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Easter Day Series A 2017

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Easter Sunday, April 16

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Our churches will ring with that familiar call and response this week and the preacher is challenged to preach on the very center of the Christian faith. Children will repeat the words, adults will smile and speak them too, and all of us will stand in awe before it without really comprehending it.

To make matters worse this is also Holy Week. You have probably had an unusual Sunday the week prior, a service on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and perhaps even on Holy Saturday or a Sunrise Service at some ridiculously early hour on Sunday. You are tired, perhaps exhausted when you croak out “He is Risen!” You might be on an adrenaline high at the moment, but when you get to Easter Sunday afternoon, I bet you will find a couch somewhere and crash.

If that is not tough enough, your church will likely be filled with a lot of folks whom you don’t know especially well. Some of them will be the families who like salmon are returning to their homes from which they swam years ago. Others will be the tenuously connected members who manage to find an excuse not to be there since Christmas Eve. Remember my dictum in that regard. If you are only planning on attending two weeks out of the year, Christmas and Easter are your very best bests. Credit the C and E crowd with some wisdom. There will likely just be some folks who wander in from the street, maybe they are there for the Easter breakfast.

But meanwhile you have a sermon to write. You are dealing with a mystery no one can fully comprehend, you are exhausted and proclaiming to a congregation which includes a lots of folks whom you don’t know. Feeling any pressure yet? If not, just remember that all your old time members are counting on you to preach the sort of sermon that will make some of these folks want to come back next week.

Let’s take a little of that pressure off.

- 1. You don’t need to save the world with this sermon. God will work through it, and while you will do your best, his Spirit will make this work. Count on him.*
- 2. You don’t need tell them something new. They are not coming for a new story, but to hear a very old and familiar story. That doesn’t mean you can be stale, but nor does it mean you have to wow them with some insight they have never had before.*
- 3. You don’t have to be the last word on Easter. There are six more weeks of this and next year rolls around too. Leave something for the rest of the season and leave something for the next time these guys come to church. Focus on one thing and do it well. Don’t get bogged down by the enormity of this project. That is why there are seven weeks of Easter. It takes time and you have it.*

Rejoice. Christ is risen! It is simply a day to be happy.

Regarding the readings: we have options! Two collects and two first readings will present us with choices for the day. The preacher and worship planner simply need to choose. The blessing in this is that these come around again in three years.

The first readings are a reading from Acts and a reading from the OT. My preference is the OT – but the Acts text is a good one too. The creators of the three year lectionary observed that the lectionary had little treatment of the book of Acts and sought to rectify that with the season of Easter. Thus we have a choice, either an OT reading or an Acts reading today. The rest of the season we will just have the Acts reading.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God the Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The first collect starts us off with God's power. That is a good thing to start with when you are dealing with terrible and implacable foes whom you cannot conquer. And foes get no more dreadful and implacable than death. I might deceive myself into thinking that I can amend my sinful life and be a better person, but death has a cruel way of mocking my delusions of immortality. The cemetery I drive by on the way to work, the anniversary of a loved one's death, the disturbing pain that has shown up in my neck or my back, all remind me that I am dust and to dust I shall return. I can mask the pain with the right pills, but I cannot make the cemeteries and the sadness go away. This problem will simply take larger help than I can provide myself. I need God.

He has answered that need. Jesus has come. The reference to opening the gate of everlasting life seems to be an allusion to the angel who was set at the gate of Eden with a flaming sword to keep Adam and Eve out. The gate, once barred, has been opened.

We pray that this joyful celebration would also transforming experience for the living of life. The same God who raised Jesus and will raise us from our graves also is called upon to raise us from another death, the death of sin, by the same life-giving Spirit.

Does that distract from the day? It might. I really like to keep things simple. Easter always seems to me a good time to talk about the conquering of one death, the big one, the bad one, the one that scares us, if you get right down to it, scares us to death. We will get the chance to preach the morality and the repentance later.

Or

O God, for our redemption You gave Your only-begotten Son to death on the cross and by His glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of the enemy. Grant that all our sin may be drowned through daily repentance and that day by day we may arise to live before You in

righteousness and purity forever; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This collect uses the metaphor of redemption. In the ancient world bankruptcy often meant that the person who could not pay bills was sold into slavery along with his family. A relative could go to the slave market and purchase that loved one and set them free. That was redemption. It meant a lot more to the folks of the first century than our usual use of the word “redemption” today: coupons.

The price God paid to have us back as his children, was the price of his own Son, dead on a cross, but also today raised to life. We are through this gift, delivered from the chains, the power, the lordship of an ancient enemy, a cruel Scrooge who would have crushed and consumed us.

Again, this prayer brings us to the new life which is lived every day in the resurrection. Both collects bring us there. Perhaps it is time not to fight it, but I would like to just to preach the resurrection today and not the moral resurrection.

