Buechner begin to encounter again and again in Holy Scripture; and the epitome of it is the resurrection of Jesus from the grave.

God's power to redeem is greater than our power to mess up.
[John Claypool tells these stories of Frederick Buechner and Winston Churchill in a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on the first Sunday after September 11, 2001]

Winston Churchill obviously held these beliefs. In June of 1965, he was asked to give a commencement address at a university in Great Britain. By this time, the great statesman was badly infirmed. In fact, he was within months of his own death. He had to be helped to the podium that day and stood there saying nothing for what seemed like an interminable period.

But then, that amazing voice that had once called Britain back from the brink, sounded for the last time in public, and what he said was, *Never, never give up! Never give up!* Then he turned and went back to his seat. There was moment of stunned

silence, and then everyone rose to his or her feet in admiring applause.

They say it is the only commencement address in history to be remembered verbatim by everyone who heard it. What was so powerful about it was that the words were so congruent with the one who said them.

Again and again, Churchill's career had been pronounced dead, but he kept coming back. Why? Because he, too, had caught the gleam that Frederick Buechner sensed in the pages of Holy Scripture that the worst things are never the last things.

The account of Churchill's funeral at St. Paul's Cathedral confirms this fact. He had carefully planned it himself and included in it some of the great hymns of the Church and all of the wonder of the Anglican liturgy.

Furthermore, there were two things that he specifically requested at the end that made it unforgettable for every person there. When the benediction had been said from the high altar, silence fell over the packed Cathedral.

A bugler high up in the dome of St. Paul's had been asked to play the familiar sound of "Taps," a well-known signal marking the end of something. *[here a trumpet plays Taps]*. Just hearing that tune we understand that it's time to say goodnight. Those haunting notes brought home to everyone there the realization that an era had come to an end, and it was reported that there was hardly a dry eye in the church.

However, as Churchill had requested, after the notes of "Taps" had sounded, another bugler on the other side of the dome, began to play "Reveille." *[here a trumpet plays Reveille]*. It's

time to get up, it's time to get up, it's time to get up in the morning.

That final touch caught everyone by surprise, but it revealed where Churchill had gotten the strength across the years to never give up.

He did believe that the worst things are never the last things and the final sounds of history will not be "Taps" but "Reveille."
[trumpet plays the beginning of Taps, then transitions into Reveille]

There is a time for the crown of thorns, no denying that. But there is also, always, and finally, the time for the crown of glory.