



## LESSONS for LIFE

**MARCH 23, 2008 7:00 p.m.**

**EASTER SUNDAY**

**WALK INTO THE LIGHT**

**Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes C.M.**

### **HAPPINESS NOW, ROBERT HOLDEN**

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Today is a very special day for us, not just because it's Easter Sunday, the holiest of days for many Christians but also because we dedicated our Sanctuary lamp and what it means to us as a congregation. If you see the lamp at the corner, many churches have Sanctuary lamps and they symbolize the presence of God always with us. Whenever you see the lamp lit that reminds us of God with us, among us and within us. So this morning we had a very special dedication at eleven and we wanted to make sure that the message was clear – that God's presence didn't come to this building when we bought it in 1991, nor did it come to this city when this church was built over a hundred years ago; nor did it come here when Europeans moved here. God's presence was here before anyone lived here and felt first by First Nations people. So this morning we invited a representative from the Mississauga Port Credit First Nations people to light the lamp, to symbolize it wasn't us, that they were the first people here; and so Justice Harry LaForme, who is the brother of Chief Brian LaForme, who is the Chief of the Mississauga Port Credit First Nations people was here this morning and spoke and then turned on our light to remind us all of God's presence. And so it was a wonderful, wonderful moment. But today is also a very special day for all of you who are under the age of ninety-five. Now I first want to recognize anyone who might be here over the age of ninety-five. Is there anyone here this evening over that age? No? Okay. I didn't think so. For all of us then, today is the earliest Easter any of us will ever experience in our lives. The last day Easter was this early – and it can only be one day earlier – maximum. The last time Easter was this early was 1913, that's why I used ninety-five. The next time Easter will be this early is two hundred and twenty years from now in the year 2,228, so we are at a very historic day – the earliest ever.

Tonight we conclude a very long sermon series called Happiness Now based on a book by Robert Holden, which book bears the same title, Happiness Now.. Robert Holden is part of the Positive Psychology Movement . Most of psychology focuses in on what's the problem and how can we fix it? whereas the Positive Psychology Movement says, "That's valuable but there's also a growing movement of folks talking about how can we help people to be happier in life?" – not focusing on a problem to be fixed but how can we help people to be happier? If you go to the church's Web site: [www.mcctoronto.com](http://www.mcctoronto.com) you can read the sermons from the series and we have wonderful transcribers who – can you imagine them taking my sermons and listening to a sentence and stopping and typing it, listening again and then typing it and they do that week after week after week. I think we have them archived for about three years, but the sermon series hasn't been that long, it's just been in the last few weeks, but if you go to the web site you can read the sermon series and catch up if you want to. Now, just a few of the key points: Holden says that happiness is not found outside of ourselves. If we go searching outside of ourselves we won't find it. We may have moments, glimpses but not a lifetime experience, but there are lots of influencers: positive influencers and negative influencers but they don't decide our happiness; we do. The essence of who we are is that we are created in the image of God. That means God in us; and our birthright. God placed love and peace and joy within us. That's who



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we are. We are love, we are peace, we are joy. No one can take that away from you unless you let them. No event, no circumstance can take away your love or your peace or your joy unless you let it.

So tonight we're going to take a look at Easter and its meaning for some guidance. The Bible says, *Rejoice always, again I say rejoice..* Jesus said, *I want my joy to be in you so that your joy may be full.* Jesus said, *I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly;* and yet most people aren't rejoicing always; most people don't experience abundant life on a regular basis. So how can we learn more, grow more to experience that abundant life, to be able to rejoice always? As we look at Easter some of us will look at Easter as a more factual perspective believing that Jesus actually lived and died and that God raised him from the dead. That's the perspective that I adhere to. However, here at MCC Toronto we practice a kind of Christianity called Progressive Christianity; and so that means that there are also folks here – full members of our church, full participants in the life of this church; some may be Deacons, some staff, who hold a different perspective; who hold a more metaphorical perspective; some, not believing in the factual resurrection but looking at the Bible stories with a more metaphorical perspective; believing that it's not important to debate whether the account actually happened or not, but believing instead that what is really important is for us to search for the deeper meaning. So, some of us believe in the factual resurrection – like me; some of us do not believe and others are not just quite sure whether these things happened or not. What makes this congregation not only unique but a great spiritual movement and a sign of hope for many many people is that all of us, whatever our perspective, we are joyfully and peacefully and respectfully traveling this journey together. One church united in our commitment to live in love together, to pursue justice with a passion, to experience a deepening of our spirituality to evolve into the kind of church God wants us to be: transforming lives and transforming our world as we journey together.

