



## Small Group Discussion Guide – April 16, 2017

### *Reversing Eden, Restoring Paradise*

#### **From Pastor Hamilton's sermon:**

The Garden of Eden where Paradise is lost; the Garden of Redemption where sin and death are vanquished and human hearts are turned back to God; and the Restored Garden of Paradise where there is no more sorrow, crying or pain—this is the overarching story the Bible tells.

So let's focus on this second garden, and particular the message of Easter. If I could summarize the message of Easter in a sentence it would be this: **Easter is God's promise that evil, hate, darkness, sin and death will NEVER have the final word.** On the cross Jesus absorbed all the hate and evil the world had to give. He appeared to be defeated, but in his resurrection he defeated and triumphed over the forces of evil, hate, sin and death. Paul captures this in 1 Corinthians 15:57: "Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" In Romans 8:37 Paul describes the challenges and adversity he had experienced in life and then he famously writes: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." We are conquerors because of Christ's victory over the forces of darkness and death....

Paul writes in Colossians 2:15: "[Jesus] having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." It wasn't just the cross, but the cross and resurrection that was responsible for Christ's victory. Because of Christ's victory, we are people who have hope. We know, as we often say here, that **The worst thing is never the last thing.** There is always hope.

- Early Christians had to work through one often disappointing reality. Although Jesus had defeated "the powers and authorities," in God's eternal timing that victory was not fully "implemented" right after the Resurrection. Rome's cruel, brutal rule continued, as did poverty, illness and suffering. What are some times when evil, hate, darkness, sin or death left you feeling hopeless? How are you able to hold onto confidence that "the worst thing is never the last thing," that there is always hope?

### From Pastor Hamilton's sermon:

Early Christians believed that when Jesus died, he went to Hades, the realm of the dead. He tore the gates off the realm of the dead. He searched for Adam and Eve. A popular ancient homily on this theme has Christ finding Adam and Eve and waking them, saying, "I command you, Awaken, Sleeper! You were not made to be held a prisoner to death!"... Even in death Christ was reversing Eden!

Jesus taught his disciples that death was not the end, that we weren't made for death. He taught them this when he said: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live." He taught them this when he said to his disciples shortly before his death: "In my Father's House there is room enough to spare. I go there to prepare a place for you, and if I go, I will come back for you that where I am, there you may be also." But as powerful as those words are, they were only words until Easter. On Easter morning Jesus demonstrated his defeat of death and the promise of eternal life by his resurrection.

I love how Paul says it in 1 Corinthians 15 as he reflects on Jesus' resurrection, once again using the language of battle and victory: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:54)

If Christ has been raised from the dead, demonstrating his conquering of death, this changes how we face death, both ours and that of those we love. It doesn't mean that death is not hard. It doesn't make it pleasant, but it does mean that it is not as hard as it would be without the hope of the resurrection. It means that we have hope that we'll see our loved ones again. And it means that Christ who died and rose again, continues to walk with us, talk with us and sustain and carry us.

- Have you ever had to face the death of someone who mattered a lot to you? For what reasons would you agree or disagree with the statement that Christ's resurrection "doesn't mean that death is not hard"?
- As with all the garden ideas, much of what Christians have said about Jesus' victory over death is couched in images. In what ways do you find the image of Jesus tearing the gates off the realm of the dead encouraging or helpful? Are there ways in which you prefer other kinds of images?

### From Pastor Hamilton's sermon:

I want to end by recognizing that Jesus primary concern in his ministry wasn't death and the afterlife. He wasn't just focused on getting us to heaven, but instead helping this earth to look more like heaven. All of his ethical teachings, his call to love, his parables and his Sermon on the Mount, even the Lord's Prayer, were about God's Kingdom coming—God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

On that first Easter night Jesus found his disciples in hiding. Jesus came to them and breathed on them, in the same way God breathed on the first human. He said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And then he said these important words: "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you!" Once we've come to believe in Christ, we're to be filled with the Spirit's power, and then to roll up our sleeves and get to work....

Easter comes with a calling from Christ to live in such a way that you are restoring Paradise, that you are helping the world look more like the Kingdom Christ preached....

Easter is God's response to darkness, evil, suffering, sickness and most especially, to death. Christ said, "Because I live, you shall live also!" In death he himself invites us to join him in Paradise, a place we only dream of here, where we join the great company of saints who have gone before us—that place where darkness is banished and where there is no more sorrow, suffering or pain!

I'd end this message as I have every Easter message here for the last 27 years. People ask me from time to time, "Do you really believe this? You are a smart guy. Do you really believe that Jesus died, and on the third day he rose again, triumphing over evil, hate, darkness and death? And that there really is a place he's prepared for us? Do you really believe that?" And my answer is always the same: "I not only believe it. I'm counting on it." And today I'd like you to count on it too.

- In what ways are you, as an individual, involved in one or more activities helping to restore Paradise, even here on this earth? How clear is your sense that God has called you to be a part of this work? Have you considered ways that you, as a group, can take on some aspect of Christ's calling?
- To what extent can you say that you fully join Pastor Hamilton in saying of God's promise of eternal life, "I not only believe it. I'm counting on it"? What obstacles, if any, do you encounter in choosing to fully trust that promise? If there was ever a time in your life when you didn't trust as fully as you do now, what moved you away from some of your earlier doubts or questions?