

What Is God Creating?

April 21, 2019

Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Just before the sermon you heard the scripture read from the prophet Isaiah. The Lord speaking through the prophets said, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind, but be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating,” going on to say, “No more shall the sound of weeping be heard or the cry of distress.” Particularly for those of us who have experienced distress in life, those words that give us a picture of a perfect future are really inspiring and hopeful. That's one of the things that we love about reading the Hebrew Bible — the Old Testament prophets. But that vision of a perfect future is also found in the Christian scriptures in the New Testament apocalyptic, or futuristic, writings. For example, you see that in Revelation 21. We don't think of the Book of Revelation as a lot like a warm and fuzzy type of book, do we? But this is pretty warm and fuzzy. Evoking the same language from the Old Testament: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

You don't need a fancy chart or a big colorful mural to understand that part of the book of Revelation, do you? “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” And so as we begin to look at the word today, I want to ask you to answer a question in your own mind. I won't ask you to say this one out loud because it might become quite personal for you, actually. I want you to think about though, what would a new heavens and a new earth look like for you? What is your version of there being no more weeping, or as the prophet went on to say, “the wolf and the lamb feeding together.” I want you to be specific for your own life, in your own perception of the world, and I want you to dream big. Imagine a perfect future where God has made everything right. What does that include for you? And now depending on your life circumstances, that might be just lots more of the good things you've already experienced. Or, it might be that you've shed a lot of tears in your day and it will be a joy simply not to weep anymore, and there's lots of space in between. So let's take a moment of relative quiet and answer that question for you, what does a perfect future look like. [Pause]

2019-04-21 *What Is God Creating?*

I want to come back to the idea of a new creation at the end of the sermon so that I give you something to look forward to. But for now, just let that concept simmer on the back burner of your mind for a bit. If you were here with us last week you know that I talked in my sermon about how it is that the death of Jesus saves us. In other words, what is the meaning of the cross. Now I don't say to go listen to the podcast of my sermon very often at Artisan. But for what it's worth, that particular sermon resonated very strongly with our community. I got more positive feedback about that sermon than I've gotten about any sermon in at least a year. As a matter of fact, the last time I got this much positive feedback about a sermon it was Judy's sermon [laughs, and crowd laughs] at Easter last year. And Judy's going to be back with us in just a couple of weeks, by the way. So I would encourage you to go listen to that, if for no other reason that you might be newer to the community and it would be a good way to orient yourself to the way that we think about faith. But I think one of the reasons that sermon resonated so strongly with people was because it was maybe the first time that some of you who had ever heard the good news proclaimed in a way that actually sounded like good news. The version of the good news that is often preached doesn't sound all that good to us sometimes.

So in talking about how it is that Jesus's death saves us, I pointed out that one of the ways that Jesus' death can save the world is that it can save it right now. It's not something that's just for far in the future, it's nothing that's just for eternity, it's something that saves the world in the here and now. Or at least it could, because in his death Jesus gives us a model for how we ought to live, how we ought to interact with the world (both our friends and our enemies) and he gives us a model of what it is like to lay down our lives. And I find that vision of the world being saved quite encouraging and quite powerful. It's reassuring to me to know that Jesus makes a difference in the world even today. It's not something that I have to wait for to receive. And you know, the other thing that I would say about that particular vision of how Jesus' death saves us is that it might even be attractive to people who are maybe drawn to Jesus but who struggle with the supernatural aspects of religious belief. It's Easter, and I'm not under any illusions. I know there's a lot of you who got dragged into the room today [laughs] who struggle with the supernatural aspects of religion, right? I'm really actually very glad you're here and I hope that you feel welcome, and I hope that you get a good brunch or whatever the deal was that you made [crowd laughs] when you leave. But the truth is today is Easter Sunday and Easter is a very supernatural holiday. So we are going to talk about some of that.