Whether you believe this or that, while we celebrate the diversity of these beliefs, you have in your wisdom, or in a lapse of judgment, chosen me to be your Pastor and so I get the opportunity, indeed I have the responsibility to share with you my perspective on events or ideas while, hopefully, doing so respectfully. So here goes:

At the beginning of this series we talked about how happiness is not found outside of us and we continue to search in the wrong place for it. Happiness is found within; but there are lots of positive and negative influencers but we make the decisions about whether to be happy or not. The essence of who you are, your birthright, what you were given at birth is love and peace and joy and no one can take that away from you unless you let them; and no circumstance can take away your love and your peace and your joy unless you let it. So today we look to Easter and its meaning for guidance. The scripture says, *Rejoice always.* Jesus said, *I want my joy to be in you so that your joy may be full.* Jesus said, *I am come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly;* and yet how many of us can say that we rejoice always. For many folks happiness is a momentary thing occasionally and not a way of life. So in this series and particularly today at Easter we look for some guidance for how indeed we can rejoice always.

Now, some of us will look to Easter in a very factual perspective, believing that Jesus actually lived and died and that God raised him from the dead. It is this perspective that I personally adhere to; however, here at MCC Toronto we practice a kind of Christianity called Progressive Christianity, so that means that there are also folks here today, full members of this congregation, full participants – even Deacons, even staff – who hold a more metaphorical perspective: some not believing in a factual resurrection but looking at the Biblical story using a metaphorical perspective believing that it is not important to debate



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whether the account really happened or not; believing instead that we should spend our energy searching for the deeper meaning and that that's more important. So, some of us believe in the factual account of the resurrection; others of us don't believe in it and others, maybe even most of us, aren't quite sure one way or the other. What makes this congregation not only unique but a great spiritual movement, a sign of hope for our times, is that all of us, whatever our perspective we are joyfully and peacefully and respectfully traveling this journey together. One church – united in our commitment to live in our love for another – to pursue justice with a passion, to experience a deepening of our spirituality and to be ever evolving into the church God wants us to be: transforming lives and transforming our world as we travel together. While celebrating this diversity belief you have in your wisdom or in your lapse of judgment chosen me to be your Pastor, so I get the opportunity and indeed I have the responsibility to share my perspective on events and ideas while hopefully doing so respectfully.

So here goes. Easter is about then and now. Easter is about new life coming out of death. Easter is about hope overcoming despair. Easter is the triumph of God over Fundamentalism. Easter is about God deciding to have the last word. Easter is about Jesus and Easter is about you and it's about me. Easter is about Jesus. When God raised Jesus from the dead God did two things: God renewed the spark of life in Jesus; life out of death. Life can come out of even the most deadly of places and life after death. Death is the door we walk through leaving this amazing gift called life and entering the next phase of our spiritual journey; and for those of us who remain behind when a loved one dies, death is the interruption of the relationship; it is not the ending of the relationship; and when we ourselves walk through the valley of the shadow of death, when we face death personally death becomes for us the door to the reunion with all of those who've gone on before us. In raising Jesus from the dead that day, God renewed the spark of life in Jesus and God rolled the stone away, allowing Jesus to rise up and walk out of the tomb into the light. Now up until now this sermon could be called pretty warm and fuzzy for most of us and yet, on Sunday mornings when we read the Gospel reading every Sunday, we say – after the reading – *These are sacred readings. May they comfort us, inspire us and challenge us.* One of the things about this church of which I'm most proud is that when we take a look at our faith, yes we want to be comforted, yes we want to be inspired and we believe that our faith should challenge us. I believe that fervently. So here's the challenge: Will every one here this evening who is still breathing please raise your hand. (a show of hands) Thank you. I think that's unanimous. A couple of you didn't raise your hand so I'll just assume you're asleep! I think I can now assert that God has placed the spark of life in every person here tonight, so now it's up to us. It's no longer enough to pray for God to rescue you. It is no longer enough to pray to God to change your circumstances. I say to you in the strongest of terms this evening, just as God has already placed the spark in life in you, God has already rolled your stone away and now God waits for you to get up and for you to walk out of your tomb. God waits for you to follow Jesus out of the tomb and into the light. Just as God rolled the stone away so that Jesus could leave the tomb so God has created the same opportunity for you right now to walk into the light of a new life. Just as God calls us in scripture to rejoice always, so also God has rolled the stone away making it possible for you to rejoice always, making it possible for you to walk into happiness now, making it possible for you to get up and leave the tomb. Why do you think God would say to rejoice always and then place obstacles? God has given you the opportunity and the resources to do that, to rejoice always, making it possible for you to walk into happiness now – but you've got to get up and you've got to get out the tomb. God has already placed within you your true essence. God has already placed love and peace and joy within you and if you will bear with me with this analogy, that bubble of love surrounds you all the time and no one can take it away. That river of love is meant to flow through you all the time no matter what. God has placed within you the gift of peace and that



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bubble of peace surrounds you wherever you go, no matter what; and that river of peace can flow from you no matter what. And the gift of joy is placed within you, that bubble of joy surrounds you wherever you go, no matter what; and that river of joy can flow through you no matter what.

