

March 31, 2024

In This Way...Rise

Pastor Paul Gauche

There's a tree in the center of the town of Lahaina, Hawaii, which is capturing the imagination of thousands of people. What probably seemed like the end of something truly remarkable to a lot of people seemed like a new beginning for Duane Sparkman, the lead arborist, a tree specialist, in Maui, Hawaii.

On August 8, 2023, a series of devastating wildfires roared through the villages of Lahaina and Kula, killing 100 people, making it the deadliest U.S. wildfire in over a century on the island of Hawaii. The wildfires so badly scorched a 150-year-old banyan tree in the center of the town of Lahaina that generations of people are feeling grief. But that is not the end of the story. The banyan tree is now showing signs of new growth. Duane Sparkman is optimistic about the tree's recovery. He sees the new leaves sprouting as a positive sign. The tree, known as the "heartbeat of Lahaina Town," was a cherished landmark before the fires devastated the historic village. Duane and an army of volunteers are actively working to save the tree by aerating the soil, replenishing nutrients, and providing water. Despite the challenges faced by the community, the resilient banyan tree is seen as a symbol of hope for a new beginning.

It's Easter. And because we're Easter people, we know that what seems like the end of the story is not the end of the story.

There is a story about another tree not far from the center of the city of Jerusalem. This story has held the imaginations of millions of people. The tree was a cross. And on a hot, dry, tragic Friday afternoon over 2000 years ago, in the land of dust and sun, Jesus was crucified. And generations of people were feeling the grief. Here's that story from the Gospel of Luke, 24:1-12.

But very early on Sunday morning, the women went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. So, they went in, but they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus.

As they stood there puzzled, two men suddenly appeared to them, clothed in dazzling robes. The women were terrified and bowed with their faces to the ground. Then the men asked, "Why are you looking among the dead for someone alive? He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Remember what he told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and that he would rise again on the third day." Then they remembered that he had said this. So, they rushed back from the tomb to tell his eleven disciples—and everyone else—what had happened. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, and several other women who told the apostles what had happened. But the story sounded like nonsense, so they didn't believe it. However, Peter jumped up and ran to the tomb to look. Stooping, he peered in and saw the empty linen wrappings; then, he went home again, wondering what had happened. This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Can you imagine? On the first day of the week, as the first rays of sunlight began to poke over the horizon and through the trees, the women... the two Marys and Joanna, went to Jesus' tomb to bring spices. And that huge boulder that covered the entry—as big as a garage door had been rolled away. And the women were baffled, confused, bewildered. And as the two Marys and Joanna stood there with their mouths and eyes as wide open as the tomb itself, they went from being flustered to frightened as two angels in dazzling clothing asked them why they were looking for the living among the dead. After all, they had seen Jesus breathe his last. They were looking for a dead man. But they didn't have a chance to

answer before the angel reminded them that they should already know the story because Jesus had told them what would happen. He told them that he would suffer and be crucified and then on the third-day rise. And then, as the sunlight slipped through two branches and hit them in the eyes, they remembered. They remembered the story.

But the story doesn't end there. In fact, it ends where it began, with some mouths gaping open, eyes as big as saucers, some of the people still skeptical, some doubting, some even disbelieving the whole thing. Others are grasping for at least a little understanding, trying to figure it all out. The amazing story from Luke, which tells one of the greatest truths of all time, one of the most glorious pieces of news ever shared with anybody, simply ends with the words: "But the story sounded like nonsense, so they didn't believe it."

Friends, thanks be to God; that is not the end of the story. That tree – that cross was not the last word. That grave – that tomb, was not the last word. Death was not the last word. The last word in this story and our story is the resounding first word of life. Hopeful life! Real life! Authentic, honest, thriving life! We are Easter people who dare to claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus change everything!

Would that be good news for you? Let me ask you: What kind of heat have you endured in your life? What fire are you trying to put out today? Maybe it's the heat of a hurting relationship. The slow burn of misunderstanding that got mixed up with some pride, and now it's a smoldering mess. Maybe it's the fire of worry about your job. Maybe the dry winds that are blowing are threatening your hope as you deal with mental health or physical challenges. Maybe the heat in your life has to do with financial security, or maybe the intensity of isolation and loneliness seems like

sitting in a heap of ashes. Maybe the hottest fire you face is uncertainty about the future. Maybe you're sensing a real lack of thriving in your life. We are Easter people who dare to claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus change everything!

It seemed like a dead end, but it wasn't. Easter is always about new beginnings. The message of Easter is a story of hope and promise fulfilled. The message of Easter is a bold statement that from the scorched earth of our relational terrain emerges the promise for new growth as we nurture new ways of caring and serving. The message of Easter assures us that in spite of the bridges we've burned, there remains the power and promise of forgiveness. The message of Easter assures us that the damage done by destructive arguments that burst into flame in the heat of the moment will be soothed by the cool water of the Spirit of wisdom and understanding. The message of Easter reminds us that in spite of the seeds of discontent and self-centeredness that choke the roots of healthy lives, the soil of life can be delightfully renewed. The message of Easter assures us that even out of the devastating losses in our lives comes the promise that we will be found and that we will be filled with hope and promise and new life!

Because of this day, this Easter day, each day is a day of resurrection. Because of this day, this Easter day, we can celebrate the power of God's love within us and through us, not just making a difference in the world but creating hope for a different world altogether! Because of this day, this Easter day, we embrace the power of life over death, and we give voice and witness to this power of new life that changes everything. The Good News of Easter is that now the possibilities are endless; resurrection changes everything!