**[Acts 10:44-48](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=91" \l "hebrew_reading" \t "_blank)**

[**Psalm 98**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=91#psalm_reading)

[**1 John 5:1-6**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=91#epistle_reading)

[**John 15:9-17**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=91#gospel_reading)

A COOL HAND Sermon for May 6, 2018

Just a few days ago, I had an experience I only get once a year. I stepped outside into a sunny day with a sweet-smelling breeze, birds singing in the trees, robins hopping around the lawn, and for the first time this year the thought struck me with full force: it's spring! It's really here, it's really back. The year is officially starting all over again.

If you think about it, spring is really the morning of the year. Winter is the night, when we sleep. But spring is the morning, time to get up, have some coffee, time to get moving again. Even the name of the season tells you that. It's spring! Things start springing up. Fall is when things start falling down; but that's way off in the future. What's here and now is spring!

And once I had fully handed my spirit over to the reality that it was now spring, it was like a veil had been lifted from my eyes that had been there all winter long, and I began to see things in a different way. Everywhere I looked, it seemed like the world was now reminding me of what the special qualities of spring are, and why we so much look forward to its return every year. I was sitting in the dentist waiting-room, for example, mentally girding my loins and getting prepared to be miserable for a while when the door opened and a woman walked in. She was what I call a tweener, which for me isn't a young teenager, it's somebody in that 40/50 range. But what really caught my attention when she walked in was that she was smiling like it was the best day of her life, like there was no place she’d rather be; she smiled directly at me and said hello even though I'd never seen her before, then kept smiling as she went over and exchanged pleasantries with the receptionist and came back and took a seat. She had a light step and her shoulders were back and her chin was up, and she was making direct eye contact, and I immediately felt like she was an old friend I hadn't seen in years.

And I thought, isn’t that what’s wonderful about spring? That it’s smiling and light-footed and alive, and just looking to spread its own happiness to everything it touches.

And around that same time I went to the calling hours for our dear sister, Ruthie. And I was sitting there at Christopher Mitchell on one of the little sofas, and off to one side was there was a man with a little toddler boy. And the little guy was standing between the man's knees and kind of looking around, and he suddenly did that windmill motion with his arms and fell plop! on his behind. He blinked and I was sure he was going to start crying, but instead he started giggling, and used his daddy's assistance to stand back up again.

And I thought: Right here, in the presence of the reality of death, a little guy was learning what it takes to walk. Right where one wonderful life was being harvested, another was just taking root. And isn't that also exactly what's wonderful about spring, that new life springs from old, it doesn't replace it: it springs from it, and carries it ever onward.

And then one afternoon I wanted to watch a movie so I looked on the Turner Classic Movie channel to see what might be on, and it was Cool Hand Luke, an old favorite of mine. So I'm watching it, and it comes to the scene where Luke - Paul Newman - is having a knockdown boxing match with another prisoner who's a lot bigger than he is. And in the fight, Luke keeps getting knocked down and getting back up, knocked down and getting back up, each time a little woozier, knocked down, back up, until he's incapable of defending himself, his eyes are swollen shut, and all the prisoners who are watching are begging him to stay down, just stay down. But Luke gets up, and the big prisoner clobbers him so hard he starts to spin, but before he can even fall, the big prisoner picks him up in his arms and carries him away like a baby.

And I thought again, that's just what's great about spring. No matter how many blows the winter delivers, spring gets back up. Just like the old Frank Sinatra song, spring “takes a deep breath, picks itself up, and starts all over again.”

And I finally realized what the world was trying to tell me. What it was telling me is that the wonderful thing about spring is that it's the season of optimism. It's the season that steps forward and puts itself on the line. That woman in the dentist's office wasn't waiting to see if the world was going to smile at her; she smiled at the world. That little guy laughed at failure, because the alternative is to cry, and laughing is always better than crying. Cool Hand Luke didn't care if his chances were slim and getting slimmer, because when you stop trying, you immediately have no chance at all.

Spring forward, fall back, we say. And that's exactly right. Spring is the time for stepping forward, for at least giving yourself a chance, for leaving your troubles on the doorstep and directing your feet...where? To the sunny side of the street.

And that's the great message I take from our Gospel this morning, so let's read it together.

John 15: 9-17

***9****“As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.****10****If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.*

***11****“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.****12****This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.****13****Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.****14****You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.****15****No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.****16****You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.****17****These things I command you, that you love one another.*

Whatever else Christianity is, it is supremely, everlastingly, and confidently optimistic.

Try to imagine the scene. This itinerant country teacher, no place to lay his head, is having supper with a small ragtag group of misfits, and he's telling them that their job will be to go out and save the entire world, from now until eternity. And how are they to do that? Just by telling a story, and not giving up.

Imagine what they must have been thinking. The cards are pretty much stacked against us. This is not a cool hand we're being dealt here. This guy wants us to dedicate our entire lives to going out into the world and talking to people about him, about who he was and what he did. I mean, saving the world and all would be great, but the odds of our doing it, this way, are pretty darn slim.

And that's absolutely right. Pretty gosh darn slim. But here's the thing, there was still a chance. If you don't step out in faith, there's no chance at all.

I don't take sides politically, but you have to acknowledge that when our current president threw his hat into the ring, the odds were pretty high against him. But he still stepped forward, and look what happened.

And just to stay neutral, I see that in the Democratic gubernatorial contest this year, an actress who was on a TV show a decade ago has thrown her hat into the ring against the mighty Cuomo machine, and from what I read, she's doing very well.

The point isn't that stepping forward, being optimistic, always succeeds in politics. The point is that its opposite, not stepping forward, never succeeds.

And that's exactly what Christianity asks us to do throughout. Those disciples in the upper room were being asked to do one thing and one thing only: to step out in faith. Faith in what? Faith in God to take it from there.

Jesus made this a very important part of His message, that we don't worry about the nonessentials. He used birds of the air and lilies of the field as example.

Was he saying not to put money in your 401-K or not to set up trust funds for your kids? Of course not.

But what he was saying is: once you've listened to God and stepped forward: be optimistic. Don’t waste your time and energy with second thoughts, with self-criticism, with what might have beens, with worrying about what others might think.

And that's our job, too. Our responsibility as Christians isn't to change the world, it isn't to tear down the strongholds of the devil, it isn't even to win people to Christ. We have only one responsibility, although it's an important one.

Our responsibility is to give God a chance to work.

And how do we do that?

By seeking God's guidance, by listening, and when we hear something – not when we k*now* something for sure, but just when we hear something – to step out in faith. And: once you've listened to God and stepped forward, be optimistic. Our focus is never on the consequences, always on God. Once we've acted in the sincere obedience to God's instruction, we smile like a winner and move ahead, not because we're putting on a brave face for the world, but because we're fully comfortable in God promise that He will make all things work to the good of those who love Him, and who have answered His call.

So our prayer for this morning, Father, is that You help us lighten up a little. Remind us to be the people who offer smiles, nit the people who wait to smile back. Remind us to smile, knowing that our Father will pick us back up even when we fall on our tuchus. Keep us in steady awareness of the reality that, as Christians, we're very rarely dealt the best hand in this life, but we're always dealt the cool hand. Help us keep our eyes always looking forward, and our gaze always fixed on you and your promises, because that’s what Jesus always did, and it’s in His name we pray.