

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“If for this Life Only...”**

**Luke 24:1 – 12
1 Corinthians 15:19 – 26**

Easter

March 27, 2016

I'm sure that many of you, maybe even *most* of you, have seen or at least heard about the movie, *Forrest Gump*. *Forrest Gump* came out in 1994 and starred Tom Hanks, Sally Field, Robin Wright, and a bunch of other up-and-coming performers. The film received rave reviews... with most movie critics gushing about how great it was. And the Academy Award people validated the high opinion of the critics, by honoring *Forrest Gump* with an armload of Oscars, for Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director, Best Film Editing, and so on.

And many of our friends and fellow church members in Ashland, Ohio, where we were living at the time, were also quick to jump on the *Forrest Gump* bandwagon. “*You gotta see this movie!*” they’d tell me. “*It’s fantastic! One of the best movies I’ve ever seen!*” One church family in particular went so far as to tell me, “*Pastor Rick, this movie will change your life. You will never be the same after you watch Forrest Gump!*”

Anyway, by the time Sylvia and I made it to the theater to finally see *Forrest Gump*, a couple of weeks after it had come out... I was ready to be seriously touched, moved, and impressed by the film. I *wanted* to love it. I wanted to feel the same way about it that so many of our friends from church seemed to feel about it. So I got my popcorn, and my Junior Mints, and my \$4.75 small Coke... and I settled in my seat and started watching the movie. And I waited; and waited; and *waited*; for some over-arching, unifying, clarifying *point* to reveal itself. But... it never came. Or if it did come, I was way too dumb to see it! Because, to me, that movie made no sense at all! I mean, I just did not get it!

You got feathers, and chocolates, and leg braces, and ping-pong, and some poor schmuck who just happens to be on hand for all these important historical events... but there’s no point to it all! There’s no plot, no story, no moment at which you go, “*Ah! Now I get it! Now I understand! Oh, yes, what a beautiful message!*” No... to me it was just a series of disconnected humorous vignettes; which seemed to me to be more about the filmmakers wanting to show how they could place Tom Hanks into film-clips featuring John Kennedy and LBJ, than telling a story that made any sense. I think the only part of the film that I really liked, was when Forrest Gump took up running... and started jogging all over the country, for no apparent reason. I had just begun training for my first marathon at that time, so, at that point in the movie, I was like, “*Hey, cool! He’s a runner!*” But other than that...

Anyway, when the movie ended, and the final credits were rolling, I turned to Sylvia and said, “*That’s it? That’s the end? I paid \$4.75 for a small Coke, for that?*” I felt disillusioned, disappointed, let down. After everything I’d heard, it just seemed like there *had* to be more to that movie... than what I had just seen. And maybe you’ve had a similar experience with some movie or other, over the years.

Now, I want you to keep my Forrest Gump movie experience on the front-burner of your mind; and understand that it is *that* feeling, that sense of being let down, and disillusioned, and wondering what it's all about... that was being sensed on the morning of Easter number one; by pretty much everyone who knew Jesus, and loved Him. Only this wasn't a bunch of people who were shaking their heads because they didn't get the point of some movie; this was a group of tired, scared, thoroughly discombobulated friends and disciples... who, with the death and burial of Jesus, had seen their entire world fall to pieces.

These were people who'd spent the better part of the past three years with Jesus; following Him around, listening to His parables and sermons, oohing and aahing over His miracles, and pretty much staking their futures on the hope that He was going to bring Israel back to the glory she'd known under King David. They'd risked running afoul of the various Jewish powers-that-be; they'd flirted with financial disaster by walking away from their jobs and careers; they'd looked like fools and ninnyes in the eyes of the Pharisees, who didn't hold Jesus in the same high regard that they did. They'd put everything on the line because they *thought*... they thought that Jesus was going to win the day. And when they saw Him get arrested; and put on trial; and convicted of blasphemy and treason; and mocked, and spat upon, and beaten up, and executed on a Roman cross... it felt like the biggest wipe-out loss in history. Jesus was dead; and their life, as they knew it, was over. *Over.*

And now all there was for them to do was to hide out, back in the Upper Room where a few days earlier they'd shared the Last Supper with a much more optimistic-looking Jesus; where they would hope and pray that the Jewish and Roman authorities, having finally gotten Jesus out of the picture, would let them off the hook, and not want to get them out of the picture, too.

