



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

March 26-27, 2016 (Easter)

"COME ALIVE (AND HAVE A CHANGED LIFE)"

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

God has many things He would like to put into our box of life. Symbols of His grace and purpose in our lives that were changed because of Him. We became more alive because of Him. Some here today may be asking, "Why have anything from God in our box? Or, "Why do we even need to believe in and follow a God?" Fact is, we need all the help we can get, especially from God. If we are honest, we all have some areas that are weak and could be made stronger.

A month or so ago, I was at an airport with a really heavy suitcase to pull off from the luggage carousel. Fifty-three pounds heavy, said the scale. I normally don't carry that much, but half of my luggage was ski clothes for a friend who I was to meet. The friend would be embarrassed if I mentioned his name, so I won't tell you that the ski clothes were for Pastor Tim.

I saw my suitcase on the carousel and was pulling it off when suddenly, out of the blue, a little boy came up to stand next me. I realized if I pulled my suitcase straight away I would smash the child with it in the face, so I twisted my arm to angle it off, just as two other suitcases came down and piled onto my suitcase. I pulled the suitcase off and wrenched my arm in the process, but I saved the child's face and his need for braces for years.

My arm really hurt for two weeks, but I didn't think it was that

bad. Pam told me I needed to see a doctor, so I finally did. The initial decision was that I had a torn rotator cuff (thank you, Pastor Tim), but then it was upgraded to a tennis elbow, which meant a shot in the elbow and physical therapy—also known as PT—which does not stand for pain and torture.

When I go to physical therapy several times a week, I observe and listen to the people there. Two teachers injured their legs and knees on the job. One had a student accidentally fall on her. The other teacher was tackled by a student and it messed up her knee. Others talked about how they fell while up on a chair in the kitchen, or from sports. I heard one woman saying how her physical therapy was worse than childbirth. I decided I didn't want to do her exercises. Some were working on their shoulder or leg or knee, a foot, or, in my case, an elbow. But we were all there because we all needed help to make some part of our body stronger. There is an environment of humility that we were all in need.

To be honest, we come to church because we all have areas that we need strengthening on a constant basis—could be emotional, spiritual, or relational. And for some of us, it might mean the muscle of faith, which maybe for years has not been used or flexed and maybe has atrophied and gone weaker.

Going to a church can be

intimidating. We may think everyone seems stronger than we. I know that feeling. A few years ago I felt I needed to reduce my stress, so while on vacation I decided to do something fun and unusual for me that would take my mind off the stresses. I enrolled in a pottery class using a spinning wheel. Big mistake! I was pathetic. And I became more stressed with each class!

First of all, I thought I had enrolled in a beginner's class, but I accidentally signed up for an advanced intermediate class. That was my first mistake. My second mistake was thinking I CAN DO this. How easy this will be. I throw the clay on a spinning wheel, and put my hands into the clay and voila a beautiful vase or bowl would be formed in a minute. Nothing could have been farther from the truth.

I discovered that I could not even throw the clay into the center of the spinning wheel. I tried to but it flew off towards the ground every time. I would throw and then yell whoa whoa whoa and off it would go! Time and time again I would throw the clay but it would not make my day. It felt like I was an amateur surrounded by Michelangelos.

So I quit and immediately switched to enroll in a beginner's clay modeling or hand sculpturing class. Piece of cake. I can do that. But again, I somehow accidentally got into an advanced intermediate class. Not again!

I knew I was in trouble when I realized there were four highly successful architects taking the class. I was in deep kim chee.

One of our projects was to make crocodiles. My son was able to create a crocodile-looking dinosaur back in grade school, so I thought, I can easily do that! But I found out that it was too complex to create, considering all the details involved: the scales, legs with claws, big jaw, and the eyes. I couldn't do it. I looked at the work of my architect classmates. Their crocodiles were so ornate, so detailed! They even had tiny light bulbs for the eyes with wires and a battery hidden inside the croc's body. So intricate, so beautiful, so unfair.

