

Racing from the Tomb

8 – Life Is A Miracle

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-25

John 20:1-18

April 4, 2010

Easter Sunday

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Last fall Philip Copeland, our gifted Director of Music Ministries and also Director of the Alabama Symphony Chorus, talked me into singing with that 150 voice chorus as we prepared for the Christmas Season performance of Handel's "Messiah." Philip is good too, by the way! You will recognize the most famous chorus "Hallelujah! Chorus," with which we will conclude our worship today. However, there is another Chorus in that great work, that spoke powerfully to me of the reality to which we bear witness today. The reality that transformed the world.

This chorus begins quietly, mournfully, somberly speaking of the human condition, "For as in Adam all die. For as in Adam all die." Then suddenly there arises the massive crescendo of full orchestra and full organ with all the stops pulled out, one immense chord, and then the chorus responding singing rapidly, "Even so in Christ shall all be made alive! Even so in Christ shall all be made alive! Even so in Christ, shall all, shall all, be made alive! Even so in Christ shall all shall all be made alive."

I

Do you believe it? Do you trust Jesus Christ to be true to his word? Do you have confidence that life is more powerful than death? Eugene O'Neil wrote a play, "A Long Day's Journey into Night" in which he pessimistically declares, "The human saga is a decline into nothingness." The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead makes a staggering counter-claim, not that life is here for a brief moment and then slowly declines or suddenly disintegrates into nothingness. But that, by God's power in raising his Son from the Tomb, life is transformed into life. Life that is life indeed! Life beyond the grave to be sure, but life transformed into life that is real, full, abundant, for us here and now, in this moment!

The Apostle Paul in his great chapter on the resurrection notes the obvious, "If in this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all people most to be pitied." We have, in essence, spun our wheels, wasted a lot of time in church, and prayer and hymn singing, and feeding the hungry and clothing the poor, and rebuilding homes destroyed by hurricanes and tornados, when we could have been out eating and drinking and having a jolly good time. "But in fact," Paul goes on to declare, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died... For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." More than that, he continues, "Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. (And) The last enemy to be destroyed is death."ⁱ

A cartoon from “The New Yorker” Magazine shows the way so many of us approach life. There is this 50ish professional type standing at the door of his apartment, opening it to this figure wearing a long, black, hooded garment and holding in its hand - a scythe. It is the Grim Reaper. Death. The man in the apartment is saying, “Oh, darn, just as I was beginning to take charge of my life!”ⁱⁱ

I experienced the same message one bright, sunny Easter Sunday afternoon in Bowling Green, KY, walking through the cemetery where I had gone so many times for the final journey of a church member. As I walked I noticed this ornate old above-ground family mausoleum. It had rusty iron gates, locked shut. And caught in the gates, trying to escape were the remains of a bird, its beak open as if crying out for help. Death comes unbidden and unannounced, and often unprepared for.

But in the Resurrection Jesus shows us a reality stronger than death and offers us a life that will not be captured by death nor the grave nor the tomb. I sat on the back row last week in the chapel enjoying the experience of being a back-row Presbyterian, and taking in the rich preaching offered by our daily noon wonderful Holy Week preachers. As I listened I noticed, really for the first time, the details in the beautiful chapel resurrection window, the last two panels on the right. There stands Jesus, vibrant virile, victorious, wearing a white robe, arising from his tomb, while Roman soldiers are slumped in a stupor. In his resurrection, death is defeated.

Remember Jesus had told 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.”ⁱⁱⁱ Here in the resurrection is a reality stronger than time and space chronology. Here in the resurrection is God’s life, abundant life converging into our life, here and now, as well as there and then.

Remember he promised the disciples on that last night, even as he was telling them he was going away, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.”^{iv} Remember. Earlier still, in this Gospel of John, upon whose seven miracles we have been pondering over the Lenten Season leading up to this Day of Days, Jesus describes the nature of this life he came to give us, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”^v

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb tells us that everything is fresh and new and alive. Nature’s renewal, the bursting forth of new blossoms and green leaves, is visual prop for the larger renewal of life Christ has won. Reality as we know it is itself undone. Apart from God death, you see, is most real, most inescapable reality we all face. “Death is the obvious meaning of existence, if God is ignored.”^{vi} If Adam has the final word, then death is the final reality.

