

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
April 24, 2011 – Easter Sunday

Weakness Turned Into Strength
Matthew 28:1-10

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Last summer, I had the privilege of attending the Presbyterian Youth Triennium with four youth from our church. This event takes place every three years at Purdue University in Indiana. It was quite a memorable experience – imagine over 5000 youth and leaders coming together for worship, fellowship, and fun. Worship services felt like rock concerts. It was so much fun.

At the last worship service, Tony Campolo preached the sermon. He told a story of a kid who, because of a terrible automobile accident, ended up losing his left arm. His father, trying to cheer him up, told his son he would do anything for him. One day the kid said, “You know, Dad, I’ve heard you can learn judo and do it with one arm. I’d like to learn judo.”

So the father got him a judo master, and the kid learned some moves. But after about 2 or 3 lessons, the master had him focus on just one move, and they worked on this move day after day, hour after hour. At the end of two months, the master said, “There’s a tournament coming up. I want you

to enter it.” The kid said, “You’ve got to be kidding! I’ve only been taking judo for a couple of months. Other than basic moves I only know one really good move.” But the master convinced him to give it a try.

They went to the tournament. And this one-armed kid surprised himself by winning his first two matches. The third round proved to be more difficult, but after some time, his opponent became impatient and charged; the boy deftly used his one move to win that match as well. He couldn’t believe his good fortune. Still amazed by his success, the boy was now in the finals. He was up against the champion. This time, his opponent was bigger, stronger, and more experienced. For a while, the boy appeared to be overmatched. Concerned that the boy might get hurt, the referee called a time-out. He was about to stop the match when the judo master intervened.

"No," the master insisted, "Let him continue."

Soon after the match resumed, his opponent made a critical mistake: He dropped his guard. Instantly, the boy used his move to pin him. The boy had won the match and the tournament. He was the champion.

On the way home he said to the master, “I don’t understand it. I’ve only been taking judo for two months. I don’t have a left arm. And I just won a tournament. How is this possible?”

The master said, “You won for two reasons. First, the one move you do now is one of the most effective moves in all of judo. The second reason why you won is the only defense against that move is to grab your opponent’s left arm.”¹

That’s a great insight into how God works. Jesus died on the cross and was put in a tomb. On the first day of the week, Matthew’s Gospel says Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the tomb and got the shock of their lives: God had transformed weakness into strength, and death into life.

That’s not what the women were expecting. What they expected to see was Jesus’ body in the grave because they believed they were still living in a world where death reigned supreme. Benjamin Franklin once said, “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” But because of Easter, half of that equation is now wrong. In the old world, death always had the last word. The powers in charge knew if something troubling got in their way, like a call for peace, justice, or mercy that threatened the ruling party, the world could just kill it and that would be that. But the old world has undergone a seismic shift because of Jesus’ resurrection. Death no longer has the last word.

¹ As told by Tony Campolo, Presbyterian Youth Triennium, July 24, 2010.

As the two women came to the tomb, they unknowingly crossed over from the old world, where what's dead stayed dead, into the new world of resurrection and life. Notice, the angel says "Come, see the place where he *lay*" (v. 6). Past tense! Where he had lain, but where he lay no longer. He's not here, for he's been raised. The only thing to see now is the empty tomb. This is not a case where Jesus only appeared to die and then was resuscitated. This is a case where Jesus really died, was buried, and then was resurrected – he was brought back from death to life, an act only God can do.

Jesus of Nazareth, who had been as dead as a doornail on Friday, was no longer in his tomb, and the world was shaken and turned upside down. We see that in the reaction of the Roman guards. Only Matthew's Gospel records the presence of the guards to secure the tomb. As one commentator notes, these soldiers had "what must surely be the unluckiest assignment in military history – making sure that Jesus stayed in the grave."² It was too much for them – when they see the angel, they literally quake with fear. The Greek word translated "shook" is directly related to the Greek word for "earthquake" found in v. 2, when there was a great earthquake at the tomb. The guards quake and pass out from fear. Matthew makes a little joke here

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press 1997, p. 322.

at their expense: they “became like dead men” (28:4). Do you see the irony? These soldiers who were so used to striking fear into anyone who would challenge the Roman Empire were guarding a dead man who was supposed to stay that way, but when he is resurrected back to life, it’s the guards who quake with fear and become like dead men. The dead one is alive, and the live ones become dead.