I don't have a picture of my crocodile, but do you want to see what my very first project was? It's embarrassing to show you. It's supposed to be a cream and sugar set. (Photo of the set was shown.) Go ahead laugh. God will get you for that.

My next project was to make a bell with no handle that you could shake. I thought I would be creative, so I decided to put bunny ears on my bell and paint it chocolate raspberry. Do you want to see what it looks like? If there are any architects here please don't laugh. Here is my chocolate raspberry rabbit bell. (Photo of the bell was shown.) I was so excited when it came out of the oven! It was a piece of art. And with the rabbit's distorted-Picasso-like eyes, I knew deep down inside that it was brilliant.

The teacher then asked us to shake the bell so we could all hear the bell. Everybody's bell was ringing except mine. The teacher asked, "Dan, you did put a ringer inside, didn't you?" A ringer? "Yes," she said. "You were supposed to form a little clay ball, wrap it in newspaper so it will burn off and the clay clapper won't

get stuck to the side. Then you seal off the bottom of the bell with a little slit for the sound so when you shake it, you can hear it. Dan, you did do that, didn't you?" It was then I realized I was not going to get a lifetime achievement award with the American Institute of Architects for my rabbit bell.

I said, "Yeah, I think I did." She said, "So where's the sound?" I said, "I guess the heat of the kiln dissolved it." But actually, I think I forgot to put the clapper in! I was indeed a dead ringer for a student.

Today my beautiful rabbit sits silently on my piano waiting for the sound of music to come from its bosom as it sits next to my exquisite sugar and creamery set. Yes! Eat your heart out, William-Sonoma.

I would contend that all of us are not experts in most areas of life. There are many things we don't know. Some say there is no God, or how do I know there is a God? For those who are followers of Christ, their proof of God is that He came to earth in the form of a man named Jesus. If anyone ever asks us what is God like, we say look at Jesus.

When we hear the Easter story, as read in our Scripture passage earlier, we might ask why should we believe. Why should I even believe the Easter accounts in the Bible of Jesus living, dying, and then being resurrected from the dead is even true? Let me give you four reasons why the Bible narratives are reliable and trustworthy, and why we believe they are authentic. The reasons are:

1) EYEWITNESSES

After Jesus died, the Bible says, there were hundreds of eyewitnesses including Mary Magdalene, all of the disciples, two men on the road to Emmaus, 500 people, James (the brother of Jesus), and the Apostle Paul. The New

Testament writers all wrote about Jesus within His generation.

Let's press the issue a big further. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November 22, 1963. That's nearly 53 years ago. If someone said he rose from the dead three days later, don't you think even today, 53 years later, we would know if that was false or true?

As a former TV news reporter, I met and interviewed someone who was in the presidential limousine when President Kennedy was shot. In fact, the person I interviewed was shot too and wounded in the chest, wrist, and thigh. He was the late Governor John Connally Jr. of Texas. He knows that John Kennedy was shot and killed. IF SOMEONE were to say to him in his lifetime, John Kennedy did not die and that in fact he lives, he would easily say, "That's crazy! He's dead." And he could say that emphatically and with confidence because he was an eyewitness.

The disciples too were eyewitnesses of a much bigger and a much more significant event—the resurrection of Christ. I say that if people questioned Jesus' resurrection during His lifetime, they would have come forth and given not ASSUMPTIONS, but evidence of that.

2) DETAILS

There is just so much detail in the Gospels—like names and places—that it would be difficult to fabricate the story of Jesus' resurrection. Also, the genre of historical fiction didn't come about till hundreds, if not a thousand plus, years later. The resurrection of Jesus was definitely written as a historical account.

3) EMBARRASSINGLY REAL

The third reason the story of Jesus is reliable and not a false report is that the details are too embarrassingly real for it to be made up.

It makes the authors look bad. That's strange to say but think logically on this. If the church leaders like Peter, Paul, Luke, John, and others wanted to fabricate their written report of the divinity of Jesus, why would they put in confusing and maybe embarrassing views of Jesus? For instance, why include in the Bible this statement from Jesus: "Father, if I could get out of this crucifixion could you give me a pass and let this cup pass from my lips?" Bad marketing if it were fake.