That was the general state of affairs among the disciples and other friends of Jesus... as the sun came up on Easter number one. Not a bunch of people bundled up on a beach, drinking hot chocolate and singing happy Jesus songs. No, more like a bunch of people cowering in terror... without the first clue in the world what to do now; now that their Lord, their friend, their *hero*, was dead and buried. And that's when they start sounding like me, after watching *Forrest Gump*. As the credits roll at the end of Jesus' life, His disciples are saying, "*That's it? That's the end? We gave everything we had for three long years for this? Where's the point? Where's the purpose? Where's the 'Aha!' moment that's going to make it all make sense?*" Make no mistake: these guys were completely flummoxed.

And, you know, it was just about that very moment that Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and a bunch of other women, came bursting into that Upper Room with the message of the angels; *that Jesus won't be found among the dead... because He's not dead but living... that He's risen from the dead as He said He would... and oh my gosh isn't this wonderful news?*

The women came bearing the good news: it's not *Forrest Gump* after all! This story has a *point*! Jesus' mission has a *meaning*! Our Lord hasn't failed, He's *succeeded*! Stop running the credits, because this show *is not over*! It was fantastic, joyous, beautiful! But the rest of those poor disciples were so Gump-i-fied by the shock of Jesus' crucifixion, that they couldn't hear a thing that those ladies were saying. They were still so stuck in the pointless disastrousness of it all, that the words of Mary Magdalene went in one apostolic ear, and right out the other.

And they responded, as men throughout history have often responded to women, by saying, basically, “*Ahhh... shaddup!*” Luke puts it a bit more diplomatically, by telling us simply that the disciples “*did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.*”

But, you know how they were acting; and you know what they were saying. “*Girls! Girls! You’ve had a shock. We’ve all had a shock. It was probably just some neighborhood kids playing a prank on you, and you fell for it. Nobody’s risen from the dead, and we’ve got important plans to make. So, Mary, please; go to the kitchen, bring some gefilte fish, and let us guys figure out what to do next. Okay?*”

Of course, Luke goes on to tell us that Peter, maybe thinking that, nutty as the women obviously are, he’d better go and at least have a look at Jesus’ tomb... runs and checks things out for himself, and finds the scene pretty much just as the women had described it.

At the time, Peter is perplexed, or “wondering,” as Luke puts it. But in a just a very little while, he and all the other disciples, will have all doubt put to rest; as they encounter the very risen, and very much alive, Jesus Himself. And *then* they’ll understand that there’s more to the story of Jesus; and more to the story of their own lives; than they ever thought or imagined. Then it will make sense; then it will add up; then they’ll finally realize that the news is even better than they thought!

And at that point, they’ll start making sure to remember the gospel message; and they’ll start telling that story to anyone and everyone who would listen; and as time went by, they’d start to write that message down in books that we today know as Matthew and Mark, Luke and John. And the Christian community would be formed; and the Christian church would continue the mission which Jesus had started; and two thousand years later, you and I would be here in this sanctuary on Easter morning... proclaiming one more time that, as Mary Magdalene said, “*Jesus is living, and not among the dead!*”

So all is well, right? Jesus is risen, the bad news has become good, and everything now makes sense, yes? Well, not exactly. Sure, we gather together to proclaim Jesus’ resurrection, and to celebrate it; and that’s good, and right, and proper. And, as Christians, even if we can’t always completely get our minds around the physics of the resurrection, we still believe that, on some crucial level that maybe we don’t completely grasp, Jesus *was* dead... but is *now* alive.