As a matter of fact, in the very first sentence of today's epistle reading from the letters from the New Testament Paul says this: "If for this life *only* we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people the most to be pitied." In other words, if it's just about being saved in the here and now, if it's just about this life and not the life to come and not a future and eternity spent with God, not a

2019-04-21 *What Is God Creating?*

new heaven a new earth having been made for all eternity. If that's all it is, just for today then that would be a real shame because as powerful as the death of Jesus is on its own, it is the resurrection of Jesus that fully overcomes the powers that killed him. Jesus did say there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends, and he didn't just say that, he actually did it. There is no greater love than to lay down your life, but there is no greater miracle, there's no greater power than the reversal of death itself. And that's actually why last week I suggested that one of the great failings of the standard explanation for how Jesus' death saves us is that it doesn't seem to require a resurrection at all. Do you remember this idea? If the death of Jesus is just the wrath of God being poured out on God's son rather than poured out onto us, if the death of Jesus is just a punishment being meted out on someone else so it doesn't have to be meted out on us, then once the punishment has happened the work is complete. There is no resurrection required to satisfy that understanding of the gospel. But in my view, and I would humbly suggest that this is also the prevailing view in Scripture and it's definitely the view of the earliest Christian thinkers, it's the resurrection of Jesus that demonstrates God's ultimate victory over death and the powers of evil.

So I want to take a closer look at that passage from 1 Corinthians 15 that begins with the verse I just quoted to you a moment ago. I want to read that passage that comes from the lectionary in its entirety and intersperse some commentary in it, as I do. If you'd like to follow along you can go to 1 Corinthians 15. In the red Bibles it will be on page 936. These are in the seat pockets. By the way it's Easter, there's lots of visitors with us. If you don't own a Bible, even if you're just curious about it please take one of these home with you. We have a whole cart full of them and we replace them all the time, and we would love to have that be our gift for you. You can also find this in the church app or by searching in your own smartphone for the 1 Corinthians 15, it will come up. So once again, this passage begins this way: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." He goes on to say, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being." Now here, Paul is making a reference to the story in Genesis Chapter 3 from the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve, the kind of proto-humans, disobeyed God and ate from the tree that they weren't supposed to eat from, and in so doing introduced death into the world. And Paul's saying death came through one person, through a human being, and resurrection comes through this perfect human being, Jesus.

He goes on to say, "For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ." Now "at his coming" means Paul is anticipating the imminent return of Jesus, at which point all of those who are in Christ will be raised with him and glorified with him. Paul says, "Then comes the

2019-04-21 *What Is God Creating?*

end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.” Now when you hear that phrase I want you to think of two things. There's two meanings in that phrase in that sentence, I believe. The first is that Paul is representing an oppressed class of people. Paul was a Christian but he was first a Jew and the Jews were under Roman occupation. The Romans had conquered that part of the world, had taken over the holy city, and they were ruling over all the people including the Jewish people. And there was this very tenuous peace that was kept with the sword and with the cross. The Roman peace was kept with violence. And so Paul is speaking as a member of this oppressed class, saying that when Jesus returns he's going to destroy every ruler and every authority and every power, and that means the emperor. That kind of thinking, by the way, is what got most of the early Christian leaders executed by Rome. But there's a second meaning in that sentence because for Paul, this language of rulers and authorities is always intended to evoke spiritual powers. The idea that the enemy of our souls is not necessarily human institutions or human leaders but those institutions and leaders under the power and persuasion of spiritual darkness, okay. The principalities and powers of the universe set against the ways of God. I told you it's a supernatural Sunday.