And who were the original witnesses of Jesus risen from the dead – women! AT THAT TIME they were the lower gender class of Israel. So low that women couldn't even testify in a Jewish court of Law because they were female and had no credibility. Why use women as the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection if you were trying to make up an account? If Bible authors – who were 1st century males, were writing up a story they wanted people in their region to BELIEVE, they would've created a story where MEN—and not WOMEN—were the first to see Jesus. That would have been more credible and culturally correct.

In other Bible accounts, we read about the male apostles hiding, running like cowards, and denying Jesus after His arrest. It's the women who are portrayed as courageous, committed and were there on Easter morning to honor the Lord even though they knew there were Roman soldiers stationed at the tomb! You go, girls! That took guts! What ancient Middle Eastern men trying to fabricate a new religion would write that?

Read the Bible stories, and you find the male disciples were often not the sharpest tool in the toolbox, who often didn't get it, and they would talk when they should have listened. If I were an apostle, why

would I make up a story in my own biography that makes me look bad?

Now if I were making up the story I would have me as an ancient Bruce Lee or a Jewish Jackie Chan who goes to the tomb and, using gung fu, knocks down the Roman soldiers, saves the women, and frees Jesus. Imagine doubting Thomas saying, "Do you have to put in the Bible that I doubted Jesus? Don't make me known for centuries as Doubting Thomas; make me Courageous Thomas! Write that I fought off 12 Roman soldiers to protect Jesus."

Imagine Peter saying, "You know that part of my denying Christ three times before the cock crows? Can you change it to someone asking me what time it was and that I denied knowing the time because I didn't hear the rooster crowing three times?"

So you see, what we read in the Bible are accurate, genuine, authentic accounts. The stories are not fiction or legends. They're too detailed! They're too embarrassing to be made up!

4) CHANGED LIVES

But the fourth point of why the Easter story is reliable is the clincher: Changed lives of first century and 21st century followers of Jesus. Two thousand years ago and up through today, the lives of the people who found Jesus to be real have been transformed. They come alive in a new way. Cowards become courageous! Purposeless lives now have purpose! The heartbroken become heart-filled! Embezzlers now become law-abiding people who are generous to the poor.

Earlier I talked about my having trouble making clay figures with even the clay sometimes flying off of the potter's wheel. But when Jesus comes into our lives, we're changed for something good.

Perhaps, some of you today, feel that you have not formed your life into any sort of a beautiful form. But the great thing about Jesus is that when we devote our life to Him, He takes the clay of our lives and souls and molds them into something beautiful and good. He takes the same clay, which you have thought or even other people thought is of no use or not lovable or pretty, and He transforms it into a beautiful piece of art.

Let me close with my own story. I am a trustee of one of a seminary, and recently while I was visiting that school, it was decided that the trustees and their spouses would be invited into student homes so we could get to know the students better. There were four students assigned to have dinner with Pam and me.

It turned out that when we arrived, three of the four students bailed and decided that even though they said they would be there, they cancelled. Made me feel really important. So our poor host, a mother of three who was cooking a wonderful dinner, felt so embarrassed so she just invited three friends at the last minute to fill the table.

After a delicious dinner, we asked one of her friends where she lived. And she said, "Oh, I live at 250 N. Oakland Ave, Apartment 8." I was stunned. It was the apartment I lived in (!) when I was at that school and I lived there not only for seminary but also when I went to USC Film School for a Masters in cinema production after my seminary degree. 5 years I lived there. 40 years ago. The student asked if we would like to see the apartment. My wife and I said yes.

We walked in; the kitchen and bathroom counters seemed to be the same Formica counters that I had 40 years earlier. Crazy. Suddenly an unexpected wave of emotion hit me.

