I know that some of you, like me, do not like to fly. There’s something about entrusting my life to a piece of metal, a mechanical device that relies on everything working just right to stay in the air, that makes me feel just a little uncomfortable. I can relate to a story told by George Wirth, who is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. He was flying from Miami to Atlanta, and the weather was not good. A late afternoon thunderstorm had come up, and he tightened his seatbelt and said a prayer for the pilot.

He said that the two women sitting on either side of him were carrying on a conversation he couldn’t help but overhear, about a Christian conference they had been to in Jamaica, and “back and forth, back and forth, they talked about the Bible studies and the inspiring speakers and how glad they were to have attended the gathering.”

Worth said, “When the pilot's voice came over the intercom telling [them] that [they] had leveled off at 28,000 feet, that the storm was mostly behind [them] and that [they] could expect a smooth flight on into Atlanta,” he was relieved, and whispered, ‘Thank you, God.’” Then he pulled out his Bible and sermon manuscript for the coming Sunday. The flight attendant came by and asked for their beverage orders, and the two women next to him responded, “‘Diet Coke, please;’” but he answered, “‘Chardonnay,’ which” he said, “turned out to be a big mistake.”

He said that “as the drinks were set down on [their] trays, the lady on [his] right introduced herself, proceeded to introduce her friend, and then asked point blank, ‘Are you a Christian?’” Worth said, “With my Bible and manuscript in front of me and the plastic cup of Chardonnay in my hand, I replied, ‘Well, yes, I am.’” After further interrogation, when he finally told them he was also a Presbyterian pastor, the woman on his left looked at him, and she said, ‘Well, then, you don't need that wine, Reverend. All you need is to trust the Lord, and he'll get you safely to Atlanta’” (George Worth, “Trust at 28,000 Feet,” June 26, 2005, day1.org).

It can be hard to trust in the Lord. But our scripture passage this morning tells us that the good news of Easter is that we can trust God with everything in our lives. Before the joyful good news of the resurrection, Jesus himself entrusted his life to the Father. Throughout the season of Lent, we’ve been hearing Jesus’ seven last words from the cross. The last word that Jesus spoke, before he died, was “Father, into thy hands I entrust my spirit.”

Jesus’ work on earth had been done. He had taught and healed and preached, and finally, gave his very life, the fulfillment of God’s plan, the perfection and completion of all Jesus’ work, the ultimate sacrifice for our sin. And despite the fact that to all appearances it was the end, that those gathered at the foot of the cross that day thought that it was all over—many of his followers had fled, the family and friends who remained were stricken with grief, the soldiers and authorities thought it was all finished—Jesus knew that it was not the end, that resurrection was to come. And so he entrusted his death and his life into the hands of God. “Into YOUR hands, I entrust my spirit.”
And on that glorious Easter morning, when the disciples found the tomb empty, the angel said, “Why do you look for him here? He has risen, just as he said.” Just as he said! Jesus knew what was to come, knew that he would have to suffer and die, but that in that act he would win victory over sin and death forever. Jesus knew that resurrection was at hand, and that he would ascend to the right hand of God the Father almighty, where he welcomes even us to his kingdom.

We too are called to trust God with our lives, and yet despite the witness of Easter that God is indeed trustworthy, it is hard for us to do.

Recently attention was riveted on the Mega Millions lottery, which had accumulated the largest jackpot in history. Drawn by the lure of huge money, more people were playing than ever before. There were a number of news stories interviewing people about why they were playing. So many of them said they hoped life would get better, that winning millions of dollars would be the answer to all their problems and make all their dreams come true.

I will tell you that Joseph and I did not buy a ticket, because we agreed that we would not want the disruption of our lives that would come with winning that kind of money! So many times, those lottery winners have more problems than solutions, and they end up being miserable, lives and relationships changed in ways they never imagined. Sometimes the things we think we want, the things we think we can trust for our happiness, are not what we need at all. As the country song says, “Thank God for unanswered prayers.”

If we could only learn to trust God, rather than trying to keep control in our own hands.

An elderly couple was killed in an accident and found themselves being given a tour of heaven by Saint Peter. “Here is your oceanside condo, over there are the tennis courts, swimming pool, and two golf courses. If you need any refreshments, just stop by any of the many bars located throughout the area,” said Peter.

“Heck, Gloria,” the old man hissed when Saint Peter walked off, “we could have been here ten years ago if you hadn’t insisted on exercising three times a week and eating that stupid oat bran, wheat germ, and low-fat food!”

We trust our own plans more than we do God’s. We trust our money, our possessions, our positions; we trust our diets, our exercise, our self-help books, to give us the lives we want. When God may have a better plan than we could ever imagine.