Acts 10:34-43 I think the setting of this first reading is really important. The reading simply recounts Peter’s words, but the where and to whom he said this are also important.

³⁰ And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ ³³ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

We wondered what Peter was saying about Jesus to us today. The preaching of Jesus is a message of peace. That is predicated on the fact that Jesus is Lord of all. That is a radical

statement, we might not like all those folks. The claim that God shows no partiality is a challenging, even condemning word for us. God wants no one to be lost and that was hard for Peter this day and it is hard for us too.

Peter opened his mouth – a rather scary thought – but this time, for once, something good comes out of it. Peter has been summoned to the house of Cornelius, a gentile Roman Centurion. The Spirit has moved Cornelius and has aggressively persuaded Peter to go to this man’s house. We don’t automatically see the issue here. The first generation of Christians were all Jews and the book of Acts tells the story of the difficult transition they had to make as the radical nature of God’s love in Jesus started to dawn on them. God loved all humanity, not just the Jews, not just the Gentiles who followed the Jewish kosher laws, but all humanity, regardless of bloodlines and BLT’s.

This scene of Peter’s sermon takes place after the Spirit has pushed him into this house which would have rendered him ceremonially unclean in observant Jewish eyes. Acts is very careful to say that several Jewish Christians come with Peter, he has witnesses who will report what he does here. One sense a real sense of hesitancy on his part. Cornelius really doesn’t know why he is there either, except he has had a powerful vision to invite this Peter. They are staring at each other for a moment, and Peter opens his mouth.

What comes out is a wonderful synopsis of first generation preaching. Peter retells the Jesus story, this is a Gospel account in miniature. The opening lines of verse 37 are probably not an indication of how much Cornelius actually knew, it was simply the speaking style of the day. It is like a modern person who slips in a “y’know” once in a while.

The story follows the basic shape of the Gospel, ministry, passion, death, resurrection and appearance to the disciples. Peter has been commanded to preach and that is what he is doing.

Of course you know the rest of the story. Cornelius and his household, upon hearing this sermon, have the Holy Spirit come upon them and Peter turns to his scandalized Jewish friends who are with him and simply points out the Spirit. If the Spirit has come upon them, they have to be baptized into Jesus’ name. And they are, despite the fact that they are not now and have no intention of observing the Jewish kosher restrictions on diet, Sabbath, etc.

For the preacher today, he will want to focus on the attestation of the resurrection. It was the center point of all the sermons we hear in the book of Acts. Jesus has risen from the dead was their main message and ours as well. What Peter asserts here and is really interesting to us is that Jesus is raised for a specific purpose – to be judge of all humanity. This is really good news, because a judge of course is the one who determines the punishment for the crime. We often mistakenly assume that a judge determines innocence or guilt, but that is not really so. The jury does that, or the evidence itself. The decision of the judge is to determine what is just or appropriate punishment for a crime.

Think about that for a moment. The one who will determine the punishment for you sin has holes in his hands and feet where he died for those sins. In a real sense, in every sense, what he will do

is look at those hands and say that his death was punishment enough for your sins. It is very good news that Jesus has risen from the dead. Our joyful task, according to Peter is to announce to all this world that the one who is your judge is also the one who has died for you. His judgment is rendered – you are restored to the life which was forfeit because of your sin. The cruel jailor, our ancient foe, no longer has a claim upon you.

The “everyone” at the end of the passage intrigues me. Peter’s audience was not only the household of Cornelius but also the fellow Jewish Christians who had come with him and were very uncomfortable being in that gentile house at that time. They considered Cornelius to be an unclean Gentile. He could be saved, it was true, but that, in their estimation, could only happen if Cornelius adopted the Jewish way. Peter now sees that out of every nation (goim) God had called people to believe and be forgiven, not just Jews and not just the gentiles who adopted the Jewish life based upon the OT. This text could be a great missional sermon, but it also carries within it a tremendous indictment of a Lutheranism which would insist that the saved look like us. This sort of cultural barrier setting is very easy. Does the homeless man need to enter the middle class before he could be one with us? Does the addict or the divorcee or the one who has just been released from prison feel pressure to conform to us and our standards before he can be a part of our community at this church? There is no part of American society today that is more racially segregated than our churches on Sunday morning. We seem sometimes to be making the very sort of distinctions that this text is smashing. We don’t insist that one cannot eat ham sandwiches or have a Saturday job, but we have surely set up other boundaries for people. Be aware, however, this theme will show up later in the Easter season.

or Jeremiah 31:1-6

“At that time, declares the LORD, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people.”

² Thus says the LORD:

“The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness;

when Israel sought for rest,

³ the LORD appeared to him from far away.

I have loved you with an everlasting love;

therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

⁴ Again I will build you, and you shall be built,

O virgin Israel!

Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines

and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.

⁵ Again you shall plant vineyards

on the mountains of Samaria;

the planters shall plant

and shall enjoy the fruit.

⁶For there shall be a day when watchmen will call
in the hill country of Ephraim:
'Arise, and let us go up to Zion,
to the LORD our God.'"

This is a marvelous text for Easter morning because it is replete with hope and Easter is the feast of hope. Not the limp, pale hope which most people would use to define that word, but the joyful, robust, and transformative hope which has sustained persecuted Christians in prisons and arenas. This hope is what you see in the face of that doughty old Christian whose doctor has told him there is nothing more to be done, but the old Christian smiles still and ends up comforting the doc.

Jeremiah's ministry came at the end of the kingdom of Judah. Israel, Jeremiah's own people, were gone, and had been gone for generations. They were lost, and were not coming back. Judah was teetering on the brink of destruction and Jeremiah would live to see it. Because of the peculiar way in which the material in Jeremiah is arranged, we cannot be entirely sure when this was written. But Jeremiah's career spans the last gasp of Josiah's reforms to the bitter destruction of Jerusalem and an unwilling flight in to Egypt, carried there by the handful of survivors.

Here in the first verses of chapter 31, which will end on the words of the New Covenant which we often hear on Reformation Day, Jeremiah speaks to the discouraged and the downtrodden people. And he gives them reason to hope on a number of fronts:

- 1. God will be the God of "all the clans of Israel." The northern ten tribes are destroyed, even to this day they are obliterated, absorbed into the cultures of the oppressors. God speaks of a time when he will once more create them and they will be his people. Jesus in calling 12 disciples seems to be saying that he is reconstituting the nation of Israel, including the lost ones.*
- 2. The people who survived found rest in the wilderness – in an interesting twist on the Exodus narrative he reminds them of another day when they were in bondage in Egypt. Usually the promised land was called the "rest" for the people, but Jeremiah envisions that the real rest comes in the wilderness, when God leads, and the people hang on his every word and eat the manna he creates for them.*
- 3. God's love for them, stated in Moses, reiterated through the prophets, challenged now in the events surrounding the destruction of Israel and Judah, Jeremiah repeats. God's love is boundless, it does not end. God's love for them is eternal. He is faithful to the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prior generations of his people. You cannot look at the current situation and find the measure of God's love in it. We have not come to the end of that boundless well.*
- 4. Their virgin state will be restored to them. Consistently the prophets have compared the idolatry of the people to adultery. Jeremiah himself has used this image. Indeed, he will*

use it just a few verses later in verse 32 of this very chapter. Normally virginity is not someone one gets back. Once lost, it is simply gone. God restores the impossible.

5. *But she will not only be a virgin, but she will be made so by God, dressed in her proper attire, given her instruments of celebration and sent to make merry with the partiers. This is not the virgin weeping over Jerusalem, but the happily restored virgin, the one Jeremiah's people cannot imagine in their sorrow, who loves life, and who rejoices and celebrates.*
6. *Samaria will be planted with vineyards. Samaria is a heap of rubble when Jeremiah writes. It has been for decades. No one plants vineyards there except the gentiles whom the Assyrians transplanted into Israel. Vineyards are a symbol of stability. Wheat or barley is harvested in a few short months, but olive trees and vineyards are things you plant for harvests years in the future. The people planting vineyards are looking ahead to being there for some time.*
7. *And the Samaritans will once more say to each other, "Let us go up to the mountain of YHWH." Every northern king was judged to be wicked by the Deuteronomic history because they did not cease from the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat. The sin of Jeroboam was that he refused to allow the people to go to Jerusalem to worship. Jeremiah envisions far more than simply a day when the two nations are restored, but also a day when they are once more united.*

And our people? What do they hope for? My guess is their hopes are altogether too small. Jeremiah's folks were hoping to make it through that day, they were hoping perhaps the Babylonians would not come and finish the job and level their city, or they were hoping that their walls would withstand his assault. They did not dream of a day when their innocence was restored to them, or that their long lost brethren would be in one family with them again.

What are we hoping for? What should we be hoping for? Do we long for Eden or have our theological imaginations grown too stunted for that? Do we long for perfection or would we settle for a little better than the next guy? Do we long for eternity, or just tomorrow?

The Easter preacher might do well to set the bar high.

Psalm 16

Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

² I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you."

³ As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones,
in whom is all my delight.

⁴ The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names on my lips.