I was overwhelmed with intense grief and sadness. You see, my seminary years were my wilderness years. Horrendous years. 40 years ago, my wife at that time told me she didn't love me and left me two weeks before I began seminary. Hence, my years in that apartment were tremendously sad, embarrassing, and lonely.

I remembered the exact spot in the apartment where I was talking to my friends when I got my divorce papers from the court. I remembered that the next day was my New Testament Survey Final, which would be 50 percent of my grade. I was in such despair, I flunked that exam. I got an "F." I remembered people feeling I shouldn't be a pastor. I was not qualified due to the divorce. I felt so low and useless. I remembered praying many nights in that apartment for God to somehow use me. Maybe I'll be a filmmaker.

But then it hit me. Here I was standing next to Pam, who I had married five years after leaving that apartment. And this year we will have been married 35 years. I never would have dreamed 40 years ago that I would be married nor have three kids. I felt then total despair. For the guy who wasn't supposed to be a pastor, I've now been a pastor for 36 years. Yes, imperfect in so many ways.

Yet, by God's grace, our church became one of the largest churches in our denomination. That's not to pat myself on the back, but it is evidence of God's grace out of the ashes. All glory to God. My wife Pam and I also head up an organization called Hawaiian Islands Ministries that has trained more than 55,000 people, mostly church leaders. Again, amazing grace.

And the guy who got an "F" in a final exam, heck, I'm now a Trustee at that same school. That's

really scraping the barrel. A few years ago, I met my professor who gave me an "F" in the exam. I told him my story, and at the end of a conference we were at, I received a note from him that he has now changed my grade from an "F" to an "A"! Resurrection!

Jesus takes the clay in our lives and transforms us even when we feel we have literally made a mess of it. We may see ourselves as an "F" but He sees us as an "A." The woman who today lives in my apartment is a single mom with a child she had adopted from Malawi, Africa. I later sent her a picture Pam took of her and me in her apartment and told her my story and gave her a Bible verse, from Isaiah 41:10: *"Do not fear for I am with you, Do not be afraid for I am your God. I will help you, strengthen you and lift you up with my victorious right hand."*

She wrote me back and said that she was thinking about whether seminary is really for her, for it's really hard, but now she is encouraged and she was planning to put the picture of her and me on her wall with that Bible verse under it. A chance meeting and a changed life.

All I can say is that when you follow Jesus, He becomes a personal friend but more important He is God who says to us don't be afraid. I will strengthen you, and I can lead you into a transformed, changed life for adventures that for now you can't see. He says I am the Potter and will take the clay of your life and make sense of it. And now this all ties in with the drama we saw earlier in this worship service.

There comes a time, maybe for you today where you say, "Okay God, I want to be all in. I don't want to follow other things that lead to a dead end. I want the clay in my life to be molded for good. "I want to declare on this Easter Sunday that I am now all in. I want to follow you for

the rest of my life. In fact, on this day, I am willing to be baptized." We would love to baptize you today!

Now some of you may be thinking, "Oh, I think Dan means I could SIGN UP for baptism today." No, I mean get baptized right now. No way, you say. I mean this is a church so that means there has to be a committee to approve me or I have to join a class or take something. Actually, you just took the class right now.

Some of you may be thinking, "Oh no way I am getting baptized; I don't want to be a member of this church." Well, the truth is, who says we WANT YOU as a member. Seriously, if you have a church, stay at your church. If you don't have a church, baptism says, "find a church." There are no lone rangers when it comes to Jesus who calls us into community.

Some of you may be thinking, "Hey, I am a private kind of guy. I have faith but I'm not going to embarrass myself in public." The deal is: baptism is a public way of making your ultimate commitment. It's really important we at times do things publicly.

Take a wedding for instance – a public declaration of love. Pam and I have been married for nearly than 35 years. Imagine if I said to her, "Hey honey, I really love you, but my love for you is kind of private and I don't want to make a vow of commitment to you in front of people. It's embarrassing to do my vows with many other people there. So let's just keep it on the QT about my love and devotion to you and not let anyone know. Besides, God knows I love you, so why even wear a ring?"