But Christ has the final word! God in raising his Son Jesus Christ from the dead, defeated death, and life pervades even now. Death is relativized. That is why there really is wisdom in the quaint old phrase “he or she has passed on.” In the Jewish

Passover, the angel of death passes over the children of Israel who have the blood of a lamb smeared over their doorposts and they are spared from death. In the Christian Passover, we are carried over, through death to be sure. Each of us is promised a death. But in Christ death is not the end, simply a doorway we pass through, simply a transition we pass over. "If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's," wrote St. Paul.

II

But that first Easter none of them expected what has now become the cardinal truth of our faith. Jesus had been executed by the state and the religious authorities acting in collusion. And Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early in the morning to grieve, expecting to find the tomb sealed by the massive stone boulder that had been rolled across it on Friday. She comes to mourn her friend the day after the Jewish Sabbath. She finds instead the boulder has been rolled aside. The tomb is open. She immediately runs to tell Peter and the other disciples. What does she think as she runs? Does she even now believe the truth of the resurrection he had been hinting at? We have no such indication. Perhaps she is scared. Perhaps she is excited. So she runs.

There is, in fact, quite a lot of running going on throughout this morning of confusion. Hearing of the open tomb, Peter and the other disciple, John, set out for the tomb, their curiosity pricked. Their hope raised. They too break into a run. And don't you love the details John's Gospel provides- John outruns Peter and beats him to the tomb. Can't you just see Peter, who always wanted to be first, feeling a little hurt as he catches up, and sees John peering into the tomb ahead of him, observing what is left- linen grave clothes lying there, collapsed in the place where previously there had been the dead bloodied pulverized body of Jesus as he had been placed there late Friday afternoon.

However, not to be outdone, though he arrives at the tomb second, Peter is the first to charge in. Rushing right past John, Peter observes the same thing, empty grave clothes lying there, and this detail, the cloth that had covered Jesus' head rolled up neatly and set off by itself. Another unique detail of John's Gospel. I don't know what to make of that detail except perhaps this; the face of a dead body is frequently covered. But not that of a living person.

Perhaps in that "unseen-by- any-mortal-eye" resurrection moment, Jesus alive had first removed that covering before he was translated bodily out of those grave clothes. Perhaps too, John, written later than the other gospels, about 100 A.D., is stressing more strongly than Matthew, Mark or Luke, the clear unmistakable reality of Jesus' total bodily resurrection in response to rising Gnostic ideas of the day. Saying and showing not simply that the spirit of Jesus was raised in the hearts of the believers. But, even as Jesus was given a human body in his incarnation, so Jesus, in this same human body was fully and totally bodily raised in his resurrection. Easter then is not a remote intangible ethereal idea but the tangible, material sign. "I believe in the resurrection of the body," we confess in the Creed - the sign that the creation itself will be renewed, and freed from its bondage to death and decay.

Remember those words he had uttered at Lazarus' tomb after Lazarus is recalled to life, and stands there bound up in his grave clothes? "Unbind him, and let him go." Jesus had already shown us in that final dramatic sign foreshadowing this one, that the grave and its constricting grave clothes do not have the final word.

What has happened is immense. This is something cosmic. Though none of them yet grasp the full implication.

III

Peter and John immediately leave the tomb. Like men leaving from a shopping trip, they have seen what they came for. The tomb is empty. They are done. We are told they saw and believed, though still not understanding. They simply go home. Maybe some of you will respond to Easter like that. I hope not.

But Mary, to stick with the shopping image, is not done. She lingers there, weeping, overcome with sorrow. Bending down and looking into the tomb, inspecting the artifacts, she sees two angels at either end of the place where Jesus' body had been. They ask her why she weeps, and she says, because, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Saying this, she turns around, and sees Jesus standing there, but she does not recognize him. He too asks her why she is weeping, and, assuming him to be the gardener, she asks him if he has carried him away, and if so to show her where and she will handle things."

