

## The Threat of Life

Acts 10:34-43

Psalm 98

Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20

April 24, 2011

Easter Sunday

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As the day is dawning on Sunday a new reality breaks forth. An unheard of reversal. Death is defeated. Life is threatening! Spare stark but spectacular signs accompany Matthew's account of the resurrection; a earthquake, an angel dressed in radiant white, bright as lightning, rolling away a massive stone to reveal an empty tomb. Professional Roman soldiers wetting their pants, motionless, and cold as dead at the sight. An announcement from that angel; "He is not here, for he has been raised as he said." Suddenly Jesus himself, alive not dead meets the two Marys, "Greetings!" Which is more formal for "Hey, how you all doing?" They worship him. Then his command, "Do not fear, go and tell the others to meet me in Galilee." Only 10 verses, and reality on earth has changed.

Some years ago Robert Louis Stevenson the Scottish writer lay gravely ill on the island of Samoa in the South Pacific. A local pastor planned to go see him and sent word by the housekeeper to find if Stevenson would like to be visited by a minister, "as one in danger of dying." Stevenson sent back word, "No, but he would be happy to receive the minister as one in danger of living." As ones in danger of living – that is how we come on this resurrection day. Life is bursting forth from the tomb. Can we believe it? Will we receive it?

Easter is immense! The Resurrection is the heart of our faith! "The third day he rose again from the dead." It is the point out of which the entire New Testament witness and the early believers are shaped. It is the truth upon which the early and continuing Church has been formed.

It is pointless to try to extract selected nuggets of wisdom from Jesus' teachings, as Thomas Jefferson did in his "Jefferson Bible" where he cut out all the miracles and other matters he found troubling to his rational mind, and called what was left the essence of Jesus. Modern reductionist scholars, and awhile back the so-called "Jesus Seminar folk" tried the same. But no! If you want the essence of Jesus it starts here, at an empty tomb, along the Sea and Mountain of Galilee, behind locked doors and along a road to a village named Emmaus. It starts here with this incredible truth: Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! The New Testament witness began here and then the biographical material and wise teachings were added.

To preach the resurrection is at the heart of any Christian preacher's job description! Skip this and you should be out of a job! For to bear witness to this immense unexplainable Truth is what we are most essentially called to be about! You are here today because you know that today, at least today, the Church really gets down to business. You are curious, you are hopeful, you are doubtful and yet believing!

You find it difficult to grasp and a stretch to believe. But you want to. You long to. Notice the encouraging fact slipped in to the response of the eleven disciples who meet him on the Mountain in Galilee, “When they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted.”<sup>i</sup> Even these eleven who had been his closest students were still struggling. The syntax would indicate that they all worshipped, while some of those who worshipped still struggled with doubt. So there is room for everyone here to come and sing “Jesus Christ is Risen Today, Hallelujah!” - even if it is still unclear to you.

The Good News of the Gospel is that even with our doubts, even with our inability to grasp or explain, it is True, Christ is risen! Death is not the end but only the beginning of a more wonderful and incredible life than we can imagine for all who are in Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it in a sermon called “Learning To Die,”

“Let no one take comfort in the false consolation: after all, everything will be over before long; rather let them be told: before long, everything will begin.”<sup>ii</sup>

It is a message that is too big for any Christian preacher to get across. So we do our best. But thankfully the message does not depend on us. All the Church really shows our stuff today, magnificent flowers reflecting Nature’s seconding the motion, and glorious music of the Easter hymns and anthems. The music, the bells, the trumpets, the hallelujahs all shout forth: life has overcome death, because love is stronger than death. The word for Palm Sunday was “Hosanna!” – “Save us we beseech you!” The word for Easter answers with “Hallelujah!” “Praise we the Lord!” For God has indeed done what he promised, done the humanly impossible, and saved us.

Not only the Church, but nature itself gets in the act, as Psalm 98 we read expressed. “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands, let the hills sign together for joy at the presence of the Lord!”