- ⁵ The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
- ⁶ The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.
- ⁷ I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
- ⁸ I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
- ⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure.
- ¹⁰ For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.
- ¹¹ You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

The reason we have this psalm today is vss. 9-10, but don't forget vs. 11. The psalmist is expressing the joy and faith of the people who hear the promises God makes today, trust those promises, and look ahead. Their hearts are glad, even though the world is scratching its head about that. Their whole being rejoices. Our flesh will dwell secure. The promise of resurrection is not just some ethereal, ghostly, float about on a cloud afterlife which is not truly real. Our flesh dwells secure, we are not abandoned to the grave. Our holy one, Jesus has not seen corruption (rot) but has been raised and that means we will as well. God has made know to us the path of Life, the One who is the Way. In his presence there is a fullness of joy and eternal pleasures which the world simply cannot give us. We live by faith!

Colossians 3:1-4 *While I would not read the text any further, I think it is necessary that the reader and the preacher understand that Paul is not talking about the Greek spiritual sense which pervades much of western Christianity. Notice at the end of the additional verses just how physical/real the resurrection comes to be.*

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which

is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Paul writes, "If you have been raised..." It sounds so speculative to most folks today, and that is a problem. That is not what Paul means, so the preacher might need to address that. I like to say, "If the window is wet, it must be raining." That is not a speculation, but simply a logical conclusion. That is more the sense of Paul. "Because you have been raised..." might be the better translation if we are looking for a dynamic equivalent.

We are to seek the things above. What are they? Do we walk about with our heads tilted up, peering into the sky, over the heads of our neighbors? Hardly! The contrast is between earthly things, and things over which Christ rules in grace and love. That is not a distinction in place as much as is in kingdom or reign.

I often ask my students if my car is a "heavenly thing." They all look at me like I am a little nuts, but then we start to talk about it a little more. What makes something heavenly that we would keep our mind upon it? What is the earthly thing we are to eschew? It is not that the heavenly is somehow not on earth, rather it is the one who rules over that thing, the one who is seated at the right hand of God. My car, in so far as it helps me be a better father and husband, caring for the children I have been given, is indeed a heavenly thing. If, on the other hand, I am in some competition with my neighbor and take some foolish pride in the fact that my Honda is better built, more reliable, or simple better looking than his Dodge, it might well be an earthly sort of thing.

This text will bring the hearer to realize and live out the fact that this resurrection of Jesus not just an Easter morning affair, but a reality which has transformed and altered the way I conceive of my world and live within it. Because in His crucified flesh Christ became so incarnate as to take up our every suffering, indeed the suffering of the whole creation, now the kingdom of God breaks into this broken world physically as well. Jesus did not rise spiritually to redeem only the "ethereal" things which we imagine are light enough to float on the clouds, but he rose bodily, in order to redeem all of creation.

Another way to consider this text is to consider that it asks us to focus on what actually happened when Jesus died and rose again from the grave. Our spiritualized and deistic culture often wants to say that the real fruit of the resurrection only happens on the last day or when we die. But that is missing the point. When Jesus rose from the grave the whole of creation was restored to the creator. I am now given to live in that new reality. It is not easy to see, in fact most of the time it is positively hidden from sight. But on the last day Jesus, who is here right now, will appear. On that day the reality in which I live right now will also be visible, appearing for eyes to see.

Matthew 28:1-10

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.” ⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

“See, I have told you.” Struck us as an odd thing in the text a few years ago when we last looked at this. What is this statement? Is it his way of saying, “This interview is over”? Is it just a guy from heaven who is used to people actually doing what gets said? I rather get the impression that the women are standing there with their mouths open and the angel is telling them to get moving.

Some years ago when this text came up, we were watching in horror the images from Japan of the great earthquake and tsunami which wreaked so much destruction. We thought that the words of the Angel were odd. He told them not to be afraid. But there was much to fear: Earthquake (Japan) Glowing clothes (Japan again!) Today it is Syria and the threat of war. The kook in North Korea is inching closer to a nuclear missile which will be able to reach North America and probably has the metro areas of Portland and Seattle in his sights. The guards are terrified past the point of fainting. The women are naturally afraid. Is he really imagining that simply telling them not to fear is sufficient?

Is this just simply a servant checking off another thing on his “to do list?”

Is he appealing to his angelic authority: “I have told you.”

What of the reaction of the women? They worship him – they grasp his feet – this is something which Jews would only do for God.

Then we get another really odd picture. The women, terrified, are running to do what the angel has ordered them to do. Suddenly Jesus shows up. I get this picture of Jesus popping out from behind the rock and shouting “Greetings!” I envision Jesus really enjoying this moment. He is not making fun of them, but he is joyful – they are terrified and that is getting in the way of their joy. The angels message was supposed to bring joy, but it has brought fear. He knows that his presence is going to be good news, I can imagine the huge grin on his face when he says this. They came out to visit the grave of a dead friend, and instead get the delight of seeing him alive.

I believe reading this passage with the fresh eyes of the first time is critical to preaching it. I believe this appearance of Jesus is intended to calm the fear of these women.

