

[BLANK] He is risen! [CONGREGATION RESPONDS “HE IS RISEN, INDEED!”] You didn’t think that Easter was over, did you? [CHURCH CALENDAR CLOCK] If you look at our church calendar clock, you’ll see that Easter has just begun! Yes, we had an amazing and joyful Easter, and yes, we celebrated Easter in our church and in our hearts, as we allowed God to start the inside job that is faith in the risen Christ. We had a blast, didn’t we, Amen? Now that blast continues, in the Christian season we call Eastertide. [BLANK]

It only makes sense, doesn’t it? If you go to the movies and see a hit film, you can be pretty sure that someone will make a sequel. Great stories live on, and Easter is the greatest story of all, so, of course it’s going to live on. The story of Easter lives on, as God calls us, simple people in a complicated world, right into the heart of God’s story. We are the sequel to God’s resurrection story, and it’s up to us to believe, not just in God’s story, but in the power that God has given us to live it. Would you pray with me, please. [PRAYER]

[TOM’S PLACE] Not long after I became your Pastor, I started to go down to Tom’s Place for lunch. I can’t say that they’ve put a plaque on my stool at the lunch counter, yet, but folks there are getting to know me, and I’m getting to know them. I see old folks, young folks, kids, families - you name it. I even put ashes on the foreheads of some folks there on Ash Wednesday! I love being a part of this community, in all of the places where I find people who need God’s hope.

What sticks in my mind about Tom’s, though, is someone who I saw sitting at the counter on one of my first lunch visits. He was an older man, and he was having a cheeseburger, and some of Tom’s homemade french fries. When the man got his lunch, he just sat there, and stared at his burger and fries for a while, and I must say, he had one of the saddest faces that I had ever seen. It was a face without any hope. It was a face of a man who seemed as if he had lost track of who he was, and what the story of his life was. All he seemed to have was his lunch in front of him, and the clock above the lunch counter, which runs backwards. After that, all bets were off. [BLANK]

We probably all know someone like that man with the burger and fries. That “someone” may even be us, sometimes. Life is a miracle, life can be a joy, life can be filled with all sorts of possibilities, but there can be times when we have a hard time believing that the story of our lives can have a good ending, much less a sequel. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated fifty years ago this past Wednesday, once said, “Hope is the final refusal to give up.” We all want to hold on to the Christian hope of Easter. We all want to never give up on God’s hope. But how can we do that, in a world that seems to be so determined to rob everyday people of the simplest of human hopes? How can God’s inside job of faith take hold of us, and never let go?

Today’s reading from John’s gospel is a powerful reminder of how God works in our lives to give us hope that will not fail us, hope that will always send us towards God’s hopes for us, and for God’s world. On Easter, we were reading from Mark’s gospel, the oldest surviving story of Jesus and his followers. Mark’s Easter story is raw, and

challenging. In its original form, it leaves us at an empty tomb, with angels telling the frightened women, who discovered the tomb early Easter morning, to have hope, and purpose. In John's gospel, the story continues, and takes on new power and meaning, as the risen Jesus comes to the men who followed him.

These men had been hiding. They had locked themselves into a house in Jerusalem, hoping to avoid the Jewish and Roman authorities who had captured, condemned, and crucified Jesus. They were not hopeful. They had no cheeseburgers and fries to stare at, but they were certainly staring at a story for their lives that seemed to have come to a sad and empty ending. Jesus, they believed, was dead. They believed the hope that Jesus had brought them was dead. There seemed to be no possible ending to their story that was worth living.

But John's gospel tells us something very important about how Easter changes the way we live God's story. You see, these men were not dead; they were just acting like they were dead. These men were not locked in a tomb, behind a large stone that they could not roll away. They were behind locked doors, doors that they had locked themselves. These men had not come to the end of their stories. They had simply come to the end of being able to imagine a next chapter in their stories, a story that seemed to have ended in failure, shame, guilt, anger, and sorrow.

God doesn't accept the limits of our ability to imagine our story. God does not wait for us even to unlock the door to God's story. When we least expect God to care, when we least expect God to conquer our condemnation, and self-condemnation, when we least expect God to enter our lives, God will just walk in.

[LOCK] And this is exactly what happened to the followers of Jesus in John's gospel. They were hiding from God's ability to imagine a story worth believing, a story worth living, literally locking out the possibilities of God's power in their lives. The risen Jesus would have none of this. He simply walked into the room where his disciples were, and said, "Peace to you." Where people who had followed Jesus for years could only imagine fear, and death, and an ending, God, as Jesus, the risen Christ, walked in, and declared their false story to be dead in the light of God's living presence. For those needing salvation, God brings peace, peace that the love of the risen God, Jesus Christ, proclaims to the world, even today. [BLANK]

Why does God bother with us? Why does God bring us a story of peace, and love, and hope, where the world promises only fear, and pain, and death? What Jesus said next to his followers makes God's purpose in the risen Jesus perfectly clear: God wants to send us into the world, so that the world will know that there is no reason to fear believing in God's hope. Jesus said, "Just as the Father sent me, I send you." Immediately, Jesus breathed into his followers the presence of God's Holy Spirit, the living power of God that unites us with God the Creator, God the risen Jesus, and with all of God's people, to save God's world, in the living image of God's love. We are to believe in God, so that the world might believe in God. The God who brings us peace wants us to bring God's peace to everyone, just like Jesus.

You see, it's not just that Easter isn't over. Easter isn't over, for a reason. Easter isn't over just because God is not done with us. Easter isn't over, because God isn't done with the world. When you look at a person like the man at Tom's, and you find in your heart the ability to believe in the hope that God's peace brings to you and the world, then you are a part of God's plan to deliver that man, and all people, and even the earth itself, from the death that is a life without the hope of God's story. When you look at your aches, your frustrations with your loved ones, with the world, and with yourself, and you allow yourself to believe in the peace that God is offering you, then you unlock the possibilities that God's Holy Spirit can work in you to find peace, love, and hope, beyond the limitations that our imaginations place in our minds and hearts.

And when, like doubting Thomas, you resent others who know the peace of faith, and you finally respond to God's constant invitation to touch and believe in the wounds that God has felt on a cross, even for your sake, then, you, too, may come to believe, and see that God's wounds are like your wounds, and like the whole world's wounds, and that your pain of disbelief is the ultimate lock that you are perfectly free to unlock, whenever you are ready to respond to God's constant invitation to believe.

And if all of these are not enough for you to believe, then please remember the ending to this chapter of John's gospel: [QUOTE] "Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it." [BLANK] God provided far more revealing signs worth believing in through Jesus than can ever possibly be written in the story of any one life. Some of those signs are waiting to be written in your life, right now. Let God finish your story for you, in Jesus, so that you may believe, and be sent to help the world to believe. Amen.