“All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God!” Indeed today all over the earth people are crowding into churches, in thatched huts and red brick meeting houses, and stone cathedrals to hear the good news and to trust the message. What Jesus told his friend Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”<sup>iii</sup> And what Martha believed, “Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”<sup>iv</sup>

## I

It all was so utterly unexpected. A few women, these same two women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph had been among the few that stayed there at the Cross with him until the end. Early on Sunday, just as the day was dawning they come to grieve at the tomb where they had seen him laid on Friday. Jewish burial rituals are clearly prescribed. I noted on a visit to a Jewish Cemetery in Jerusalem a few years ago, the presence of a group of women, part of a Jewish burial society that was in a little building off to the side in the cemetery. They were busy preparing the body of one of their own who had died only a few hours before. These Marys have come

for similar purposes and for simple private grief. Suddenly there is the sound of a mighty earthquake. Interesting, in Matthew there is an earthquake as Jesus dies on Friday and there is an earthquake as Jesus rises on Sunday. Two parts of his essential action for you and for me, crucifixion and resurrection, mighty events to save and bring life.

The contrast is vivid between God's mighty power made visible on this morning and the 40 days that follow, and the terrified responses of the officials of state and religion. The guards of Caesar shake uncontrollably then are as dead men. The old religious leaders, men who tried to control the religion of the people, the priests and the elders, concoct a bribery plan to try to make a logical explanation for what has happened. They buy off the guards with a wad of money. A lot more money than they had paid to Judas for his initial betrayal.

Fearful old men trying to secure themselves from resurrection. What they are afraid of is losing control and the people no longer thinking they knew and managed, like the Wizzard of Oz behind his curtain, the power of death, the reality of death, the finality of death, the threat of death- so valuable as an instrument of control. So a little more money, a little more lying, and just maybe this embarrassment can be contained. But what if death were dead? What then?<sup>v</sup>

David Halberstam was a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and author, best known for his book, The Best and the Brightest. In a book out shortly before the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century he wrote about being one of two speakers at a conference in 1989 for the governors of the 50 states of the Union. The other was Henry Kissinger. This was just after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of Communism in Eastern Europe. He describes how Kissinger initially was charming the governors with his wit and insight. But that after about 10 minutes turned to Cold War rhetoric, as if nothing had changed. Halberstam said, "His speech struck me then as the last speech of the old order."

The old order is what these old men in Jerusalem were trying to maintain.

## II

But God had acted. God had intervened. God had raised Jesus his Son from the dead and revealed it first to the only ones who were there at the end on Friday, not the disciples. They had all fled. But the two women. It is a powerful statement that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women! Just in case you question the propriety of women pastors, keep that in mind. The men were not there at the end. The men were not there at the beginning. The women receive the essential message of Christian faith. "He has been raised. Come and see the place where he lay. (No body was there). Then go quickly and tell his disciples he has been raised.

How can we receive this message? It is no accident that though Jesus was seen by the broad public, people in the streets, officials of state and temple on Palm Sunday and throughout the week, only his own saw him after he was resurrected.

Did you know there is not much good art depicting the resurrection? The painting by Matthias Gruenewald on the front of the bulletin is one of the few, and it did not print off too well. Maybe a parable there. And it is not nearly as good a painting Gruenewald's "Crucifixion" that we used on the Good Friday bulletin. There are many famous paintings of the Crucifixion, You see, we know how to depict death. We are all too familiar with it. We know physically how people die and how we can make them more or less comfortable in it.

But resurrection is another dimension we do not know so much about. The resurrection cannot be proved scientifically or logically. Do not waste your time there. The resurrection must be received believed by faith. Eugene Peterson remembers as a young preacher launching an Easter sermon on "The Thirteen Incontrovertible Proofs for the Resurrection," a sermon that went on for an hour and a half, by which time no one much cared any longer.<sup>vi</sup> If human reason were the only form of truth the idea of resurrection is impossible. But if there is another way to know, if there is another form of truth than logical understanding, then resurrection means we are now in a whole new reality.