There is a good chance that this will be the text you almost have to preach this day. And it is a good text to preach. Acts shows us Peter preaching these events. Jeremiah looks forward to these events. Paul reflects on these events. These are the events!

*The struggle with it is that Matthew and all the Gospels tell a very spare story here. You can do a comparative reading of the text and find interesting things. If indeed, as many scholars assume, Mark was written first, Matthew may be furthering the story when he tells us the women left the tomb with fear **and great joy**. Mark only notes the fear. The angel tells them to go, and they are going, but suddenly, before they can get there, Jesus shows up. We don't know why, but he does. He urges them not to be afraid. Is that why he comes, simply to tell them not to be afraid? Does he come to us with the same message?*

There could be a really nice sermon in that. Easter means you don't have to be afraid anymore. Jesus really wants to make sure of that. When the angel did not succeed in calming their fear, he personally came and took their fear away.

Law and Gospel

1. Death is universal – Even Jesus died. But the good news is that Jesus' death means resurrection. Jesus is the first fruit of a glorious turning backward of time, an undoing of Sin's great destruction. Death is undone and we have begun to see that in Jesus.
2. Death is not only the day when I stop breathing, as real as that is. Death is anything that is without God. Jesus resurrection from the dead is not only a future life, but also a present life which turns my current dead-like trudging from birth to grave into a celebration of a new life which Christ has given me now.
3. Death can lead us to despair and despair is the absence of hope, real hope. I often substitute my pathetic hopes for real hopes, but Jesus' resurrection means that I can do much better than simply settling for what sounds reasonable. Resurrection is not reasonable, it is off the chart miraculous. What miracles may I hope for now?
4. Death makes me very afraid, and fear is a killer of joy. Jesus appears to those women on the way back from the tomb. They feel the joy, but they are still afraid. He wants to take their fear from them. He wants to leave you with a life of joy.

Sermon Ideas

1. Don't be afraid (Gospel lesson – that Jesus' creative word spoken to those women so long ago would also ring out this day and relieve us of our fears so that we may rejoice in the resurrection of Christ.)

What makes people afraid this week? To what are they saying, Yeah, he rose, but what about...

The unknown is often the nameless fear – we don't know what we are afraid of, but we are surely afraid of it.

Our parishes are often afraid of the death of the church as we know it. We wonder why there are not more people at church today. something like 39% of young people identify as “nothing” when the religious question is asked of them.

Our government seems to be coming unhinged. Some are happy, others are terrified.

Death – are we really afraid of death?

Losing their money? Are they afraid that the economy will tank?

Are they afraid of their relationships souring and losing members of their family?

No good future for our children. The American dream seems like wishful thinking.

Will the North Korean wacko launch a nuke in our direction?

The forces which control my life seem like I have no ability to meet them or do anything about it.

Do Coptic Christians tremble with every shadow which approaches their church doors this Sunday?

We have a great question to ask of this. There is much fear, but people are not connecting the ministry and service of God's people to answering these questions. Somehow their fear is not driving them into the arms of Christ in the church. Jesus and the angels will say to the fearful people of the first century that they should not be afraid of those things of which they were afraid. The persecutions, the famines, the death, the suffering, and much more did not go away. In fact, sometimes it got much worse, and Jesus still said, “Don't be afraid.” He has destroyed death and devil. Don't be afraid. Is the problem that the Christians have not believed this word of Jesus? Are we acting out of fear? I don't know if that is what we preach on this day, but is it what we preach against without mentioning it, a subsumed or subliminal antagonist? Do we preach against fear because it is that important?

This seems appropriate: Earthquakes continue, the recent rattling of California has many nerves on edge after recent quakes in Chile and Indonesia. Lots of things make us afraid. We are not quite so fixated on nuclear plants melting down, but melt-down may be the best way to describe Ukraine, Middle Eastern turmoil, and much more. The economy looks like it is teetering toward another meltdown and our hopes are seemingly pinned on Congress to solve a budget problem. We have tornadoes and floods, it has already been a month of seemingly biblical proportions. Excuse our poor folks if they are afraid. They bring with them a whole host of things to be afraid of. They are lonely, they are

struggling with uncertainty, they are afraid what will happen and their human nature is to assume the worst. They are afraid that their identity will be stolen or that their identity will be discovered. If my wife, boss, kids, really knew who I am, would they still love me? Will I lose it all?

The angel and Jesus will tell the women and us that we should not be afraid. That does not mean the problems go away. But the fear does.

The angel has sat upon the stone which he rolled away. Through the eyes of these women we are also invited to peer into the darkness of the tomb and see that He is not there. We have all heard this message before – but still we fear. Someone once counted them up, and there are 365 different places in the Bible which have some form of “fear not!” in them. That’s one per day of the year. This is today’s “don’t fear!” Where does Jesus pop out from behind a bush with his greetings and remove our fears? Where do we find his smiling and gentle face where we least expect it? I remember a day when my parish faced great challenges as leaders took jobs in other cities. I was afraid – but God had people waiting in the wings of my parish whom I had never considered. Within a year we were better off than we had been before.

