

A THIRD DAY GOD

An Easter Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Exodus 19:10-11, 16-17, 1 Samuel 5:1-4, 7
Luke 24:1-12

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We are all hoppers. We are creatures who cannot stop wishing. We are four-leaf-clover collectors, and we enjoy stories about genies coming out of a bottle to grant three wishes. After a turkey dinner, a couple of us might grab the ends of the wishbone from the turkey and break it with the understanding that whoever gets the longer piece will get his or her wish. We teach our children to make a wish before blowing out their birthday candles. And don't we all remember fondly that chirpy, irrepressible character named Jiminy Cricket from the Disney animated movie, "Pinocchio" singing, "When you wish upon a star; makes no difference who you are; anything your heart desires will come to you..."

We all hope. But **there are two types of hope – hoping for something and hoping in Someone.** When we hope for something, we are hoping for a particular outcome. "I hope I get that job, that house, that new I-phone, that girlfriend, that man-of-my-dreams." Sometimes the thing we hope for is life or death: "I hope she comes out of her depression; I hope he hasn't started drinking again; I hope it's not cancer."

Hoping can break our hearts, because one day every THING we hope for will eventually disappoint us and fail to be what we need most. Every circumstance, every situation, every object that we hope for is going to wear out, give out, fall apart, melt down, or go away. When that happens, the question then is about your deeper hope, your foundational hope, your hope when you are eventually disappointed by all your other hopes. Today, **we have gathered on this Easter Sunday because we either already believe or we want to believe that there is Someone in whom we can put our hope and in whom we will never be disappointed.** When it comes to such hope, all of Scripture points us in the direction of a third day God.

And so, beginning with the Old Testament, and the story of the Exodus, we see the recently departed from Egypt Israelites being told to prepare for God's coming to them on the "*third day*" (Exodus 19:10-11). When that "*third day*" arrived, God appeared on Mount Sinai, and it was dramatic (Exodus 19:16-17). The mountain was engulfed by smoke; there was "violent" shaking and the sound of thunder. Moses received from God a set of rules we know as the Ten Commandments. Those rules directed the people of Israel on how to live a new life of faith. According to scripture, that day, the third day became a turning point not just for Israel, but for all the kingdoms of the world.

The second Old Testament story read this morning is much less familiar and may seem odd to you, but sometimes I like to throw in something unfamiliar, so I invite you to bear with me because it is also a "*third day*" story. It happened after the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years. They had finally gotten to the Promised Land, but it wasn't as easy as they thought it would be. They go into battle against the Philistines hoping for a victory, but they lose.

Afterward, they debrief and ask themselves what happened and what they might have done wrong. They also asked, "Where was God? We were counting on God, but God didn't give us what we expected."

Then somebody gets an idea and says, "Let's go into battle with the Philistines again, but this time we'll use our secret weapon. We'll bring the Ark of the Covenant into battle" (1 Samuel 4:3). The Ark was a beautiful box the Israelites had built in which they kept the tablets of the Ten Commandments as well as some of the manna God had provided during their wilderness time. But it was not just a storage box, because for them it also represented the "presence of God." If they brought it into battle, God would never let the enemy capture it because that would be like capturing God, and God wouldn't let that happen. They think they can set up a situation in which God will be forced to give them the victory they want. They thought they could manipulate God to produce a certain outcome. There is a strange theology behind this way of thinking. But the truth is that **you cannot keep God in a box of your own making. And you cannot force God to give you the THING you are hoping for.**

So, the Israelites go into battle a second time, and it's a disaster. Their army is devastated, and worst of all, the Ark of the Covenant is captured. This is unthinkable. God's presence, God's glory is now gone; and their hope is crushed. The people of Israel are desperate, and they don't know what to do. They feel helpless. But it is when they have lost everything that they had been hoping for that this odd story gets very interesting.

The Philistines take the Ark of the Covenant to the city of Ashdod. They place it inside their temple and right beside the statue of their God, Dagon. They believe that Dagon has prevailed over Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. After a big feast and lots of celebrating night falls and everybody goes home. But the next morning, the second day, the priests of Ashdod discover that the statue of Dagon has fallen on his face on the ground right before the ark of the Lord. Maybe it was an accident, but it looks suspiciously as if Dagon is bowing down to the God of Israel. Since this doesn't look good, the priests prop the statue back up, and the victory celebration continues throughout the second day. Then night falls and everybody goes home. Dagon is once again alone with Yahweh. The next morning, the third-day morning, the priests not only find Dagon on the ground, but this time his head and his hands are broken off.

