

April 9, 2023
The Resurrection of Our Lord—Easter Day
John 20:1-18
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

It's Not a Competition

I feel like I need to start wearing the Progressive insurance name and logo on the back of my robe, because for the second time in a month, I'm going to reference one of their commercials in my sermon. I swear that I'm not sponsored by them. I don't even have Progressive insurance.

But as I was thinking about Easter today, one of Progressive's commercials came into my mind. It's one of the TV Dad commercials, the one where a son is talking to his father about how expensive it is to be raising kids these days.

In response his father suggests that he change his insurance. The son is skeptical about whether or not that will help.

Then, the TV Dad appears and gives the very same advice. The son thinks the TV Dad's advice sounds like a great idea, even though he didn't take the advice when his own father gave it.

The father says, "Hey, I just said that."

The TV Dad says, "When you're a father, you'll understand."

The real father says, rather indignantly, "I'm his father."

And the TV Dad says, "It's not a competition."

The idea behind the ad it is that we're supposed to be wowed by the wisdom of the TV Dad, about insurance and about other things, but I have to say, when I consider my life, when I consider the world, I think that the TV Dad is actually wrong. Not wrong about insurance, I don't know about that. But wrong about it not being a competition. So much of life does indeed feel like a competition.

I mean, on Palm Sunday and the Monday of Holy Week we ended March Madness for the Women's and Men's NCAA basketball tournament, bringing an end to a whole month of competitions. Conference tournaments and championships, followed by the NCAA tournament, with teams playing their hearts out, competing, with lots of surprises, lots of thrills, and lots of heartbreaks.

Try telling the teams that were upset that it's not about the competition. Try watching the post-game interviews of both the winners and the losers of the games. They surely knew that it mattered who won, who lost.

Did any of you fill out a bracket for either the Men's or Women's NCAA tournament this year? Even with that there's a certain thrill to winning, even if it just means that you guessed right.

In some ways, March and early April have been have been all about competition for me. In addition to the NCAA tournament (Yay UConn!), I spent March and early April cheering on Norwood High School's Drama Troupe, as they competed in the Massachusetts Educational Theater Guild's annual one act play festival. With joy I've watched them move from preliminaries, to semi-finals, to finals, with a play that they wrote themselves. Emmanuel's own Stephanie Sol was a part of the group that made it to the state finals.

In addition to that, the first weekend in April was something called the MICCA Festival, which stands for Massachusetts Instrumental and Choral Conductors Association, and groups that my kids, Julia and John, are in were competing in that festival. True, in this competition, they're competing against a set of standards rather than against other schools' choral groups, but still, there are gold medals to be won, there's honor to be had, and they want it.

I have my doubts about whether or not it's a good idea to make the arts competitive, especially since the quality of a performance is very subjective, and very much based on how an individual audience member or even an individual judge

experiences the performance, but still these events mean a lot to the kids who are a part of them, and to their teachers, and if I'm being honest, to their parents.

And it's not just the arts, of course. The town soccer season started yesterday for Norwood. And of course, we were thrilled when Cyrus's team opened the season with a win. It does matter how you play the game, of course, but I think that if you've ever played sports, or had a child or grandchild play sports you know that it's more fun to play in a win or to watch your child win.

Cyrus loves soccer, but this winter, he's been playing indoor soccer with his club team. And quite frankly, his team has always been overmatched in these indoor soccer games. They've gotten blown out, almost every game. Like 2-10. Like 0-15. Like, they stopped keeping score because it was just mean. And he's sick of it. He has hated indoor soccer to the point where this kid who loves soccer has begged us not to take him to the games and make him play.

It's not that he hates losing so much. He doesn't like losing, of course, but if it's a close game he can stand that. But with these indoor soccer games, he hates that his team is not competitive at all.

So, regardless of what TV Dad says, lately it's felt like a lot of life has, indeed, been a competition.

But here we are, this week has been Holy Week and now it's Easter Sunday and of course, we put all talk of competition behind us as we look at the gospel reading where, oh, wait. oh, no; where we find another competition waiting for us. It's Peter and the beloved disciple's race to the empty tomb.

Get ready. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb early in the morning. She sees that the tomb is empty.

Get set. She runs back to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple and tells them the news, because she, of course, is not thinking resurrection. She's not thinking miracles.

She thinks that Jesus' body has been stolen. She says, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." (John 20:2)

And—go! Peter and the beloved disciple set off for the tomb. And the way that John describes it, it's a race.

At first, they're running together, but then the beloved disciple outruns Peter and gets to the tomb first.

He looks in the tomb, but when Peter gets there, he actually goes into the tomb. So who one, the beloved disciple because he made it to the tomb first or Peter because he actually went into the tomb?

Once he's in the tomb Peter sees the linen that was wrapped around Jesus' body after his crucifixion but, of course, Jesus' body isn't there.

And then, the other disciple goes into the tomb too and sees the same thing that Peter saw, but he believed. Does that mean that he's the winner?

But it's not clear what he believed because John says "...for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." (John 20:9).

Then Peter and the beloved disciple left the tomb and went back where they came from.

Even though John describes this race to the tomb like it's a competition, who is the fastest runner, who is the most faithful and insightful disciple, place your bets here, I'm not sure if it's completely clear who won.

Sometimes the resurrection is described as though it's a competition between Jesus' male disciples and the women who followed him.

In the accounts of the resurrection in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the women always go to the tomb first, they find it empty and, in some way, they receive the news of the resurrection. All of the gospels, except for Mark, describe the women sharing the news of the resurrection with the male disciples, but in some cases the men don't believe them or don't understand. It's the race to believe in Jesus' resurrection.

In the account of the resurrection from John, Mary Magdalene is alone at the tomb weeping, because she believes that not only is Jesus dead, but that his body has been stolen, perhaps desecrated.

And then, she sees the angels and they ask her, “Woman, why are you weeping.” (John 20:13)

After she tells them why, she turns and sees Jesus, but she does not recognize him. She thinks that he is a gardener and she begs him to give her Jesus’ body back.

Then he calls her name and all of a sudden, she sees him, she knows him, she calls him teacher and he gives her the news that he wants her to share, that he will be ascending to his father and her father, to his God and her God.

And Mary goes, as she had been told, to tell the disciples the amazing news, “I have seen the Lord!” (John 20:18)

Does that mean that Mary won the race to the tomb, the race to believe, the race to resurrection? Does Mary win the Easter prize, the golden egg, the biggest chocolate bunny?

Or maybe, the TV Dad was right. Maybe, in spite of the race to the tomb in today’s gospel reading, maybe, in spite of the competition that preachers, even I some years, have set up between the male and female disciples, in terms of their capacity to believe the miraculous good news, the amazing, even unbelievable, for them, and perhaps in tough moments for us, news that Jesus has been raised from the dead, maybe, it’s really not a competition.

The good news is for all of us:

the fast and the slow,

the quickly faithful and the slow of heart to believe.

the questioning and the confident,

the wonder-filled and the doubting,

the men and the women,

the young and the old,

the grieving and the joyful,

the healthy and the sick.

the struggling and those who are successful in the competitive lives that we've made for ourselves.

The good news is for all of us, no matter where we find ourselves in the story of life.

In the story of Jesus' resurrection, no matter how we, steeped in our culture of competition try to frame it, there are no losers. There is only this good news. The tomb is empty and Jesus lives! All creation sings and we all win. and the prize is peace, and joy, and resurrection, and life and love everlasting.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!