"Mary!" says Jesus, calling her by name. "Mary!" Another personal touch found only in John's Gospel. Her recognition of the Risen Jesus, "Rabbouni," "my Teacher" comes only after he calls her name. "To name is to know and remember," said a literary critic I heard on the radio on Good Friday. "To name is to know and remember."

John's gospel, you see, deals more intimately and more personally with the people who encounter Jesus along the way than the others. In John's Gospel, personal relationship with Jesus is everything. In John's Gospel we are given many of the names or at least descriptions and details of the lives of those who encounter Jesus, a couple at a wedding, a royal official and his sick boy, a lame man lying at a pool for 38 years, a hungry crowd of 5000 fed from a little boys lunch pail with 5 loaves and 2 fish, frightened disciples in a storm on the lake, a blind man given sight, Lazarus, dead, buried, given life. People and their personalities and their names matter to Jesus. "To name is to know and remember."

IV

People like you. "Mary, Joe, Molly, Tom," the risen Jesus speaks your name today and calls you to trust him and follow him. Resurrection you see, "is not an impersonal exhibit put on display before crowds. Resurrection is experienced as a network of personal relationships."^{vii}

Mary is told not to try and cling to him, but rather to go and tell the others. And she hurries back and announces the good news, "I have seen the Lord."

There follow scenes of his appearing to two on a road to Emmaus, to some behind locked doors in an upper room, later to them again, this time with Thomas present, Thomas who previously absent, missed the meeting and had said he would not believe unless he placed his hand in Jesus' side and felt his wounds. This, Jesus invites him to do. Jesus offers each individual with their varied personalities, what they need in order to believe. And believing, they are propelled out across the world and literally turn it upside down.

V

I do not know where each of you are today in your personal embrace of faith in Jesus and his resurrection. I do know the very fact that you are here says you at least hope it is true. What will it take, for you to trust and go forth believing, confident, courageous, convinced Jesus Christ is alive and death is defeated, and therefore ready from here on out to live for him? What will it take, for you to love God more than you fear death? Simply ask him. Simply ask God to reveal himself to you today. There is no better time and no better place for you to call on him and, no longer doubting, to declare to him, "My Lord and my God!"

If death and the tomb have the last word, then Macbeth is right, "All our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more."

But in fact, "Christ has been raised from the dead." The Lord God Almighty has in his Son descended from realms of light and penetrated the thick darkness of the kingdom of Death, and released all of us who were bound, all of us who were imprisoned, and made us God's sons and daughters for all eternity. "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly."^{viii} "Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die!" Indeed! "Do you believe this?"

With his resurrection and the breathing on us of his Spirit we his community have a mission to fulfill, and the power to fulfill it, to declare to all the world this good news, and to make it real by our actions of mercy and compassion and justice.

"The Misfit, in Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," says of Christ "He's thrown everything off balance."

"If he did what he said then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow."

I tell you dear friends, with all my heart and all my mind I believe it is true. He did what he said. Jesus Christ is alive and with us this very moment. May the Risen Christ reach you, call your name, lift you, hold you, and heal you. Then may you answer by faith, "My Teacher, My Lord and my God."

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”^{ix}

PRAYER:

“Risen Lord Jesus – we thank you, we praise you, and we welcome you. We receive you, as you in fact are: Our Lord, our Savior, and our God. Dwell within us. Shine forth through us. May your resurrection life transform us – Hallelujah! Amen.”

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 15:19, 20, 22, 25,26

ⁱⁱ New Yorker Cartoon, recounted by Fleming Rutledge, The Undoing of Death, p.283.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 11:25,26.

^{iv} John 14:18,19.

^v John 10:10.

^{vi} Fleming Rutledge, The Undoing of Death, quoting William Stringfellow, p.274.

^{vii} Eugene Peterson, Living The Resurrection, p.95.

^{viii} John 10:10.

^{ix} John 20:30-31.