

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, *Rector*
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Easter Day, April 16, 2017**

Two pillars of our community have recently entered the nearer presence of God, Dan Rooney and Henry Hillman. In their own ways, they each changed the city to make it a better community for all. They deepened pride of place and diversity. They greatly enhanced the arts, education, and medicine. They fostered hope and commitment in good times and bad. They could have lived anywhere but chose to call our city their home. They were proud Pittsburghers. They were also persons of deep faith.

Dan Rooney was a Roman Catholic. Henry Hillman was a son of Calvary Episcopal Church, one of us. Henry was baptized here when the building was eleven years old. He was confirmed and married here. Elsie and Henry were married for seventy years. I once asked him his secret to a long and successful marriage. Henry replied that he told Elsie when they were young, "I won't try to run your life... and I won't try to run my life either." He was wise, too.

Henry was one of the most humble people, rich or poor, one could ever meet. He might be further humbled by the fact he was born and died on the same days as Jesus. He was born on Christmas day and died on Good Friday. Dan, Henry, and Elsie now enjoy the resurrection life. That same hope of raised and eternal life in Christ is open to all of us. And that is our focus on Easter.

Everyone dies, even Jesus. Everyone's got to pay taxes, too. There is no great revelation in that. Our Easter faith and hope is that something new *has* happened. Jesus died but has been raised from the dead. God has acted *in* human history to bring about a *change* in human history for all time open to all people. Because Jesus has been raised we, too, can be raised.

Resurrection is the simple but profound point of Easter. Resurrection is about eternal life. This certainly applies after death – what we normally call Heaven. Heaven is not a place we go when we die whether we are good or not. Heaven is a state of being we enter at death, a deepening of relationship that exists beyond death. Heaven is simply being in the presence of God and those we love but see no longer with all human barriers and frailties and sins left behind. The greatest love we enjoy now is but the faintest shadow of the infinite love God has for each of us. The eternal life with God that Henry, Elsie, and Dan now enjoy is more sublime than we could ever hope to imagine. Pain, heartbreak, separation, betrayal, even death, are all swallowed up in Jesus' death leaving only abundant, resurrection life.

That quality of eternal life with God, we call Heaven, is not just for when we die. Jesus' resurrection means we can begin to know heaven on earth. We will still experience all the travails of this life but from a hope grounded in faith in the resurrected Christ.

We will still have doubts. Everyone does. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Fear is the opposite of faith. To live from hope in the power of the resurrection is to live without fear of death in all its forms. The *dying* part can be difficult or painful. Death itself need not be for it holds no final power over us. Overcoming fear of death changes everything else for the better.

The gospel story from Matthew emphasizes this aspect of the resurrection. The two women who went to visit Jesus expected to find him dead in the tomb. Instead, they encountered an angel and the resurrected Christ himself. From each of them the message is the same. “Do not be afraid.” A direct consequence of the resurrection is fear of death need not ever stop us from living fully. Jesus had a clear message on that first Easter – Do not be afraid. Do not ever be afraid. Resurrection, not death, is God’s final word for Jesus and for us.

One of my greatest role models of faith, who embodied Jesus’ Easter message, is a person I never met. He was a priest known to me only by reputation and one printed sermon. Father Bob was a predecessor of mine. He was a person of deep faith and many gifts as a leader. He was not perfect but it was clear the priest and people loved one another deeply and tried to understand what it means to embrace a resurrected life in all its forms.

Bob was in his early 50s and had enjoyed sustained success for fourteen years in the same position. Everything was flourishing. One day, he got a headache that lasted several days. By all other outward signs, he was a model of health but went to the hospital to run some tests. The unexpected diagnosis came back as an inoperable brain tumor. One week he was on top of the world with a bright future. The next week, he had terminal cancer.

Bob’s decline was swift but met with a remarkable faith. Everyone seemed to be in shock at the news but him. He was soon sent out of state for aggressive treatment but preached one, final sermon to his beloved people. In effect, that was his farewell speech and his own funeral sermon because it was the last time anyone there ever saw him alive.

Bob said, “One of the most common questions that comes with cancer, when facing death or some tragedy, is why me? Why me? But another, more important question, is *why not me*? I’m not afraid of death because I know the end of the story.” That is faith grounded in hope rather than fear mired in death. Because Christ has been raised we, too, shall be raised.

The Easter message is that we don’t have to be afraid of life or death when you embrace resurrection. You don’t have to *save* the world. God has already done that through Christ. But you can *change* the world. You don’t have to own a football team, be a titan of industry, or lead a political party to change the world.

God transformed the whole world by changing one person, Jesus, from death to life. You *can change* the world by changing one life, your own. Can you be open to God’s resurrection to embrace life and death without fear? Why not me?