

The God of New Beginnings

Easter Sunday

First Sunday of New Pastor, Rev. Todd Freeman

Matthew 28:1-10

Rev. Todd B. Freeman

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

March 23, 2008

Sioux City, Iowa
St. Cloud, Minnesota
Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Grand Island, Nebraska
Chicago area, Illinois
Sioux Falls, South Dakota
Dallas, Texas
Austin, Texas
Houston area, Texas
San Anselmo, California
Canyon, Texas
Fort Worth, Texas
And back to Dallas, Texas

Though it may have taken me 51 years, and all those many moves, by the grace and providence of God, I have finally made it here to Tulsa, Oklahoma!

One of the benefits of having moved that many times is that I have learned how to grow where I am planted. And even though I've been here just over one week, I can already tell that there is good soil here in which to grow.

And what an appropriate Sunday to begin our ministry together. In fact, it serves as an excellent illustration of what lies at the very heart of the Easter message - that our God is a God of new life and new beginnings.

I must admit, however, that I have found all the new beginnings in my life over the past month a bit overwhelming. But I wouldn't have it any other way! For when we truly come to realize that God is always *with* us and always *for* us, then new beginnings (and the inherent changes that accompany them) are a lot easier to cope with.

For nine years I was the pastor of the only More Light Presbyterian congregation in Grace Presbytery, which covers all of north central and north east Texas.

I still vividly recall my first Easter Sunday with that church, called Bethany Presbyterian Church in Dallas. Since the

majority of the members of that congregation (perhaps not unlike yourselves) were quite progressive theologically, I intentionally preached a sermon which focused on a traditional understanding of the Resurrection, knowing that it had probably been quite some times since they had heard a message from that particular perspective.

While there were a handful of the more traditional folks that were quite thankful about that, the sermon, needless to say, didn't go over very well.

So the next year I intentionally preached an Easter sermon from the opposite end of the theological spectrum. While the majority of progressive folks appreciated it, the sermon didn't go over very well with the more traditional folks.

Now, I'm not one who is afraid of taking risks, even from the pulpit. However, I did learn that it's probably best not to mess around too much with Easter.

So with all the many things that can be said about the profound meaning of Easter and the promises of God that are revealed in the story of the Resurrection of Jesus, I think it wise on this, my first Sunday as your new pastor, to focus on just one particularly significant (and yes, less controversial) element of the Easter message. And that is the aspect that reveals that **our God is a God of new life and new beginnings.**

This belief has wide-ranging implications - from the eternal to the present moment. Concerning the eternal, this truth is rightly the focus at every funeral or memorial service. **Our God, as a God of new beginnings, reveals through the story of the Resurrection that death does not have the final word. There is life beyond this life.** And though no one knows for certain exactly what that life will be like, we believe that it is lived eternally in the loving presence of God.

This message of hope is especially meaningful to those who grieve the loss, or impending loss, of a loved one. It is also meaningful to those who may be facing their own death. The promise of Easter, then, makes it possible to experience a sense of comfort, peace and hope even in the midst of our pain, sorrow and grief.

The promise of new beginnings that is revealed in the Easter story is that God, who created each one of us and gave us life, will continue to give us life, even in death. That's one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith.

In an issue of the *Presbyterian Outlook* a few years ago, there was an article entitled *The Significance of the Resurrection*, written by Cynthia Rigby, Professor of Theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. In explaining the church's doctrine of the resurrection she states:

The cross - and the suffering and death associated with it - are not the end of the story. Because we believe

the One who created us out of nothing will re-create us free of sin and free of sorrow, we are empowered to care about and nurture every life so loved by God, however insignificant in the eyes of the world.

New beginnings, then, pertain not only to the hereafter, but also to the here and now. This applies, for instance, to us as **individuals**. This is especially comforting when we mess up. Anyone here mess up lately? This is also comforting when current circumstances in life aren't particularly going our way.

To put this in non-theological language, our God is a God of second chances, a God of "do-overs" so to speak.

So let me ask you: **Are there any areas in your life right now in which you would like to experience a transformation of a new beginning?** I encourage you to take that to God in prayer, seeking God's wisdom and guidance. And if needed, accepting God's gracious forgiveness - a promise revealed in the meaning of the cross.

On the flip side of that, perhaps you are already in the midst of a new beginning in your life that is particularly difficult; a new beginning in which you would just as soon not have to deal with. **The good news on this Easter Sunday is that regardless of what kind of new beginning you are facing - wanted or unwanted - God promises to be with you and for you.** God can and will provide encouragement, comfort, peace, strength, and hope in all of our new beginnings.

And all this applies to us as a congregation as well.

College Hill has indeed been going through a period not only of transition, but also of transformation. Transformation (perhaps a more theological term than new beginnings) is not always easy for a congregation. Yet, it is often vital in order to be the church that God is calling us to be in this time and place.

Like the ancient psalmist, I too believe that God is always doing a new thing - a new thing in our personal lives, and a new thing in the life of this congregation. Therefore, it is crucial that we are intentional and persistent in trying to discern where and how God is leading us into the future.

So in that spirit, **I'd like for you to be thinking about what it is that is that you think is in need of a new beginning or transformation here at College Hill.** It may be in the area of: mission and outreach, or in evangelism, or congregational nurture, or Christian Education, and youth and children's ministries, or worship and music, or church administration and leadership and communication, or building and grounds, or finance and stewardship, or in the healing of old wounds and the strengthening of relationships with fellow church members and with our neighborhood.

As your new pastor, I truly look forward to working together with you in all of our ministry efforts; in getting to know each

and every one of you; and in learning from all of you. I am truly excited and indeed blessed to be here on this day of new beginnings.

On this Day of Resurrection, we celebrate the joy that can be found in new life and new beginnings - eternally and in the present moment - in our individual lives and in the life of this congregation.

**So thanks be to God, our God of new life and new beginnings.
Let's begin!**

Amen.