There was a man who went to his pastor one day and told him that he had made a covenant with God. If God would bless him with financial wealth, he would give ten percent of his income to the church for the rest of his life. The first year, the man earned $10,000, and he tithed $1,000 to the church. The next year, he earned $20,000 and gave $2,000 to the church. And the man’s bargain seemed to work. His business took off; all his ventures became successful beyond belief. Before long, his income soared to $100,000, and, true to his deal, he gave $10,000 to the church. Within a few more years, he earned a million dollars, and he tithed $100,000 to the church. But the year he earned six million dollars, he just could not bring himself to write that check for $600,000 to the church.

He made an appointment to visit the pastor and he said, “You know, I’ve been faithful to this deal all along, but this is just getting to be too much. Pastor, please, you’ve got to help me out
He was surprised when the pastor got down on his knees, bowed his head, and began to pray silently. After a quite a few minutes watching the pastor’s fervent prayers, the man finally asked, “Pastor, what are you doing? Are you asking God to let me out of this covenant?” The pastor replied, “Why no! I’m asking God to bring your income back to where your tithe is only one-thousand dollars!”

So often in our quest to control our lives, we place our trust in the wrong things, and then we wonder why we are not happy, why our lives lack joy and fulfillment. Will Willimon said that as a Methodist Bishop, he sometimes has to make difficult decisions about where to place pastors. One time he had to move a pastor to a church where his salary was $7,000 less than it had been at the previous one. He apologized to the pastor and said that while he thought the church was a good fit for his gifts, he was sorry he had to take a cut in pay. The pastor responded, Bishop, don’t worry about that. “I was pulling down $85,000 a year before Jesus grabbed me and made me go to seminary” (Will Willimon, Thank God It’s Friday: The Seven Last Words from the Cross).

That made me think of a seminary classmate of mine who had been a successful dentist. He, his wife, and three children, enjoyed “the good life,” before God called him into ministry. He gave up his practice, they sold their beautiful home, and moved into a tiny seminary apartment, and they said they had never been happier. The joy of trusting one’s life to God is greater than any other satisfaction.

Does that mean that everything will always work out beautifully, that we’ll never have any hardships or sorrows? No, the reality of life is that Christians are not insulated from the effects of the world.

In the mid-16th century, Sister Teresa of Avilla led a group of fifty Spanish nuns to another convent. A raging storm came up, as they traveled on foot through treacherous terrain. “Crossing a rickety bridge over a swollen stream, the sisters prayed that the bridge would hold up until they were safely across. It didn’t. Near the center it collapsed, spilling all of the nuns into the water. As they managed to swim safely to shore, Sister Teresa raised her eyes toward heaven and said, ‘Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, it is little wonder you have so many [enemies].’”

I read that “Sister Teresa,” who later was made a saint by the Catholic Church, “was known for her wit and her sense of humor . . . but she also knew that the God in whom she believed did not keep the storms away.” God does not play games with the laws of the universe. “And yet she trusted God to help her cope with trouble, and she believed beyond the shadow of a doubt that God would see her through” (George Wirth, “Trust at 28,000 Feet,” www.day1.org).

Do you have that kind of trust in your life? The good news of Easter is that we can trust the God of the resurrection, the one whom Jesus himself trusted, with our very lives. I have learned this in a powerful way since I was diagnosed with cancer and have been going through chemotherapy. I confessed to you my fear of flying. The week before my first chemo treatment, I flew to Austin, Texas to visit a friend. Although I had been dreading the flight, strangely, as the time drew near, I found that I wasn’t afraid at all.
There’s something about getting a cancer diagnosis that puts things in a different perspective. My diagnosis has made me realize how little control I have over my life. I learned that very powerfully last Sunday, when the effects of chemo made it impossible for me to be here on Palm Sunday, one of the most special days of the church year. And yet, there is something good about being stripped of the illusion that I am in control. I trust my life and the life of this church to a good and trustworthy God, and I know that I can leave all things in His hands.

The truth is that we cannot control our lives, but we don’t have to. All we have to do is trust in our heavenly Father.

When you were a child, did you ever play that wonderful game with your dad, where you jump off the edge of the pool into his waiting arms? When I was a child, it didn’t matter to me one bit that the water at the deep end was well over my head. It never entered my mind that my dad would not catch me. I had perfect trust in him.

And so it is with our lives in Christ. The one who raised Jesus from the dead, just as he said, is the one who has the power to keep us from falling, the one who watches over us every moment and never leaves us alone. In the words of the beloved 23rd Psalm, the Lord who is our shepherd guides and guards us, keeps us and cares for us, leads us beside still waters and restores our souls. We can trust him with our lives, knowing that we dwell with him now and forevermore.

So on this Easter morning, let us give thanks that just as did our Lord himself, we can entrust our lives to God. He has already won the victory over every evil power. There is nothing that can bind us, nothing that can hold us in the tomb, for Christ has risen, just as he said, and because he lives, we shall live also. So let us live now in gladness and joy that have no end, for he has risen, just as he said. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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