

**YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD MAN DOWN!
EASTER SUNDAY**

(04/08/12)

Scripture Lesson: John 20:1-18
Romans 6:3-13

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”
(Rom. 6:3-4)

I hope you will forgive the sacrilegious touch of humor in my sermon title this morning, but Easter is supposed to be a fun time, a time to laugh, a time when the joyous dimension of the Christian faith is raised to its full and legitimate status.

Too often our church services, at least my worship services, focus on the seriousness of life and have an overall serious tone. I'm not apologizing for this trend in my preaching because life is serious. Life is difficult for many of us. It's not a joke. However, our weekly worship services shouldn't look and sound like a wake, as if we were observing Good Friday every Sunday. And our worship certainly shouldn't look and sound like a wake on Easter of all days, because the message of Easter is that Christ has risen! The message of the Christian faith is not about death, but about life!

You can't keep a good man down! Not even death can keep a good man, a good woman, a good person down! This is a truth about life that has been articulated in the religions of the world for thousands and thousands of years.

One of the earliest expressions of this truth is found in the legend of the phoenix. According to myth, the phoenix is a bird the size of a large eagle with beautiful many-colored plumage. Only one phoenix lives at any one time, the bird living for hundreds and even thousands of years.

As the end of its life draws near, the phoenix fashions a nest of aromatic boughs and spices, sets the nest on fire and is then consumed in the flames. From this funeral pyre, a new phoenix miraculously springs forth. This new, resurrected phoenix then carries the ashes of its cremated parent to Heliopolis to deposit them on the altar of the Temple of the Sun. The phoenix rises out of its own ashes, expressing the truth that out of death can come life.

We don't need to look to ancient Egypt for a religious articulation of our theme. There is the familiar story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis. Joseph's brothers, jealous of his special status with their father, sell Joseph into slavery. He is shipped off to Egypt where he ends up in prison, the victim of his master's scheming wife.

But you can't keep a good person down for long! Through his ability to interpret Pharaoh's butler's and his baker's dreams, Joseph gains his release from prison. Through his ability to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, he becomes Pharaoh's chief advisor. He helps Egypt prepare for the imminent famine, thus saving not only the Egyptians but also his own family. The Joseph story reminds us that you can't keep a good person down, that God is with us in our darkest hours, even when we are imprisoned, that God can bring good out of evil, and that even when things look bleak, the future is still in God's hands.

But we are not here this morning to celebrate the rebirth of the mythological phoenix or the restoration of Joseph's favored status. These stories have meaning for us only because we can see them in the perspective of Jesus' resurrection. The empty tomb is the greatest historical expression of the theme of the resurrection. It is this resurrection, the resurrection of our Lord, that is the cornerstone of our faith.

There are three dimensions to this resurrection -- past, present, and future.

We celebrate the past dimension of resurrection in the historical event of Jesus' resurrection and his post-resurrection appearances to the disciples. Each gospel contains different accounts of the post-resurrection encounters between Jesus and his followers. This morning we listened to the proclamation of the Gospel according to John.

Mary Magdalene, by some accounts the one from whom Jesus cast out demons, the one who anointed his feet, comes to the tomb on the first day of the week with a heavy heart. She discovers that the great stone that sealed the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away. She runs to tell Peter and John. Mary does not know what happened to Jesus' body. She says only that "they" have taken his body from the tomb and she does not know what they have done with it.

Peter and John run to the tomb. They find the linen wrappings, the shroud, but the body of Jesus is missing. Up to this point, according to scripture, they see the empty tomb but they do not understand. They see the empty tomb, but they do not yet see through the eyes of faith.

After the disciples leave, Mary stays, weeping alone in the garden. Suddenly she sees two angels in white sitting at the head and the foot of the place where Jesus lay. The angels ask her why she is weeping. Mary tells them her concerns about the theft of the body of her Lord. Little does she realize that he is standing just behind her.

Jesus, apparently in human form, repeats the question that the angels asked: “Woman, why are you weeping?” Supposing him to be the gardener, Mary tells him of her concern. It is not until Jesus calls her name that she realizes who he is. Jesus then directs her to go and tell the disciples that she has seen him.

Mary goes to the disciples and relates to them her experience, her encounter at the tomb. However, the disciples do not believe her, at least not initially. It is not until Jesus miraculously enters the room where they are meeting, until Thomas touches his hands and his side that they believe. They realize that the tomb could not hold their Lord, that death could not defeat him. They experience not only his presence but also his commission as they go forth into the world to proclaim the Gospel.

We celebrate the past dimension of the resurrection as we read the scriptural accounts of Mary’s encounter with the risen Christ at the tomb. We witness to the future dimension of resurrection through our belief in the promises of Jesus concerning life after death. We have faith that our loved ones who have passed on before us are in the realm of God, are in the presence of God. We believe that they are not lost to God, and if we see through the eyes of faith we will come to know that they are not lost to us. We celebrate the future dimension of the resurrection in the assurance that we do not have to be afraid of death, for when we die we will be received into God. Our celebration of the future dimension of the resurrection is grounded in the belief that physical death does not have the final word.

The third dimension to the Easter story is the present. This is the dimension that concerns our life here and now. Resurrection is a word that applies to our present life.