In this three-day story, the first day was a very dark day, a day of defeat and death in which it looked like the glory of God was gone forever. Hope was crushed and life seemed meaningless. Then there was the second day, the day Dagon falls down but gets propped back up. It is a day in which a hidden battle is taking place; it is a day of ambiguity and anxiety. But on the third day, the story takes a dramatic turn. The idol has not simply fallen, it has been destroyed. God had acted, captivity ended, and God returned in power and glory to his people.

In the Bible, one of the ways you can divide up stories is by their time frame. One kind of story is the **forty-day story**. These are usually "wait-around-and-learn-patience" stories. The focus of these stories is on the need for people to be faithful as they wait, watch, and pray. Forty-day periods of time are

about learning and persevering; they are about facing difficult times and growing in faith. Another kind of story is the **three-day story**. These are stories about crisis and urgency. The focus is not on the need for a human response, but on God coming to the rescue. **The third day is God's Day – it is a day of deliverance, hope and new beginnings.** On the first and second days, things may be messed up, our hope may be crushed, our hearts may be broken, but the second day is not the end of the story for a better day is coming. A third day is about to dawn, and God will make it a very different kind of day – a day of hope.

Time and again scripture bears witness to a third day God. The third day is the day when the people of Israel come to the mountains and the mountains shake and the journey to the Promised Land begins. The third day is the day when God's power is revealed, and idols like Dagon come tumbling down. And the third day is the day stones are rolled away, and tombs are found to be empty. Clearly, our Gospel lesson on this Easter Sunday is a third day story.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father" (John 1:14). Nobody could contain Jesus. Nobody could use him, not the politicians, not the Zealots, not the religious leaders. Nobody could manipulate him to get what they wanted. Nobody could shut him up. So, in the end, those who were in power took him and lashed him with a whip. They hung him on a cross, pierced him with a sword and then laid his body in a tomb. That was the first day – a very dark day – a day of death. His followers were crushed. They had seen the glory of God for a while, but suddenly it was gone, and that absence felt devastating.

The second day didn't look much better. Pontius Pilate posted a guard to stand watch over the tomb, because he thought he was in control. He wanted to make sure that nothing happened – that nobody came in and did anything with the body (Matthew 27:62-66). He wanted to make sure that Jesus stayed in that tomb, but Jesus was not a tomb kind of guy – he couldn't be kept in a box. Death was not a defeat for him. Instead, his death set right between God and us. Yes, the second day was also a dark day – a day of continued sadness and despair. But it was a day when a type of battle was taking place behind the scenes, a mysterious battle that we couldn't see.

But the point is that the story of Jesus is a three-day story. Of course, there have been and still are some who say the third day never happened. They point to tombs and bones, to brave plots and deception. And yet, countless people over the centuries have courageously disputed those claims, putting their own lives on the line because of their belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They have witnessed to a hope they would have never had if there had been no resurrection. For it was on the third day, resurrection day, new life day that the followers of Jesus knew for certain, beyond a doubt that there was Someone they could hope in for the rest of their lives.

It is a matter of historical record that once there was a time when there was a little group of frightened, foolish men and women. They didn't know how it happened; they weren't really expecting it, and yet the third day came. The third day is the only explanation for how that little group of scared and faltering men and women became the church in which people would submit themselves to

being hung on crosses, fed to lions, and pierced with a sword. They would give up their lives. If the third day had not come... if what happened were not true... if anybody could have pointed to bones, they would have pointed. Nobody is going to sacrifice and die for bones, but for a third day God, people would give their own lives because they now understood what was on the other side of the third day. **To believe in a third day God is to hope in Someone we can count on to save us and usher us into a new life both in this life and in the life to come.**

Easter may not be the first ever and only dramatic third-day intervention by God event in the Bible, but for those first disciples, it was the most profoundly impactful, life-changing event of their lives. Jesus' followers who used to observe the seventh day Sabbath began instead to observe on Sunday because Sunday is the third day – resurrection day. The third day became known as the "Lord's Day." And ever since the tomb was found empty, followers over the centuries have continued to have their own risen Christ encounters of hope and new life.

The truth is that most of the time we live in a first and second day world; it's a world focused on death and filled with confusion, fear, betrayal, denial, disappointment and sorrow. But even on those days, Jesus reminds us that there is something else going on that we can't always see, and **Jesus proves to us once and for all that the third day is not wishful thinking, but a reality we can count on.** For if the third day is not today, you can be assured that it is just ahead. Now I don't know about you, but I cling to that hope. My faith and all my hope is in a third day God. It is a hope in Someone who will see us through our failures, fears, firings, defeats, divorces, illnesses, and even death. Today, we celebrate our hope in a third day God – a hope that in the end will never disappoint us. Thanks be to God, Amen!