This past Tuesday night, the *First Presbyterian Church* in Englewood, NJ suffered a 3-alarm fire that utterly destroyed its 156 year-old sanctuary and its steeple. Thankfully by the grace of God, there was no one inside the church at the time and their pre-school was off this whole week because of Spring Break. No one was injured as a result of the devastated fire. Just imagine what might’ve been like if this fire had occurred in a packed sanctuary on Good Friday, or let’s say on Easter Sunday? On a given Sunday, they have about 400-500 worshippers.

I was shocked when I first came across an Alert on my phone saying that a fire was breaking out in this Presbyterian Church in New Jersey. That alert surely got my attention!! I said to myself, “Hey, I know this church. I’ve been there numerous times. I know the pastor there – Richard Hong. That’s because I did two years of internship at another Presbyterian Church the next town over in Leonia and we frequently used that church’s facility to hold our elders/deacons retreats or other meetings, services, and concerts there.

When this fire alert was reported on the phone app, I saw Richard was on-line at the time and I informed him right away of what was happening at his church and he acknowledged my message by saying that he was on his way to the church. This was about 20 minutes after the fire had reportedly started.

When asked about what his congregation was going to do for this Easter and going forward, now that the sanctuary is almost completely destroyed, Rev. Hong mentioned that *“the worship of God must go on. They just have to take it one day at a time….*e*ven if they have to worship at the church’s parking lot.* *I feel for the people who were baptized here, who were married here, whose parents had their funerals here to see that destroyed is not an easy thing to watch, but the congregation is people, so as long as the people are fine, the church is fine!"*

Over the past couple of days, that community has been touched by the outpouring support offered from all crosswalks of life, from different faith organizations and ethnic backgrounds. Incidentally right now, they are currently celebrating their Easter service just like everyone else at the *Bergen Performing Arts Center*. Their building might have been destroyed but their faith remains steadfast. Their place of worship will undoubtedly be rebuilt…once all the dusts and ashes are settled, maybe not in three days, but in perhaps three years?

I think there’s a lot to be said about this seemingly untimely and unfortunate incident, especially during the Holy Week. For one, it reminds us of that our worship of God is not strictly confined to a building. We do not worship the building, but instead we worship God who is beyond the boundary of these walls. We may have developed sentimental values over time through our important events in life such as baptism, wedding, confirmation, and funerals, or you may be sitting in the same pew as your grandmother once sat. That’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s not the most important thing when it comes to our relationship and our worship of God.

As Rev. Hong mentioned in his interview, the church is the people not the pews, the organ, the hymnals or its stained-glass windows! All those are replaceable. We can worship God anywhere, at any time, and with anything…and even if we have nothing.

As I reflect upon this unfortunate incident, it made me ponder upon the word that Jesus spoke of concerning his own death and resurrection. Just as we read in our text earlier, after Jesus had entered into town on Palm Sunday, he and his disciples entered the temple of Jerusalem, Jesus was not pleased with what he saw. On a rare occasion, Jesus expressed his anger and emotion because instead of being a House of Prayer, the people have turned the house of God into a marketplace, a place where they would be selling items to be used for the temple offering and making a profit for their personal gains. Jesus was not pleased at all with what he saw and he went off on a rampage.

Jesus made a bold declaration that he would destroy this temple and in three days he would raise it up again.[[1]](#footnote-1) Many of those religious leaders mocked Jesus saying, “You’ve got to be kidding me?!? Did did say that you’re going to destroy this temple and rebuild it in three days?” After all it took Solomon 46 years to build the original temple. Incidentally that temple was also burnt down by a fire and was destroyed by the Babylonians nearly 1,000 years before Christ, how could Jesus claim that he could rebuild it in 3 days? But as you and I know, the temple that Jesus was referring to was not just the physical temple, but metaphorically he was referring to his own body, foretelling of his own death and eventual resurrection.

Jesus was unjustly arrested after he was betrayed by one of his most disciples. He was put on an unfair trial on a charge of blasphemy claiming to be the Son of God. He was being sentenced to a death penalty upon a cross. In the midst of many confusions and chaos, we may find ourselves searching for answers with so many questions and uncertainties. Why? How? What had just happened? How did the fire get started? What was the cause of it? What did Jesus do that deserve a punishment by death? Why would a loving God allowed such tragic event to occur…even to his very own Son?

When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees, “by what authority was He performing those miracles, and declaring that He was the long-expected Messiah?” They asked Him for a sign of authority. Jesus responded, **“destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up once again.”**

Jesus died a horrible and undeserving death upon the cross and was buried into a tomb. But **death would not have the final word**! The Son of God was NOT to be denied. Three days later after he was buried in the tomb, Jesus rose from the dead! The stone was rolled out! He was alive once again and was out and about ministering and witnessing to many of his followers. In the same way, through our faith in witnessing Christ’s resurrection, the temple of our hearts will also be restored!

As Philip and Ruthie read for us earlier, many of the disciples were surprised by Jesus’ re-appearance. They wanted to be 100% positive that they were not seeing a ghost. They wanted tangible proof to touch and to feel his nail scarred hands and feet in order to believe. They seemed to have forgotten of what Jesus had told them concerning his bodily temple that must being destroyed, only to rise up in God’s glory. Eventually after spending time with the resurrected Christ, those disciples believed not only in Him, but also **believed in themselves**. God sent them the gift of the Holy Spirit. The believers were empowered to give testimony of ALL that they had seen and heard concerning Jesus and his teachings.

This is what the Resurrection story all about…It’s about a new beginning and a new hope, rising from the ashes and dusts. In light of tragedy, hopelessness and despairs, God reveals God’s greatest glory and power through Christ’s resurrection. Through Christ, we dare to proclaim with confidence that the once broken relationship between God and humanity has now been restored. Christ is risen, Christ is risen, indeed!

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God gives us courage and wisdom to speak on God’s behalf, to proclaim God’s glory and to bear testimony of God’s work in our everyday lives. As I mentioned in our Good Friday service, **even though Christ’s work here on earth was finished; ours had just begun!** Upon the final days, Christ will once again return to finish what He has started and what we are commissioned to do on His behalf.

Friends, we are living in an exciting but also a scary time. As evident in what’s happening all around us these days, nothing is certain about our future. But one thing we do know for sure is that **God’s temple will be restored upon the stone that rolled away on this day of resurrection. The rolled away stone served as the foundation of our faith during our times of trials and challenges.** Our faith WILL be tested, our physical temple may be destroyed, but our faith WILL not be wavered.

As the prophet Isaiah prophesied, ***Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.[[2]](#footnote-2)***

If Jesus were to walk into this house of worship and to visit us today, He would probably be angry at our human disbelief and our lack of faith in Him. Even after all that He had done for us, we still didn’t get it. We still fail and fall short of God’s glory so miserably in our lives. **Perhaps we must engage ourselves into a reality check of how the individual temple of our hearts MUST be destroyed and be purified by fire[[3]](#footnote-3), in order for us to be fully restored with the resurrected hope and power in Jesus Christ.**

This is the Good News as we, the Easter people, come to witness and proclaim Christ’s resurrection not only on this day but in the days ahead. Hallelujah, Glory to God in the Highest! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *John 2:19* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Isaiah 43:18-19* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Malachi 3:1-18* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)