

Betting a Weak Hand

John 20:1-20

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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I've never been much of a poker player, but one thing I know about the game is that sometimes the cards can be very deceiving. There's one variation of poker where you deal seven cards: the first two are face down and then the next four are dealt face up for everybody at the table to see. And the last card is face down again. As the game progresses and the cards are dealt, those cards that are showing can reveal a hand that looks pretty strong, even unbeatable, while other hands look pretty weak, like there's no chance those cards could be a winning hand. The player with the strong hand keeps raising the stakes, betting more and more on his good hand.

But every once in a while, someone with a weak looking hand stays in the game and keeps betting. Why would anyone bet on a weak hand when it's sure to lose? He does it because he knows what cards he has face down that only he can see, and he believes that his hand that appears to be weak is really the winning hand. Sometimes you bet on a hand that others may think is weak because you know that it is not weak at all, but really stronger than all the others.

Today's scripture tells the story of someone who bet a pretty weak looking hand. It happened one Sunday morning as he was sitting there minding his own business, talking to his friend Peter. That was when their friend Mary came to tell them some disturbing news. She said that she had been to the tomb of Jesus and discovered that his body was missing from the grave. At once this man and his friend Peter got up and started running toward the grave. They ran faster and faster. This man was the first to arrive, but when he got there, he didn't go into the tomb. Peter, impulsive Peter, was not one to lay back; he barged in as soon as he arrived. Then the other man went inside. And here's what he saw: nothing. Just an empty tomb. He saw absolutely nothing—just some cloth that had been wrapped around the body. And, the Bible says, "he went in, saw and believed." What did he see? Nothing. And yet he believed. Talk about betting a weak hand! This man saw nothing, and believed.

From that very first Easter, people have been wanting proof of the resurrection of Jesus. We want proof because it's so easy NOT to believe. Mary couldn't believe that Jesus was alive until she heard him call her by name. The other disciples needed to see Jesus in the upper room and hear him say "Peace be with you" before they would believe. Thomas wanted to see for himself the holes made by the nails in Jesus' hands and feet before he would believe. And many people just simply refused to believe that Jesus might be raised from the dead. That kind of thing just doesn't happen; you'd be a fool to believe something like that. You'd be betting on a very weak hand, one that cannot possibly be a winner.

Now that may sound like a foolish thing to do, but the fact is that people have been betting a weak looking hand for centuries. There was that time that Moses went to Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth at that time, and demanded that Pharaoh let the Hebrew people go. There's an impossibly weak hand—Moses alone against the most powerful person on earth. But Moses stood firm because he believed something Pharaoh did not know. Moses believed that God was with him.

No sooner had the people made their escape from Egypt then they found themselves holding another terribly weak hand. They found themselves trapped between the Red Sea and the onrushing Egyptian chariots. A bunch of unarmed men, women and children, carrying all their

earthly possessions trapped between an uncrossable sea and a galloping chariot. Some people wanted to throw in their cards—this hand is too weak; it can't possibly come out on top. But Moses refused to fold—he believed something more. And when God parted the waters of the sea, this weak looking hand became unbeatable.

And on it went. Centuries later in the little backwater country of Judea the Roman soldiers stood on every corner carrying out the order of the emperor that the Jews be registered. This census was done to intimidate, to oppress the people. The greatest, most powerful army the world had ever known, in service to the most ruthless dictator the world had ever known. What could anybody do against forces like that? And yet in the village of Bethlehem, down in the poor side of town, in a stable out back of an inn, a young woman began to sing: “My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...for he has scattered the proud, he has put down the mighty from their thrones.” And soon her song was followed by the cry of a newborn baby. Can there be any weaker hand than that? What chance does that hand have against such stronger forces? But, you see, something was happening in that stable that only a few knew—it was God come to earth! And that weak looking hand was really unbeatable.

And on it goes as people continue to bet on that weak hand because they believe, even when they cannot see, that God is at work in the world.

So bring all of this forward to today. All around us, in places big and small, we see people dealing with the challenges of life, struggling to overcome what appears to be an unbeatable hand.

If you think about it, the world can be a pretty dark place. It's a place where tornadoes blow through leaving death and destruction in their wake; it's a place where tsunamis wash away whole cities; it's a world where ruthless dictators continue to wage war against the very people they are supposed to protect. We live in a world where cancer cells take root and grow in the unsuspecting and undeserving. It's a world where sin abounds. What chance do we have against such a strong hand?

What enables us to keep going in such a world is that we know that we are holding an even stronger hand: we know how this story is going to end; we know that God's power to give life is stronger than the world's power to take it away. What enables us to keep going in a world of sin and death is today...Easter...that Jesus who died has been raised to new life by the power of God.

I remember once reading about a man named Clint Tidwell, the pastor of a church in a small Southern town. It just so happened that the publisher and editor of newspaper in that small town was a member of Rev. Tidwell's church, and every Monday he would publish in the paper a summary of Rev. Tidwell's sermon from the previous day. That kind of thing happens in small Southern towns. There were times, of course, when this well-meaning, but somewhat eccentric old newspaperman would completely miss the point of the sermon.

But there was that day when the old newspaperman understood perfectly what the preacher had said. Early one Monday morning, the day after Easter, Rev. Clint Tidwell, in his bathrobe and slippers, padded out the carport door to retrieve the Monday newspaper. The paper was lying at the end of the driveway, and, as Rev. Tidwell approached, he could see that the morning headline was blazoned across the front page. What could it be? he wondered. Had war broken out somewhere? Had the local bank failed over the weekend? Had a cure for cancer been discovered? As he drew close enough to focus on the headline, he was startled to read the words, “Tidwell Claims Jesus Christ Rose From The Dead.”

As you might guess, Rev. Tidwell was somewhat embarrassed. Yes, of course, he had claimed in the previous day's Easter sermon that Christ rose from the dead, but was that headline news? You're supposed to say that on Easter, aren't you, that Christ rose from the dead.

But then isn't that exactly the news that the world needs to hear?

If it left Rev. Tidwell feeling a bit foolish, it was the foolishness of the gospel. Who would dare to stake their life on such a weak and improbable hand? We do. You and I. Because we believe that this hand is really the one unbeatable hand. It's God's hand, played on that Easter morning.

Alleluia. †

(Two resources were used extensively in the preparation of this sermon: *Whispering the Lyrics*, Tom Long, p. 81-88; and *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 3-6.)