The two Mary’s thought that they had come to the end of the story, he reminds us today that all these things, even death itself, are simply not the end of the story. Peter had followed Jesus into the courtyard because he wanted to see the “end.” All the things he was afraid would happen indeed happened. Jesus was tortured, crucified, and killed. But Jesus rose on Easter and said, “Don’t be afraid!” We know the end of this story, we may be a little fuzzy on the details between now and then, but we know the end of this story, and that ending is no ending but the continuing of something we call life, a life which is currently hidden with Christ.

Here we want to really focus on verse ten. Why did Jesus show up on their way to fulfill the angels command? They were on the way. They were doing what they supposed to do. But it says they had fear, and Jesus comes, with the simple message not to be afraid. Surely he smiled at them and the text tells us they fell at his feet and grabbed them with their hands. (Bill says pay attention to this next part!) That touch must have been glorious. Those feet, pierced by nails, had been the scene of his horrible death, now they were the sweetest Gospel. He lived. They touched him. This was no ghost. They had come out to the tomb anticipating touching his corpse, but now they touch his living flesh. He replaces their fear with certainty. These feet which bring good news were truly beautiful.

Jesus wants to take away our fear because fear gets in the way of our joy and our mission as his resurrection people. Our fear too often closes our mouths. We imagine that when Jesus says don’t be afraid that we are supposed to take this fear away, conquering our fear. But it is Jesus who takes the fear away.

We know that simply telling folks does not take away fear. But then again Jesus once told the wind and waves to be quiet. He once told Peter to feed a multitude with a few fish and loaves of bread, he once told a blind man to open his eyes and see, he told the demons to leave, well...you are getting the point. When Jesus says something it is not like when you and I say something. Jesus' words have a power which creates the very thing they describe or proscribe. Jesus takes their fear away.

That Jesus, risen from the dead, takes your fear away. Notice that the Christian who faces death bravely, has not had the reason for the fear taken away. They still die. The cancer or heart attack or whatever still happens, but it is the fear that goes away. The reasons the women were afraid at the tomb do not change. It was a dangerous time. There was still a scary angel sitting on that stone. There were lots of good reasons to be afraid, but Jesus takes away the fear. We have all seen people face death or some other fearful thing. It is not that God takes the fearful thing away, but he takes the fear away. Consider the psalm perhaps. David, the psalmist, faces his own death, but he is not afraid. You may want to tell a story here about someone you know who has bravely faced death. Consider Peter who was afraid to talk to Cornelius that day. He was way outside his comfort zone.

Think of the persecuted Christians who have endured terrible things because they heard this same Jesus call them and assure them that theirs was a crown of righteousness. Point to the fact that Coptic Christians are in church today. Last Sunday their brothers and sisters in faith were bombed and scores died. Is that threat gone? Hardly! But Jesus conquers fear.

This Eastertide Jesus takes your fear away as well. He is risen from the dead and your death is undone. He replaces your fear with hope and love and joy. He points us to grab hold of something else – in the case of the women, his feet! He is risen from the dead to care for you. He is risen from the dead, your sad and fearful duty is no longer necessary. It is a day to rejoice! Your life is in his hands. Fearful things may still happen, indeed they will happen. The bombers will still do their dirty deeds, but every one of those Copts are in his hands. Live or die, they are in his hands. Whatever Satan may have contrived to make us afraid will not have the last word for us. That belongs to Jesus who shows up today and says, “Don't be afraid!”

2. Raised with Christ (Epistle – that the Holy Spirit would restore the senses of the hearer to perceive the world in which we live as the redeemed and restored place that God has seen.)

This sermon would reorient the hearer. It is a little like looking as vertical blinds that have been turned so you cannot see out. When you take two or three steps to the left and you look at it from a different angle, you can see through to the outside. This sermon would have your hearer look at the same things that they see every day but now see them in the light of Christ and see through them to the salvation which Christ has wrought for this whole world.

First deal with the “if.” This is an evidentiary if, not a speculative if. Paul does not doubt that they have been raised from the dead with Christ, and neither should we.

Then deal with the new world that Paul sees through the resurrection. We keep our minds on heavenly things. But as we say in the notes, that does not mean we tip our heads back and look up all the time nor that astronomy is the only godly profession for a Christian. It means we see this world differently, no longer as earthly/fleshly things but at heavenly things. The car I drive, the home I live in, my neighbor, my family, my money, all of it. The people in my life are now heavenly because God has died for every one of them, risen from the grave, and bestowed eternal life on all. Some don't know that yet, it is true, but that doesn't change my view of them as much as what God has done for them changes it. Their sins are forgiven, you see, I don't need to balance scales, settle scores, or keep a ledger any more. I have my eyes on a heavenly thing, a person whom God has redeemed in the blood of Christ. This keeping a tally of your sins and my sins seems so pointless when they are all already paid for anyway. The sins are now the things we help each other set behind us, but they are not the things which give definition to you or me. God has defined us in Christ.

