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Date: April 21, 2019
Sermon Title: From "Hadestown" to Resurrection
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Easter Litany of Life

Easter Litany of Life

Alida: John, in his Revelation, tells us "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord . . . they will rest from their labor, their good deeds will follow them . . . And I saw all who had died, great and small, standing before the throne of God, as the Book of Life was opened . . . And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, and God was with the people. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain."
(from Revelation 14, 20, 21)

David: And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light; and God said "Let there be waters and sky," and God said "Let there be vegetation, plants and trees that bear fruit," and God said "Let there be living creatures and birds and livestock and wild animals."
(Genesis 1)

Alida: And God saw that it was Good!
(Genesis 1)

Kids: And God saw all this life, all the earth, all the animals, and all that lives, and God saw that it was good, so good, really REALLY good.

People: In Jesus, the Word of God becomes us: flesh, humans, people. In him, through him, is life, and his life is the light of the world!
(John 1)

David: Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life, abundant life."
(John 10:10)

Alida: Jesus said, "whoever hears my word and believes in God who sent me has eternal life and has crossed from death to life."
(John 5:24)

So, yes, for our little Church up on this hill, Easter is our championship. We must make Good Friday's Crucifixion and Easter's Resurrection win the day, or else we've lost the day. In other words, it has to make sense to you, mean something to you.

Do yourself a favor this week. Go on our Church website and find Alida's Palm Sunday sermon* from last week. No one has ever done a better job of making a 2,000-year-old parade make sense for you and me right now. Today, we need to do the same for Easter.

Alida and I have been on a roll lately. Her Virginia basketball team reversed the curse, won the college championship, and inspired a lot of people along the way. A lot of Christian, Easter, Resurrection analogies fit Virginia nicely, including, yes, they "came back from the dead."

We've also been going to a lot of theater. We saw Mike Mitri's successful new Broadway musical, "Be More Chill," a dazzling story of social media frenzy, of peer pressure and bullying, of perseverance in the face of all that, and a virtual hell of teenage anxiety. The cast of high-schoolers are all trying to figure out how to "be more chill," more popular, "cool." A sort of futuristic drug offers them an easy way out. It's artificial, but cool. Or they can choose to "be more," well, real. Be good, and real. In our language, to be more "Christlike."

Then we saw "An Iliad," up at New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre, a magnificent retelling of Homer's classic Greek tale. If you remember Brad Pitt's movie, "Troy," well, this is that story, minus Brad Pitt, updated; but it's still about the living hell of war, sorrow, despair.

And speaking of hell, we just saw "Hadestown," another Broadway musical that just opened. It's a spectacular retelling of ancient Greek gods written by Virgil and Ovid just a few years before Christ. And that's an important fact. These stories emerge just before Christ. In "Hadestown," Hades, of course, is the place of the dead. And all around Hades, up above on earth, down below in hell, these ancient Greek gods have their very human struggles with love. Orpheus and Eurydice, Hades and Hermes and Persephone, all trying to make love work and make love survive. It's a story of love trying heroically to triumph over all, over hate, regret, over death itself.

That's what we all want. That's what the characters in the play want. That's what the audience wants: for love to win. And it doesn't! It doesn't. Not then, not yet, not in that great Greek tragedy, written just years before Christ's Easter. But it yearns for an Easter ending, the whole story, the whole theater cries out for Easter. It even hints at Easter! At the end of this mesmerizing show, an end that is all too real, too sorrowful, there is a haunting song, a song about love and loss.

*"It's an old song," Hermes sings,
"it's an old, sad song.
And we're gonna sing it again and again and again
'cause here's the thing,
to know how it ends and still begin
to sing it again as if it might turn out this time.
I learned that from a friend of mine."
(Road to Hell II, "Hadestown")*

And he encourages everyone to sing—the Greek chorus, the three Fates, all the gods and goddesses, all the musicians, to sing it again, that old song. As if to say, "We'll sing it till it comes true. We'll sing it till it happens. We'll sing it till love wins."

By then, Alida and I and the whole theater, we are emotional wrecks, wanting to burst into applause, yet heartbroken at love's seeming defeat.

And then a vision of spring emerges on stage. That's part of Easter too, isn't it? Spring as a stand-in for Resurrection, spring as a promise of eternal life, spring as a symbol that the death of winter is an illusion—finally, our tulips say, our crocuses say, our dogwoods say, finally—life wins!

And in "Hadestown," that glimpse of spring allows the audience to wipe the tears from our eyes and stand up and cheer. Because everyone in Hadestown and on Broadway and in our little Church and every human being I've ever met, we want a real heaven. A real triumph over death. A real wiping away of tears. A real proof that love wins. That's a showstopper. That's Easter.

"Hadestown," Virgil's ancient story, is the all-too-human story of life, even love, limited by harsh reality. Sickness comes. Wars happen. Life ends. Your dreams die.

Easter, the Bible's ancient story, Jesus's ancient story, our ancient story, is the all-too-divine story of life, even love, limited by nothing. Your faith is not in vain. Your dreams do not die. Your life is just beginning. Truly, Halleluiah!

Let's conclude with this beautiful Easter hymn, "Thine Is The Glory," printed in the back of your bulletin:

*Thine is the glory,
Risen, conqu'ring Son;
Endless is the vict'ry
Thou o'er death hast won!
Angels in bright raiment*

*Rolled the stone away,
Kept the folded grave-clothes
Where Thy body lay.*

*Lo, Jesus meets us,
Risen from the tomb!
Lovingly He greets us,
Scatters fear and gloom;
Let His church with gladness,
Hymns of triumph sing,
For the Lord now liveth;
Death hath lost its sting!*

*No more we doubt Thee,
Glorious Prince of life;
Life is naught without Thee;
Aid us in our strife;
Make us more than conqu'rors,
Through Thy deathless love;
Bring us safe through Jordan
To Thy home above.*

*Refrain
Thine is the glory,
Risen, conqu'ring Son;
Endless is the vict'ry
Thou o'er death hast won!*

*(<http://www.greenfieldhillchurch.com/sermons-online/> "Waited So Long")