The way we believe the resurrection is by trusting the trustworthiness of God and acting upon it. Paul the Apostle offers a short statement in Romans of how we receive and believe it. And remember Paul was like us. He was not among the original group of witnesses. He did not see Jesus in the flesh nor during the 40 days of his earthly appearances before the ascension. Paul saw the risen Christ only by faith. And he called it "the word of faith." "The word of faith that we proclaim: if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."<sup>vii</sup>

### III

The two women are then given specific instructions about what they are to do, first come and see, see where he once lay but lays no more, then go and tell the others to meet him in Galilee. As they turn to do that suddenly the risen living Jesus himself appears and instructs them in the same way. Do not be afraid. We never have to be afraid of anything ever again, because Jesus is risen. And this promise that in Galilee they will meet him. What is that about?

Galilee is where they met him the first time amid their fishing boats and tax booths and dinner tables and worship services, in the local synagogues not the central Temple. Galilee is daily existence. Galilee is ordinary life. Jesus is saying he will meet them where they work and worship and eat and farm. He will meet them where they go to school and share their friendships. There Jesus will meet them, and does. At the mountain in Galilee, an image connecting with Moses on the Mountain, with his transfiguration on the Mountain, with his Sermon on the Mountain and his feeding of 500 on the Mountain.

Interestingly heaven and our eternal destiny with Christ there is never mentioned in the Gospel Accounts of the Resurrection. That comes in other places, like Paul's

account and Jesus answer to those who came to test him about the woman who was married to seven brothers and wanted to know whose wife she would be in heaven. And Jesus quickly dismisses such speculation, saying of course there is a resurrection and a new age, but it will be quite different from what you are suggesting. You cannot put eternal life into your little box.

The Gospel emphasis, however, while assuring us death has been defeated by Jesus for us all and we will participate in his resurrection when we die, is concerned with what we do and how we live here and now. N.T. write describes it like this,

“If it is really true that in going to his death he took upon himself, and in some sense exhausted the full weight of the world’s evil- there clearly then is a task waiting to be done. The music he wrote must be performed. The early disciples saw this and got on with it.”<sup>viii</sup>

Over this Lenten Season many of us have been working a building our faith by participating in a small group, practicing intentional and personal forms of prayer, and learning ways to share our story about God with others who need to know and experience God’s love in Jesus. There has been a really remarkable even exponential growth of praying going on at red lights and on athletic fields, of random acts of kindness like breakfast being given to street people and prayers with folks who are looking to pay their power bills. We’ve even had people up front and giving a witness to the reality of Jesus Christ in their lives. The risen and living Jesus. Through them, through us, Jesus is at work.

Suddenly in a death dealing, cynical bad news world, resurrection is occurring. Not just in New Testament times but in our times. Resurrection is occurring where people are going to remote places of the earth to operate on eyes and build water purification systems.. Resurrection is occurring where others are going to Mexico or to north Birmingham to build to build a house or renovate a neighborhood for a poor family. Resurrection is occurring where some others are counseling with and praying for people who have lost their job and cannot pay their water or light bill, and where musicians are coming to share music with older folks who have been told they have dimmentia but because of these musicians there is a light in their eyes and a smile on their faces.

A man who worked with the homeless was asked, “Do you believe in the resurrection?” He responded, “Heck, I’ve seen it!” Resurrection is going on in our daily lives as we trust in the Living and Resurrected Lord and do what he says. Because, you see, now there is a new force controlling us. Not fear but faith. Not death but life. “Because I live you shall live also!” Forever! Now! Welcome him! Receive him! As one in danger of living!

“Christ is alive! No longer bounded To distant years in Palestine,  
But saving, healing, here and now, And touching every place and time.”<sup>ix</sup>

Jesus Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! “Hallelujah! Amen and Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 28:17.

<sup>ii</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Testament of Freedom, p. 264.

<sup>iii</sup> John 11:26

<sup>iv</sup> John 11:27.

<sup>v</sup> John Buchanan, in a sermon, “Fear and Great Joy”. 3-23-08, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, commenting on and quoting Frederick Buechner’s “The End is Life”, The Magnificent Defeat (p.75-77)

<sup>vi</sup> John Buchanan, in a sermon, “A Task Waiting... Music To Be Performed”, 4-8-11, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL.

<sup>vii</sup> Romans 10:8b,9.

<sup>viii</sup> N. T. Wright, Simply Christian, p.105.

<sup>ix</sup> The Presbyterian Hymnal, “Christ Is Alive!” , p.108.