So then Paul goes on to say, “For he [Jesus] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” That's a powerful statement: The last enemy to be destroyed is death. By the way, we said the Nicene Creed together earlier. If you've been at Artisan for a while, you are probably more familiar with the Apostle's Creed which we've used more often in the past. In the Apostle's Creed there's a phrase that doesn't exist in the Nicene Creed. After talking about Jesus' death and burial, the Apostles Creed says, “He descended to the dead,” but some versions of the Creed actually say, “He descended into hell.” In the Eastern church, there's this whole amazing tradition called the harrowing of hell. Harrow — H-A-R-R-O-W. Like Jesus is going into hell and ripping things up and bringing all the last damned souls out. He's rescuing all the people who are captive to the powers of the Satan. The Eastern Orthodox view is really fascinating. But the idea that Jesus descended into hell; I think we're tempted to think of that as like the last part of his punishment and humiliation, right? Like he's arrested, he's tortured, he's executed, and then he descends into hell. But no, no, no. I think we should think about that moment as the first part of his triumph of his victory. At any rate, now all of a sudden Jesus has become more mysterious, more supernatural, less tame if you will. Like Aslan the Lion, “Of course he isn't safe.” Maybe even a little bit dangerous. Jesus is now, with all this stuff in mind, maybe the type of person on whose bad side you don't want to be. And you can see that side of Jesus, the power radiating out of him in his appearance at the empty tomb. As the story was read earlier in the service today, our resurrection story this year comes from John 20 and it starts out: “Early on the first day of the week while it was still dark,

2019-04-21 *What Is God Creating?*

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved...and they set out and went toward the tomb.” Somebody asked me this week, what is the business of that thing with the “disciple Jesus loved,” what does that mean? And it’s the author of that particular book of the Bible trying to be like, self-deprecating in some way by not mentioning his name except instead of just saying John he says, you know, “the disciple Jesus loved” [laughs, and crowd laughs]. Like, the most humble of humble brags ever [laughter].

So there are a number of poignant moments in this Gospel story, some of which I recognized for the first time ever as I read it this week. Now, I need to tell you I've been reading the Bible since I was a little tiny kid who grew up in church, was in church all the time, and I've read the story from John 20 like, a lot of times. And it still came alive to me in a couple of new ways this week. I just want to tell you that I know the Bible can get stale sometimes, and sometimes your soul feel sort of stale and you're trying to read the Bible and you're not finding anything in it. But I want to tell you, if you will persist with it, it does come back around to you again. And you will continue to find new meaning in this sacred book for the rest of your life if you are willing to give yourself to it in that way. Anyway, here's one thing I noticed this week for the first time ever; the bending down to look into the tomb. Did you notice that when you heard the story read earlier? Both Mary and John bend down to look into the tomb, and I don't know what it is about that that makes it seem so much spookier to me [laughter], but it really does. Now we have these like, beautiful pastel images of the tomb and you know, the halos and all this beautiful stuff and it's a beautiful story. But come on, it was a gravesite, right? There is a zombie kind of aspect to this part of the story [laughter] if you don't know what's coming, which Mary didn't know and John didn't know. And so imagine the stone has been rolled away from this tomb and they're bending down and I imagine they're going very slowly as they bend down because how terrified would they have been about what they were going to find in that empty tomb? I don't know, that just struck me this week for the first time ever and it really brought home the the fear that would have been present in that moment.

And please do notice one other thing about this story. This isn't really what my sermon is about but I've got to say it. It was a woman who was the first person to visit the tomb. It was a woman who stayed there when the men inexplicably decided that they just were going to go home. Did you catch that? “The tomb is empty. I'm going to go home now.” No, Mary stayed. It was a woman who saw Jesus first, it was a woman who first proclaimed the gospel, the first evangelist if you will, was a woman. And of course, the men who heard her doubted her story. So there are many messages of the resurrection both big and small, but one of the messages of the resurrection is that we ought to listen to women and believe them and trust them to proclaim the gospel. But here is, to me, the most poignant and most moving part of the story. So we

2019-04-21 *What Is God Creating?*

have the miracle, we have the resurrection, we have the fear, we have the uncertainty and confusion. We have the risen Christ appearing. His body may be apparently remade or reformed or reshaped or somehow looking different because we have Mary who does not recognize Jesus at first. And make no mistake, she had spent years following Jesus. She was one of the disciples of Jesus, one of the most important ones, and she knew who he was. So she didn't see him and that was very strange. But she's not alone in that — there is another story in one of the other Gospels where some of Jesus' other disciples don't recognize him after the resurrection. And in that story, which is from the Gospel of Luke, they travel with him on a road for probably hours and they come to have invited him into the house for dinner to stay the night because it was night time and they didn't want to travel on alone because he was a stranger to them. And they didn't recognize him, until what? He broke the bread for dinner. And I just imagine those disciples remembering the moment when Jesus broke the bread in the Last Supper and said, "This is my body which is broken for you." Maybe they had been in the room, maybe their friends told them about it, but in either case the text tells us in Luke that he was revealed to them in the breaking of the bread. I just think that is so lovely. He's revealed to us in the breaking of the bread even now today.

