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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/20/2014, Easter Sunday
Jeremiah 31:1-6, Matthew 28:1-10
An Everlasting Love

At the start of the sermon, the minister says and the people answer:

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “An Everlasting Love.” That wonderful phrase is from our First Lesson, from Jeremiah Chapter 31. The Lord says this:

...I have loved you with an everlasting love... (Jeremiah 31:3,
RSV)

I bet it would be a splendid thing if *anyone* loved us with an everlasting love. But it is wonder of wonders to think this: that it is *the Lord* – our Maker - who loves us — aye, loves us with an everlasting love. So, that’s my topic this morning: an “everlasting love.” Let’s begin with the Easter morning conversation between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

We cannot hear the tone of our Lord’s voice. But I cannot help but imagine it to be a tender tone. He says one word to her – one word that opens her eyes to the wonder of a new world. He calls her name, “Mary.” Before, she had been confused and had to sort things out the best she could. She supposed him to be a gardener. Now, he says her name, Mary, and her familiar title for him springs to his lips - “Ribboni” - and she rushes to him. He has to restrain her:

“Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father;
but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my
Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (John
20:17, RSV)

The transition from the violence of Good Friday to the tenderness of this scene is one of the great wonders of the Gospel. If you or I had been through Good Friday’s abandonment, brutality, exhaustion, and finally the agony of crucifixion and death, I bet we would be disoriented afterwards if we should be brought back to life. We would be ripping and roaring with emotions – perhaps some boiling mixture of fury, exhilaration, plans to punish, plans to rebuild. But the prominent thing about this Easter morning story is the steadfastness of the love of Jesus. He loved the world before his crucifixion, and he loved it afterwards. He loved Mary

before the Cross and he loved her on the day of his resurrection. He loved you on Good Friday, and he loves you still on this Easter morning. In the midst of all the violence of life, Jesus loves with an everlasting love.

We human beings are capable of that. We are capable of tender love that goes on no matter the chaos and heartache around us.

SHERIFF BELL

Let me give you an example from modern literature. You might have seen the movie *No Country for Old Men*. It won the Academy Award for Best Picture back in 2007. But it's not the movie I want to mention, but rather the book by the same name, written by Cormac McCarthy. It is a strange book for its general violence intermixed with passages of great tenderness. Especially I mean the monologues by Sheriff Bell.

He is getting on in years, and he is rather stunned by the changes he has seen over the course of his career as a Texas lawman.

I know when I first took office you'd have a fistfight
somewheres and you'd go to break it up and they'd offer to
fight you. And sometimes you had to accommodate em. They
wouldnt have it no other way. And you'd better not lose,
neither. You dont see that so much no more, but maybe you
see worse.¹

Indeed, he does see worse. He seems people pulling handguns, shotguns, machine guns on him and on one another. The world has turned so violent he can hardly understand it any more.

But amidst all the violence and strangeness of modern life, Sheriff Bell still has his wife, Loretta. They've been married for thirty-one years now. In one of his quiet interludes in the otherwise violent story, Sheriff Bell thinks of Loretta and thinks back to when he first met her. The beautiful passage goes this way:

She's a better person than me, which I will admit to anybody
that cares to listen. Not that that's sayin a whole lot. She's a
better person than anybody I know. Period.

People think they know what they want but they generally
dont. Sometimes if they're lucky they'll get it anyways. Me I
was always lucky. My whole life. I wouldnt be here
otherwise. Scrapes I been in. But the day I seen her come out
of Kerr's Mercantile and cross the street and she passed me
and I tipped my hat to her and got just almost a smile back,
that was the luckiest.

¹ McCarthy, Cormac (2007-11-29). *No Country for Old Men* (Vintage International) (p. 38). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they dont deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did.²

Blessed are the husband and wife who can say such a thing. Across our land, I bet there are many elderly couples who could echo those good words. “The Lord has smiled on me in my dear wife, in my dear husband.” I pray that there are many such couples now, and that as the marriages of young husbands and wives season, they will be able someday to join that good testimony themselves. Indeed, I pray that for you husbands and wives before me now. And if you have in some measure fallen short of those high words so far, I pray that this day will be the start for you of a new long era in your love, so that one day you will be able to echo the blessed words of this sermon’s text, “I have loved you with an everlasting love.”

We human beings are at our best when we love with a faithful love that endures warm and steady through the years.

...IF NOT FOR EASTER

But for all our good hearts and our faithful loves, none of us would be able to speak of an “everlasting love” if it were not for Easter. But Christ is risen! And therefore there is such a thing as an everlasting love. Even if the worst should come to the worst, still we can stand at the grave of our beloved and in the quiet of our hearts we can affirm, “I have loved you with an everlasting love, my Dear – not simply a love for twenty years or sixty-five years, but an everlasting love! Because Jesus is the great Man of love and he is on our side.”

JEREMIAH

Would you believe if I told you that the context for this golden saying in Jeremiah – “I have loved with an everlasting love” – is exile and guilt and loneliness and deep longing for home, but with precious little evidence of things getting any better? The people of Israel believed themselves to be the Chosen People of God, yet here they were, growing old in Babylon, with their harps hanging upon the willows beside the rivers of Babylon and their old songs of faith growing faint on their voices and rusty in their memories. They are a defeated people swept off into exile, and they are conscious that they deserve it, for they had too long, *too long* disobeyed the Word of the Lord.

But to these dispirited people, the Lord now comes and sings his love song:

² Mccarthy, Cormac (2007-11-29). No Country for Old Men (Vintage International) (pp. 90-91). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

I have loved you with an everlasting love.

If this be so, then things are looking up. It is time to pick up and start again — time to rebuild. Things are going to get better if it is God who loves in such a powerful way. There is hope for the people of God. There is hope for Israel, hope for the Church, hope for you and me, my brothers and sisters in Christ.

MARY

And there is hope for Mary Magdalene at the tomb of Jesus. It is still early, toward the dawn of the first day of the week. She has no way of knowing that that particular dawn is the dawn of a whole new world — a better world. She simply knows that she is sad, for her Jesus has met a cruel death and died on a cross. She has come in love, she has come in grief, to the tomb of Jesus.

When she arrives, she finds a distressing sight: the stone sealing the tomb has been rolled away. She fears that the body of Jesus has been removed. She runs to tell Simon Peter and John the news. She returns to the empty tomb, weeping. Two angels asking her why she weeps. She turns around and finds Jesus, whom she concludes must be the gardener, until he speaks her name, Mary.

Jesus tells her to go to the disciples and tell them of his resurrection. But I think he also could have said this to Mary, for it suits the tenderness of the scene:

Mary, I have loved you with an everlasting love. I know you inside and out. I know your good, I know your bad. But you love me and have tried to follow me fair and square, and I want you to know that I love you with an everlasting love. And those disciples of mine. They let me down, denied, and abandoned me, yet they are my own, my own brothers. Go to them, for I love them with an everlasting love.

And to you dear folks gathered before me now, our risen Lord likewise says, “I love you with a love that endures. Neither angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, neither life, nor even death anymore can stop my love for you. It is an everlasting love. Go, then, and enjoy the kind of life I desire for you. Spend yourself in giving love, in receiving love, in teaching love to others. Do not fear to give yourself away to others, for you rest in my love and it is an everlasting love.”

To this Savior who loves with such unconquerable love be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

At the end of the sermon, the minister repeats:

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

