

“Break Out from Hopelessness”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

based on the theme, “GET OUT OF YOUR TOMB!”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Luke 24:13-31 [NRSV]

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” ¹⁹He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” ²⁵Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* is a story of the conflict between hope and hopelessness. The characters in it truly face that dynamic time after time. The central figure is Jean Valjean, a man who is convicted of stealing bread to feed his family in the midst of pre-Revolutionary France. He serves 7 years for his crime and comes out bitter and hopeless. But in an encounter with a priest he suddenly

regains hope and turns his life around. He becomes a factory owner and mayor of a small town.

Unknown to him a young woman who works in the factory, Fantine, gets fired for refusing the advances of the foreman. She has had a child with a lover and the girl is a sickly child who is cared for by thieving innkeepers, and in order to pay for her expenses Fantine is

forced into prostitution. She becomes ill and as she faces her own death she sings a song that captures the terrible turn her life has taken from hope to hopelessness. She sings:

*I dreamed a dream in time gone by
When hope was high
And life worth living
I dreamed that love would never die
I dreamed that God would be forgiving.*

*Then I was young and unafraid
And dreams were made and used
And wasted
There was no ransom to be paid
No song unsung
No wine untasted.*

*But the tigers come at night
With their voices soft as thunder
As they tear your hope apart
As they turn your dream to shame.*

*And still
I dream he'll come to me
That we will live the years together
But there are dreams that cannot be
And there are storms
We cannot weather...*

*I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I'm living
so different now from what it seemed
Now life has killed
The dream I dreamed.*

Now I wonder how many of you have heard of Susan Boyle? She is the media sensation who appeared on “Britain’s Got Talent,” and whose performance over 70 million people have now seen

on “Youtube.” If you are one of the two or three in the world who haven’t seen or heard about her let me tell you about her.

Susan Boyle is a 47 year-old woman from Scotland who I first heard described as a Mrs. Doubtfire without the good looks. She came on this show, which is a talent contest judged by three judges – two of which are those nasty Brits we Americans have come to know on shows here – Simon Cowell and Piers Morgan. When she comes out you would think she is the most hopeless contestant that could ever appear on a talent show. The crowd is ready to turn on her at first sight. The judges can’t believe she is even there, you can tell from their expressions and then she tells them she is going to sing this song from Les Mis – “I Dreamed a Dream,” which is about the hardest song to sing you can imagine. A set-up for a disaster at best and a laugh at her expense at worst, right? Well, let me share the video with you and if you aren’t in tears or almost in tears by the end of it, you better check your heart and see if it is still beating.

[VIDEO CLIP]

What Susan Boyle has done is shown us why hope is powerful enough to break through any hopelessness we might face. Now, surely, she is not facing some life-threatening illness. And no, Susan Boyle is not, as far as we know, living with the kind of personal debt that might cause a person to commit a murder-suicide on her family. But she would certainly, at first glance,

have no hope of being a professional singer. Yet, she shows no sign of hopelessness and she steps up and “sticks the landing” as they say in Olympic gymnastic parlance.

Relate this to the Scripture this morning by thinking about the situation of the two people walking on that road to Emmaus. They are as good as buried in a tomb of hopelessness. They have watched their beloved friend and master be arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified. They hear a strange report that he has risen, and yet their hopelessness will not let them hope that such a thing could be true. As they walk along they encounter a stranger who asks them why they are so downcast. They explain what happened to Jesus and they say, “we had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel.” They “had hoped.” In other words they no longer had hope, they were as buried in a tomb of hopelessness as Jesus himself was after his crucifixion.

But their hopelessness is shattered by this encounter for in it they discover the presence of the risen Christ. They experience him in the same way we can. Let me share three things that this story tells us about God’s power to overcome hopelessness.

First, the resurrection is the promise that God has the power to break open the tomb of hopelessness. When we proclaim the resurrection of Christ we are saying God is more powerful than any tomb, even the tomb of hopelessness. The world tries every way it can to entomb us in hopelessness. It

brings disaster, disease, and death. It taunts us with false hope, false security, and false idols and then shows us just how false they are just to make us fall further into hopelessness. But God has the power to free us from that tomb and it is the power of the resurrection and it is at work now. It is not just a “pie-in-the-sky-in-the-sweet-bye-and-bye.” The power of the resurrection is present now and it is the promise that God has the power to set us free from the tomb of hopelessness.

Secondly, the resurrection is God’s promise to make all things and all people as they should be. It is a promise of justice in the face of injustice. It is the promise of transformation of systems and people. The resurrection is the power of God to not only “redeem Israel,” as those two on the road to Emmaus had hoped, but redeem all creation. The resurrection gives me hope because it is the promise that one day I will not be as I am, I will be as God fully intended me to be. It is the promise that Susan Boyle will be as beautiful to our eyes as she is to our ears. Resurrection is the promise that God will make all things new. It is the promise, as Paul said, that we may not all die, but we shall all be changed... from glory into glory.

Third, the resurrection is the promise that the Risen Christ is accessible to us all. The story of Emmaus is the story that we might not all encounter the risen Christ in bodily form, but we can encounter him in something as simple as word and

sacrament. The worship of the church is the act of putting ourselves into the presence of the risen Christ. These few minutes on a Sunday morning are the vehicle God uses to make the promise of the presence of Christ known. That's not to say that we will all necessarily experience the spirit of the risen Christ at every worship service. It would be great if it was! It certainly is our hope, and our desire! But the truth is sometimes – though he is here – we just don't experience it. That's okay. We still need to be here because we are called to be the community of hope. We need each other to embody that hope.

I need you when I am struggling with my own tomb of hopelessness, and you need me and we need each other because we never know when one of us will reveal the risen Christ to someone else. We are the community of hope. We are the community of the risen Christ. In us God seeks to reveal the risen Christ in the word and sacrament we share in worship. Here God seeks to reveal the risen Christ so that we can break out of any tomb of hopelessness that might try to hold us.

All of us have dreamed dreams and seen them killed. All of us have known the tigers come at night and devour our hopes. But God's power is greater than those tombs and we must be the bearers of that hope, we must be witnesses to the risen Christ, and we must be the community of hope for one another and for all those who come into our midst. AMEN.