Had I said that, I probably wouldn't be married today. There are times when a line is drawn in the line, and we cross it and take a stand.

We put a stake in the ground and say I'm in. All in! No more fence sitting. It's the only way we allow God the real Potter to mold us into the destiny He always wanted us to have.

When Jesus walked on earth He said, "Baptize my followers." He knew we needed that commitment. That's the spiritual ring on the finger. When you make a public commitment to follow Christ, something happens in your heart, your soul. The Holy Spirit supernaturally comes. Transformation begins as I shared in my story. It's a new day from black and white to Technicolor, from film print to digital. This is a way of saying, "I am going to follow Jesus. This is serious, and I want the world to know."

So how does this work? The pastors of our church will be up here in the front. We will have a bowl of water from which we will take a cup of it in our hands and gently pour it on your heads. It is a symbol that your sins have been washed away by the life and death of Jesus Christ. It's a symbol of how we are cleansed and we can start a new life, write a new chapter. It's like holy water being added to the clay of our lives so that we will be more easily molded by Jesus Himself. It's a sacrament that points to a faith and grace in Jesus.

And so if you want to be baptized we are going to have six stations here in front of the stage, all headed by one of our pastoral staff who has been confirmed by our church as a pastor who can baptize. In the Bible, sometimes entire households were baptized at one time as an act of faith. So if you want your children to be baptized, bring them too.

When you come up through the center aisle we will give you a card for you to write your first, middle, and last names, and to indicate if this is a first time baptism or a renewal of

baptismal vows. If you have been baptized before, we believe the first one took so this will be a renewal, like some people do renewal of wedding vows, it means the first time was real but we will celebrate that again on this special Easter weekend, as a renewed commitment of obedience to Christ. After we baptize you, we will give you a small wooden cross to wear around your neck to commemorate today. And as you leave the front area, through the side aisle we have some things to give you to remember this day. Contact us if you'd like a baptismal certificate.

If you are a child, make sure your parents or guardians are okay with this if you want to come forward to be baptized. And if for some reason it is difficult to come up front, maybe you are in a wheelchair or have an ambulatory issue, signal an usher and he or she will come to you, have you fill out a card and he will make sure one of our pastors will come TO YOU and baptize you where you are.

Before you get baptized, those who want to, I will ask you questions that have been asked for centuries in churches all over the world. To make it easier, I am going to ask you all the questions at one time. Those who want to get baptized or have a renewal of baptismal vows may answer. The rest may remain quiet. The first answer is Jesus Christ. All the other answers to the questions, you may just say "I do." So, here we go. Now everyone who is able, please stand.

For those who want to get baptized or do a renewal of your baptismal vows today I ask you these questions that you can answer these as loudly or as softly as you desire? The rest can remain quiet. Let us take a moment in silence to think, as this is a big decision. Let us pause in quiet as the pastors and their helpers get into place. (SILENCE)

To those who on this Easter weekend who want to get baptized or renew your baptismal vows from long ago - I ask: Who is your Lord and Savior? Do you trust and follow Him and accept His forgiveness of your sins? Do you promise to be a follower of Him, obey His word and show His love to all? Do you promise wherever you may be, to be part of a church, a fellowship of believers and to strengthen that faith community?

And if there is a child who wants to be baptized today and follow Jesus, I ask this congregation: Will you do everything in your power to help this child be a follower of Jesus?

And I ask the child's parents or guardians: "Will you do all in your power to raise this child up as a disciple of Christ, that he or she will obey His word and show His love to all, and strengthen the child's ties with a church? And if so say "I do."

Now, for those who are not being baptized I will in a moment ask you TO SIT and sing the next songs or prayerfully listen to the music and watch this glorious sacrament as it is a highlight of any faith community when people make a decision of faith, and then in a few minutes at the end of the baptisms we shall close the service with some special music.

By the way, If you are the only one who comes up, that is fine. It's about you and not them. So as we sing these songs all who desire to be baptized, please come forward now, down the center aisle, and then leave by the sides and the rest may now be seated.