Perhaps to break us of the feeling that resurrection refers only to the past or the future, we should begin our Easter celebration with the Christmas affirmation, "Emanuel -- God is with us." God is here, with us and within us, not just in the past as recorded in scripture, not just in the realm we will enter after we die. God is present in the depths of our life, our present life. This is where the power of the resurrection is at work.

The apostle Paul tells us the resurrection applies to our life, to the present, to the here and now. In the sixth chapter of Romans, Paul says:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3-4)

Paul tells us that when we are resurrected or raised from the dead, we will experience new life in the here and now. Paul goes on to say,

But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. . . . So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. . . . Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life. (Rom. 6:8-13)

What is Paul talking about here? He seems to be telling us that we need to experience a death in the midst of this life, the death of the old self, if we are to be raised from the dead with Christ Jesus. He tells us that resurrection is a word for something new. He tells us that we need to be alive to God in Christ Jesus, that we should present ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life in this life, in the here and now.

It was the experience of the resurrection in this life, the experience of resurrected lives that made the early Christians come alive. To be sure, it was something that had happened to Jesus of Nazareth, but just as important, it was something that happened to them.

How can there be a resurrection and new life this side of death? There can be a resurrection before the grave because there can be a death before our physical death. This death is marked by separation from God, separation from each other, and alienation from the deeper parts of ourselves. This death is an ever-present possibility for each of us in this life. It creeps in between the members of our families, doing its silent work. It tears deep wounds in the human fabric of a nation through prejudice and fear. It thrives on brokenness, hatred, and despair.

The forces of both life and death are at work in this world and also within us. Whenever we lay our values aside -- there death is working. Whenever we turn our back on someone in need, when selfishness becomes the ruling force in our life -- there death is working. When we abandon our search for meaning and truth, when we neglect our relationship with God -- there death is working. When we lose the beauty of feelings, when our hearts become hardened and

defended -- there we feel the cold hand of death. There is death and potential death all around us because it lies deep within the recesses of our souls.

There are times, especially when we read the morning paper or watch the evening news, when we may feel that death is the master of this life. Life is difficult for most of us, tragic for many of us, even in this country where we have so much. The dimension of joy slips away and we feel no hope for the morrow. We do not experience resurrection in this life. We lose faith in the power of love, the power of God to move mountains, to raise new life from our ashes.

There is a kind of death before the grave, a death that claims the lives of many people. But resurrection begins in this life too. That is what Paul is telling us. That is what the New Testament proclaims. The message of Easter is that the power of life in Christ will win out over the power of death *in this life!*

In Tennessee Williams' play, "Camino Real," there is a scene where a man and a woman talk about life -- the past and future of their relationship, what they had and what they lost. They speak of tenderness and the redeeming power of love. Her name is Marguerite; his name is Jacques.

Marguerite says sadly,

We're lonely, we're frightened. . . So now and then, although we've wounded each other time and again, we stretch out our hands to each other in the dark, the dark that we can't escape from. We huddle together for some dim, communal comfort. . . What is this feeling between us? . . . What is it we feel in whatever is left of our heart? Something, yes something -- delicate, unreal, bloodless! The sort of violets that could grow on the moon, or in the crevices of those faraway mountains.

Then she says -- sadly,

But tenderness, the violets in the mountains, cannot break the rocks.

Jacques replies,

The violets in the mountains can break the rocks -- if you believe in them and allow them to grow.

The violets in the mountains *can* break the rocks if we believe in them and if we allow them to grow. What more redeeming word can we have than that? What more do we need to restore our hope in this life? Resurrection is not only the belief but also the experience that God has given us life not to crush us, but that we might live our life in all fullness. But we have to give love a chance. We have to give tenderness a chance. We have to empower the Christ who

dwells within us. Then the violets of love will break open the tombs within which we are imprisoned.

If we look around us, if we look carefully, we can see these healing miracles. We see a person break the power of an addiction through faith and trust in a higher power. We see a person who has been diagnosed with cancer not only experience remission but actually become cancer free through sound medical treatment and the power of prayer. We see something suddenly click in a young person's mind, and a life that was aimless and chaotic suddenly takes on direction. We see a person who is struggling with depression not only emerge from the darkness but make the changes that he/she needed to make to live his/her life more fully. We see two people in a marriage ruled by fear and stubbornness begin to work at making their marriage live. And a family that might have broken apart is healed and made whole in the process.

As we witness these healing acts of God in our own lives and in the lives of those we know, we are experiencing the power of the resurrection. We can see with our own eyes the tremendous power of life that strives to overcome any obstacle, anything that would consign it to the grave. God works within people and also through people in the most amazing, the most confusing, the most unexplainable, and yet the most exciting of ways. How could you ever convince a Christian that love no longer transforms lives? How could you convince a Christian that death is the ultimate victor? How could a Christian believe that all depth and meaning and value have vanished from human experience? The violets of tenderness and love *can* split open the rocks of despair. But we have to give them a chance.

This Easter, take the Christian affirmation of Jesus' resurrection and discover its reality in your life. As the apostle Paul tells us, we, too, can know what it means to experience resurrection, to be born again, to live as a new creation. We can experience rebirth, new life in the here and now. Just like Mary Magdalene and the disciples, we, too, can see, can experience the presence of our risen Lord. When we experience this, we will be able to fully enter into our joyous Easter affirmation: Alleluia! Christ is risen!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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