We know that the disciples weren’t nuts; we know that there’s no convincing evidence that the apostles were either mistaken or deliberately trying to deceive us; the most rigorous critical examination of the resurrection hope of the early church leads to the conclusion that these people really did experience Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. So unless you insist on being unreasonably skeptical, and refuse to take even the tiniest objective look at the New Testament evidence, you can say, with complete intellectual integrity... that the gospel proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection is *true*.

But, still... sometimes, in the back of our mind, when we’re lying awake in the middle of the night too anxious and restless to sleep, we feel some of that post-Forrest Gumpian discontent that, somehow, the picture’s not making any sense. Yes, we believe the gospel; yes we believe that Jesus has risen; yes we believe that the church has us pointed in more or less the right direction. But then some idiot blows up a bomb in an airport or a restaurant; and we wonder, what the heck is going on? Innocent victims suffer senseless deaths in wars, acts of terrorism, and natural disasters; and we worry, is God minding the store here, or what? Greed, hypocrisy, corruption, and

evil seem sometimes to be the most successful game around; and we struggle to find any justice, any grace, any hope at all.

We watch our children suffer; we see our bodies ravaged by illness and age; we struggle at work, at school, at home; we sin, we foul up, we bow under the weight of our secret guilt; we grieve our losses. We're acutely and painfully aware that this life is very far from perfect; and in that awareness, the joy and the power of Jesus' resurrection begins to ebb away... just like the tide out on Cooper's Beach. And it's *Forrest Gump* all over again.

So, on this Easter Sunday morning, here's what we need to remember: all of the angst, frustration, worry, grief, fear, and confusion that we sometimes feel in our own lives... the disciples of Jesus felt in their lives, too. And not just *before* Jesus was resurrected, but *afterwards*, too! We need to remember that these people who were eyewitnesses of the formerly dead, and newly risen Jesus... who knew for sure that His mission and ministry had been 100% successful; these people still experienced the same ups and downs that we do, they still had the same unanswered questions that we have, they still bore the same griefs and sorrows that we bear.

All of the crud that we must deal with as finite, human creatures, they had to deal with, too! And they were able to do that because they knew that the resurrection of Jesus was *not* just for *this* life... it was also for the life to come. Or, to put it another way, they knew that what Jesus *accomplished* with His resurrection was not just to make *this* life perfect; no, it was to open the way for you and me to enter the life to come... which *will* be perfect!

This is the great truth that Paul the Apostle had in mind when, in our lesson today from First Corinthians, he told his friends that, "*If for this life only we have hoped, we are of all people most to be pitied!*"

In essence, Paul was saying, "*Hey, I've suffered a lot in this life, in order to follow Jesus! A lot of my friends have abandoned me, the Jews who used to respect me now want to kill me. Like Jesus Himself, I've been arrested, mocked, beaten up, and tortured. My devotion to Jesus has turned my life into a king-sized wringer, which squeezes my guts out every day. And, if that's all there is... I'm an idiot! And you should feel sorry for me!*"

"But that's not all there is! Because Jesus is risen! And because Jesus is risen, this life I'm living right now takes on a whole new meaning. My life, no matter how full of pain and disappointment it may be, can still be lived with hope, and with peace, and with joy; because Jesus has given new life to me. Resurrection life; eternal life; life like it was always meant to be... lived in the new creation of God's blessed kingdom."

You see, Paul lived his life with one foot on earth, and one foot in heaven; and so, too, did those first disciples of Jesus. And so, too, should we, because Jesus has come to give us both: a meaningful life now, and resurrection life in the world to come. And when we can keep our eyes on *both* sides of that equation, well, maybe we won't be able to make sense out of *everything* that happens in life; but we'll darn sure be able to make a lot more sense of things than we often do! And *that* is a great gift... that makes it possible to keep hanging in there, even when nothing's going the way we want.

It's Easter Sunday; Jesus is still risen; and He has promised that one day, so shall we also be! That is the truth; and therein lies our hope! Today, tomorrow, and all the days of our life!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!