And the things of my life, the possessions, the home, the money, the environment, and the whole world in which I live, all of it has been reoriented by Christ. No longer do they get to define me either. They are gifts of the father to his children. My car is a heavenly thing because with it get to live out the vocation God has given me to be a husband and father. It is no longer the competitive thing which I use to demonstrate that I am smarter or better or luckier than my neighbor. Such thoughts are far from me. For Christ has given me value, I do not need it from these things. They are heavenly because they are part of that beautiful kingdom which Christ has wrought and with them I live the beautiful life he has given me to live.

Do not think that God is beneath using my Volkswagen as a heavenly thing. He surely uses the simplest of things – bread and wine, water, and even the human voice to work his kingdom among us. The women grab the feet of Jesus in the Gospel reading today. They had been pierced by nails on a cross on Friday and they had come out to anoint that dead body with oil, but find that the resurrected Christ still has use for those feet as he stands before them. He still has use for this old and sometimes broken creation until the day when he comes to make all things new.

3. Our Hope is Risen from the Dead (OT/Acts and Gospel Lesson – That the Spirit of God would call the hearer to a life which is lived in the sturdy, lasting, and joyful Hope in God.)

This sermon will notice the way the women come to this tomb this day. In the dark, afraid, grieving, spent from a terrible week of terrible sights and sounds. They have come for a somber task, to prepare the body of their beloved master. He had been hastily buried

on Friday. They did not have time to do this right. They had come hoping only to do this right.

But their expectations were turned on their heads. They found not the body of Jesus, but the glorious light of his servants. Relaxing upon the stone which had sealed in Jesus in vain, the angel gives them the unbelievable news. Jesus is risen from the dead.

That is a miracle. Dead men don't rise. But then again, I don't see angels sitting on stones very often either and for that matter Jesus has always been breaking my expectations. He walked on water, he fed the multitudes, he opened the eyes of the blind, and even raised the dead himself. Demons obeyed him, so did the wind and the waves.

And now, he has conquered death. That means there is not a problem in this world I cannot approach with hope. Distinguish between the real hope and the pallid imitation hope so many people think of when the word comes up. Look at Jeremiah's situation, or use Peter's exhortation that the risen Christ is our judge, both of those things give us reason to hope. Jeremiah stretches the hope of ancient Judah in its hour of need. Peter points his gentile audience and the Jews who were with him to a judgment rendered by the very King who had already given his life blood for their redemption. That is a hopeful expectation!

Jesus' resurrection means that you too can hope.

Don't try to flesh all that out for folks – just let them hope in Christ.

4. Everyone? (Acts 10 – that the Spirit of God would convince the hearer that he/she is included in the everyone and so is everyone else.)

An African-American poet once reflected on walking by a segregated cemetery, with a “whites only” sign on the gate, that here was segregation he could get behind. Being excluded from death sounded like a good thing to him.

But of course we know that there is no segregation from death. Death is the ultimate equalizer, no respecter of race, class, gender, or any of the categories we might imagine. His clammy embrace will grab us all eventually.

The world knows no other end to this story we call life. Many today peer into its reality and despair in nihilistic self-absorbing, grief. They will create some meaning or give up hope of creating meaning for their lives, but they are absolutely sure that this is all there is.

But we are gathered this day because there is another everyone which rings out today. Peter saw it in the outpoured Holy Spirit which came upon the folks in Cornelius' house that day. God's love, his resurrection, his undoing of all that is wrong in this world is not just for some, it is for all.

The Christian today has such a happy and joyful message. Not only has God included me in that all, but he has included everyone else as well! Our joy is complete and replete, full

and overflowing. The redemption which God has wrought in Jesus is human, fully human. It extends to every member of the race. He has not conquered the foe of some, but the ancient enemy of us all. He has undone death.

Forced by his love, the grave has surrendered his body to eternal life, but that is simply the precursor, the first fruits of another great day when at his Word, all the dead shall rise.

He is risen!

Any great Easter illustrations? Three years ago we called for some and got these. Any new ones?

From Pr. Robert Grimm: The report from the Battle of Waterloo is an excellent example of what took place on Good Friday. The victory was clear, but unknown, as we shall see.

The Duke of Wellington led the English forces against the troops of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. News of the history-making battle came by sailing vessel to the south coast of England, and it was wigwagged overland by semaphore toward London.