But in this story, did you catch what it was — what was the trigger point, what was the moments of realization what was the epiphany that Mary had. What caused it? It was when Jesus said her name. And the instant he said, "Mary!" she recognized him and she cried out, "Teacher!" and she ran to embrace him. And I love this right there in the middle of all this transcendence and mystery. We've got the greatest miracle of all time still fresh like the morning dew. In that same instance, we have a moment of total imminence, of utter closeness and intimacy with God because he said her name. Earlier I quoted the prophet Isaiah speaking the words of the Lord: "I'm about to create a new heavens and a new earth" and I asked you to apply that to your own life and imagine what a new heaven and a new earth, a perfect future might look like for you. As you begin to recall that I'll ask you this: Do you remember how it was that God created the earth in the first creation story? In Genesis chapter one, unlike in lots of other contemporary creation myths, God does not create by ripping something in two and putting them in different places. God does not create, even in this story, by like pushing something together and shaping it out of material. How does God bring the earth into being? By speaking. "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." It is the voice of God in that story that calls the earth into being. It's the voice of God that calls the plants and the animals into being, and the voice of God that calls humanity into being. People — you and me. God's words create worlds. And it is this particular word, "Mary," that allows Mary to recognize the risen Christ, and I would suggest to you that the new creation began to take shape in Mary's life

2019-04-21 *What Is God Creating?*

in that very moment when Jesus said her name. Because God's words create worlds, and the new creation begins when God says your name.

So can you imagine yourself at the empty tomb. Confused, frightened, maybe wounded or hurt or shocked. Maybe disaffected or unbelieving. Maybe entirely cynical, maybe ready to give up, maybe completely dismayed. And can you imagine in that moment Jesus appearing before you making himself present with you, looking you in the eye and saying one word. A word full of love, a word full of healing, a word full of the same power that created the entire universe. And that one word that Jesus speaks is your name. God's words create worlds. You let Jesus speak your name today. Because the moment Jesus speaks your name the new creation begins to take shape, and your life will change, and the world will change. Everything will change. And it will be the first moment of getting closer to that perfect future that God has in store for each one of us, and for God's whole world. God's words create worlds. Let Jesus speak your name today. Let's pray.

God, thank you for the gift of resurrection, this impossibly beautiful miracle. Thank you that you love us enough to have died for us. Thank you that you have power over all the principalities and all authorities so that death does not have the last word, that death is the last enemy. That Jesus, the first fruits of resurrection, is our guide and our Savior. Help us to believe and to trust in Him, help us to move forward into the great and beautiful, perfect future you have for us. Help us to receive Christ's love and to allow him to speak our name just as he spoke Mary's name outside the tomb. Make us new, we pray, and draw us into the co-creation, the work of making the whole world new. We trust in Him. Amen.

At Artisan we always respond to the word being proclaimed by coming to the communion table, and the table at Artisan is open to all. You do not have to be a member of this or any church to come and receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. If you are seeking to follow Jesus in this place on this day, please do come to the table, take a piece of the bread, dip it in one of the cups, and you can eat it right at the table. May it be the real presence of Jesus the savior. May it be a reminder of Christ's love and sacrifice, his body broken for you and his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. And made nourish you on your spiritual journey. There's a member of our prayer team who would be happy to pray with you. Generally, that happens at the back of the room if you'd like to receive that this morning. Also, our kids are probably ready for you and they can take communion as well, or you can get them right after you take communion, whatever you prefer. So as we continue to worship God in song and in prayer and in sacrament, respond however the Spirit may be speaking to you today. Amen.

[end of sermon]

2019-04-21 *What Is God Creating?*

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com