While the guards shook with fear, the angel tells the women, “Do not be afraid.” On one level, the angel is simply reassuring the women not to be afraid of his shining presence. But on another, more profound level, he’s telling them that in the new world of resurrection, they no longer need to be afraid of anything anymore, because in life and in death we belong to the risen Christ.

It’s striking what different messages the angel sends at the tomb. To the women the angel says, “Do not be afraid.” To the guards the angel sends the message, “Be afraid, be very afraid, because everything your world has been built on has now been shaken to its very core by the earthquake caused by the resurrection.”

After telling the women, "Do not be afraid," the angel says, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee." Then as the women leave the tomb "with fear and great joy," Jesus meets

them, saying, "Greetings!" The word Jesus uses, *chairete*, is a standard Greek greeting, but the root of the word means "joy" or "rejoice."

So the women do rejoice. They come to Jesus, take hold of his feet, and worship him. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is worshiped. The women (v. 9) and later on the disciples (v. 17) worship him, as did the Magi at the beginning of this Gospel (2:2, 11). This is no small matter. These are Jewish women who know that Israel is commanded (in the very first of the Ten Commandments) to worship nothing and no one but God. They give to Jesus that which we're only supposed to give to God – their worship.

Afterwards, Jesus reiterates the angel's message: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." It's significant that Jesus promises that he'll meet his disciples in Galilee, because this promise repeats a statement Jesus made before his death in Matthew 26. After the Lord's supper, when they had gone out to the Mount of Olives, Jesus told his disciples that they would all desert him that night. Then he says, "But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee" (26:32). Matthew is showing us that the risen Christ is the same historical Jesus who ate with his disciples and was crucified on Good Friday.

Since that first Easter, God has continued to transform weakness into strength, defeat into victory, and death into life. When I was in seminary

about 20 years ago, I was able to serve as an intern at the Young Nak Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea.

At the time, Young Nak was the largest Presbyterian Church in the world, with around 60,000 members. Way beyond a mega-church, we call that a meta-church. Young Nak was an amazing place to work. They had 25 pastors and 23 additional assistant pastors on staff. There were five Sunday morning services with five different full choirs, as well as a Sunday evening service. The church operated its own high school, orphanage, prayer retreat center, and senior citizens home. I joined a weekend retreat just for graduating seniors from high school – there were over 500 students who attended.

To state the obvious, Young Nak Presbyterian Church was a mighty, impressive organization. But it didn't start that way. Instead, it began in a much humbler situation: in a weak, impoverished country. The Young Nak Church was established by Rev. Kyung-Chik Han and 27 fellow believers who had escaped from the persecution of communism in the north. The first worship service was held on December 2, 1945, shortly after the Japanese occupation of Korea ended with their defeat in World War II. But then came the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953 and devastated Korea.

In 1954, shortly after the Korean War had ended, Young Nak Church was in the process of rebuilding itself. Many Korean Christians who had lost everything in the war, including their churches and homes, made a commitment to come together and build a new church as quickly as possible.

Rev. Robert Boyd Munger, who at one point was the pastor at University Presbyterian Church here in Seattle, visited Young Nak Church at that time, and he was amazed to see thousands of people come to worship in a freezing building that had no heat. He asked the pastor of Young Nak, Dr. Han, why so many people had come to worship in such harsh conditions. Dr. Han replied that many of these people had given money to build the church before they had even built their homes. He then turned to Bob Munger and said, "Even though we do not have much, we have Jesus Christ, and he is enough."

From those humble beginnings, today Young Nak Church has more members than all of the Presbyterian Churches in the state of Washington combined. That's because we're talking about a God who's even wiser and more powerful than the judo master who can transform a one-armed boy into a judo champion, a God who is able to turn weakness into strength, defeat into victory, and even death into life. The world is indeed different because

of the resurrection. The good news is that Jesus Christ is still alive, he is here with us, and he is enough.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! ***He is risen indeed! Alleluia!***