The capitol awaited the news. On top of the Winchester Cathedral, the semaphore began to spell out the message to the people who eagerly wanted to know the outcome. But the London fog was rolling in. The semaphore's short message was W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N D-E-F-E-A-T-E-D, and no more could be read. Ooooohhh! The word spread quickly in London. Wellington's defeat was now made known. The citizens were distraught at this horrible setback. England could not halt Napoleon's armies!

The fog lifted in an hour or so, and the message was repeated. The signaling semaphore repeated the message, so it could be understood completely. W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N D-E-F-E-A-T-E-D T-H-E E-N-E-M-Y! There was the whole truth, and it was marvelous!

When the forces of evil broke out against God's Son on Calvary, it caused him to die. It looked like Jesus was defeated. But when the battle ended, and the air cleared, the message was continued: Jesus defeated the enemy. His dying did not end the world. His Kingdom was not lost. It had its most amazing victory. The Bible says in I Cor. 15: 20 - 22

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

The message is better than first thought. It is not simply that Christ has died, but that He died and He lives. It is that we can be forgiven our sin. It is that we can join Him in heaven. The message is that we, too, shall live!

From Pr. Bob Martinek: “One beautiful spring afternoon, as a boy and his father were driving in the country, a bumblebee flew through an open window. The little boy, who was allergic to bee stings, was petrified. But his dad quickly reached out, grabbed the bee, squeezed it in his hand and then released it. But his son grew even more frantic as it buzzed by him, so again his father reached out his hand, but this time, he pointed to his palm. There stuck in his hand was the stinger of the bee. His dad then said to him – you don’t need to be afraid anymore, I’ve taken the sting for you.”

Illustrations of God taking away the fear:

- The firefighters on 9/11 ran into those buildings because their fear did not govern what they did. For many of them, they ran into their deaths.
- Jesus told the women “don’t be afraid – go and tell” Did he tell them to get back on the bike after they had fallen off?
- Love does this – the guy who sacrifices his life for his buddies, jumping on the hand grenade, does so because he loves the people he is saving. Christ’s own sacrificial love conquers fear.
- An African immigrant who was afraid of all these strange people who lived within his apartment complex and outside it. It was a community of people who befriended him and got him out of that apartment and into the world. Were there still scary people out there? Yes, but he was not alone. Jesus has risen from the dead so you would never be alone.
- Do we just list off some of the goofy phobias? Luposlipophobia (far side cartoon) or this list: Peladophobia: fear of baldness and bald people. Aerophobia: fear of drafts. Porphyrophobia: fear of the color purple. Chaetophobia: fear of hairy people. Levophobia: fear of objects on the left side of the body. Dextrophobia: fear of objects on the right side of the body. Auroraphobia: fear of the northern lights. Calyprophobia: fear of obscure meanings. Thalassophobia: fear of being seated. Stabisbasiphobia: fear of standing and walking. Odontophobia: fear of teeth. Graphophobia: fear of writing in public. Phobophobia: fear of being afraid.
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An Easter Sermon Outline (I usually like to preach fairly briefly this day – let the music also bear some of the load – the hymnody of Easter is just too good to shorten because I want to talk. I will have lots of opportunities over the next seven weeks to talk about Easter.)

- I. A proclamation – Death is Undone – Christ has Risen, Alleluia!

- II. Know the enemy – name him, for our victory is assured
 - a. Cut to the chase here, don't spend a lot of time, but don't speak limpidly either. The cruel reality is that every one of us will taste death's bitter dregs. Our hope is not that we will eat right, exercise and live forever. That is a fool's dream. We will eat right, exercise, take our vitamins and die anyway!
 - b. Our death is the fruit of this world which was broken by sin. We can no more stop it than we can stop the earth from circling the sun. We are too wrapped up in this world, its living and its dying. We cannot free ourselves from it.
 - c. Death is a real problem – it cuts us off from God. Dead people are not just happy ghosts – they are dead.
- III. Hear the doom of this enemy – Christ has crushed his power by his death upon a cross
 - a. But one is able to stop the earth from circling the sun. He stood outside this broken world and ruled it as its creator, but he has also entered it that he might save it. Jesus has come because he hates death. He suffered death himself that he might defeat this foe of ours.
 - b. This Friday past we call Good, because on it, Jesus Christ has taken your death and my death and nailed it to a tree. He has crushed its power and now it cannot hold us because it could not hold him.
- IV. Celebrate the victory – Christ has indeed risen from the dead and death no longer has power over us!
 - a. Now, no-one lies forgotten in a tomb. Christ who cared for the little and the least has remembered them all. They are all connected to the one who is the Life of the World.
 - b. Now, Jesus lives and reigns to all eternity, and nothing shall cut us off from that blessed kingdom, not even death. He has conquered and we are blessed! The end of Romans 8 seems appropriate to quote here.