The issue is not about needing more peace or needing more love or needing more joy. It's getting in contact with and being more aware of the love and peace and joy already placed within you. One of the big problems with Christianity today and with Christians today is that we keep looking for things in all the wrong places. We keep looking for things up there or out there that are already placed in us and we keep praying for things, asking for things that are already given to us. Karl Marx once said that Christianity is the opium of the masses, that it makes everybody passive, and I think most of Christianity does that and the way that Christianity does that is that it makes people keep asking for things instead of accepting them; keep begging and praying for things instead of opening the gifts that already have been given. As long as you keep praying for peace or joy or love you'll never accept what has already been given to you. The gift is already here and we need to be opening the gift and not praying for it again and again. You can stay in the tomb and pray for God to roll your stone away or you can accept that God has already done God's work. God has already done God's part and you can accept your responsibility to get up and walk out of the tomb into the light. You can stay in the tomb and search for happiness outside of yourself or you can walk into the light and claim your happiness within. It's tougher work. It's much easier to blame someone else. You can stay in the tomb and let circumstances determine your happiness; blame other people, surrender your power to people or to events; or you can walk into the light and change your attitude and reclaim that connection with love and peace and joy within. You know, when something nasty or bad happens to you the easy thing is to surrender your happiness and blame. It's much tougher to take responsibility and when you can feel that happiness fleeting to stop and say, aha, that's an external circumstance; that can influence me but it cannot decide. I'm going to do the harder work and decide to hold onto my joy in the midst of the circumstances. You can stay in the tomb and focus on what you don't have, what you'd like to have or what someone else has, or you can walk out of the tomb into the light and focus on gratitude and on goodness. Living with the losses, but focusing on the gift. There will be deep, deep losses and sometimes multiple losses. There'll be times when you will be devastated and you can't just go Pollyannaish and walking through life and whistling through the funeral. It will hurt and it will hurt deeply, but walking out of the tomb says, *I can live with that loss while at the same time focusing on the gift..* Maybe it's someone close to you who has died and you're hurting deeply and you can experience that hurt and you can grieve and your faith says even in the midst of that hurt you have to experience the gift of who that person was to you and of the wonderful moments you had together. Or maybe you're in a more painful situation of a relationship break-up and it's really hurting and you can live with the loss of that relationship while doing the tougher work of saying what was good about it; what can I learn from it? You can stay in the tomb out of fear or you can walk forth lead by faith and take risks. You can stay in the tomb with all of your religious baggage or you can leave those grave cloths behind and take up your religious wings, flying higher than ever before, being on the top of the mountain or stuck in the valley. I love that symbolism. Last Sunday at six o'clock in the morning when I was re-writing my sermon again, that came to me, so I do not claim it for my own, but put down your religious baggage and take up your religious wings. Religion was meant to lift you up, to give you wings so you can soar above the problems and experience how high you can really fly. The song says, *You raise me up so I can stand on mountains; You raise me up to walk on stormy seas.* Just as Jesus had a choice that morning: he could have stayed in the tomb, will you? He chose to get up, will you? He chose to walk out of the tomb and to walk into the light, will you? God has already done God's work. God has already placed the spark of life in Jesus and the spark of life in you. God has already rolled the stone



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away for Jesus and he's already rolled your stone away. Whatever obstacle you're facing, God has already done God's part. It would be much easier to stay in the tomb and blame God, or beg God. Easter then? Yes. Easter now? It's up to you. Happiness now? It's up to you. A world waits to hear this good news. It's up to us.

I want to conclude this sermon and this series by giving Robert Holden the last word. This morning I panicked because I hadn't marked the spot that I wanted to read. Holden writes:

The following story illustrates perfectly the only real key you ever need to walk free. Harry Houdini liked nothing better than digging a hole for himself and then looking for a way out. His ability to free himself from shackles, boxes, strait-jackets, hand-cuffs and all kinds of sealed containers brought the Hungarian escape artist world-wide fame. There was nothing he could not escape from, well, almost nothing. At the height of his fame Houdini issued a challenge to the world to build a jail that he could not escape from. Jail after jail after jail Houdini would escape from within moments. There's a story of one jail, however, when something went very wrong. This jail was like all the rest: concrete floors, concrete walls, a set of bars and no furniture. Harry entered and the door was shut behind him. The stop-watch started ticking and Harry got to work on the lock with a piece of metal that he'd concealed in his clothes. Harry soon realized this lock was unusual. An hour passed by and no luck. Another hour passed by and still Harry was imprisoned. Sweat formed upon his brow and effort upon effort upon effort got the great Harry Houdini nowhere. Finally, out of tiredness and frustration Harry fell against the door in despair – and the door swung open. The prison door had never ever been locked!

That which you are praying to God for and waiting for God to give you has already been given to you. The door was never locked. The gift has already been given to you. The challenge is to accept the gift, open the gift, experience the love the peace and the joy already within you and around you. The challenge is to walk out of the tomb and to stop praying for the stone to be rolled away. Instead, to get up and walk out into the light. Jesus did and so can we. Easter then and Easter now. It's up to you.

Amen