

“TOO BIG FOR WORDS”

Reverend Jim Dennis, Jr.
Easter Sunday
March 27, 2005

Sermon Text: John 20:1-18

Easter has a lot of mixed messages. One of my favorite mixed message stories is about a wife, who was trying to decide what to put on her dearly departed husband's tombstone. She decided on the traditional, "Rest in Peace." Simply, rest in peace. Then she thought some more, and added a second line, which said, "Until we meet again." What a mixed message!

We do get a lot of mixed messages about Easter. Did you ever stop to think how truly bizarre the secular customs around Easter are? First, there is the Easter bunny himself, a big, male rabbit that carries nests of eggs! I guess eggs are the perfect symbol of new life to come, but rabbits don't lay eggs or make nests, especially not male rabbits. The whole idea of Resurrection is put down, and it is snickered at by many outside the church and a few inside. Some have written that it is the continuing spirit of Jesus' teaching, not a literal Resurrection. That it is simply the denial of death and wishful thinking, that they thought He was Resurrected. That is not the church's story!

Many years ago, a retired French diplomat decided that Christianity was simply no longer for him. He was way beyond it! He was entirely too sophisticated! He saw the church institutions in decline, and he criticized the clergy for lack of zeal. He thought all church goers were hypocrites. He questioned Jesus' teachings and the Sermon on the Mount and so on. One day, he made these cynical feelings known to his friend, Talleyrand, the famous French statesman, and he said, "What if I should decide to start a new religion? How would you suggest I begin?" Talleyrand replied, "I would recommend, my friend, that you get yourself nailed to a cross and then die, but be sure, be sure on the third day to rise again!" One solid message of Easter is you don't have to stay dead! God, the Creator of all there is, the Giver of life and love and life eternal, is able and willing to give you life and faith now that will sustain you forever.

In one of my former churches, we had a sunrise service on the very edge of the graveyard each Easter morn. It's an old Irish tradition, and it's to take seriously that we will meet again one bright morning. In Christ we don't have to stay dead forever. As I was preparing this message, I ran across a verbatim copy of a letter written by a 12-year-old girl, whose mother was a popular teacher and who had died of cancer tragically in my last church. She wrote this letter, with Easter faith, and I want to share it with you this morning. She wrote, "Dear Mom, I really miss you. I loved you and love you still. Mom, I know you're in a better place now, but I feel like I didn't do much for you. I felt I should have given you more hugs and kisses. One thing I would have done before you went away was to see you and love you more. I'm sorry I wasn't in your class this year, but you've been my teacher at home. You taught me manners and how to love. It seems like everything I see, I remember, reminds me of you. Mom, it's gonna be different

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without you here. I know your spirit is going to be with me wherever I go. I am glad you went to Heaven, but I am scared, and happy, and angry and sad all at the same time. Don't forget. I love you always. Your loving daughter.

Love does not die. Love does not die. I did a pre-Easter study once, in a former church, on all the references I could find in the New Testament on Resurrection, and one man in particular came to every session. His name was J. D. Lowery. He was a delight. He was full of love and laughter, and very soon after that study, he wasn't ill, but very soon, just after Easter, at home in his sleep, he died. His funeral was the most Easter event I have ever attended. At his service, I paused, as I always do, to allow people to recall what he meant to them and how he had touched their lives. Well, as people started to remember the ways in which J. D. had touched their lives, right in the middle of the prayer, they started laughing! Right there in the funeral service! They laughed the sort of loud, embarrassing snorts that come when you're trying as hard as you can not to. After a minute, I was afraid to finish the prayer. I was literally biting my tongue, afraid that I couldn't speak without snorting myself. I remembered the time that I was thrown out of J. D.'s intensive care unit room because we were making too much noise. Then I looked down front, and I saw his widow, her shoulders silently heaving, finally burst out laughing herself! Never, have I been to a more Easter, Christian funeral! A more Resurrection affirming, undergirded funeral! Folks, real life begins with a relationship with God, and God always sends us out into relationships with others, and gives us peace and joy, even in the face of death. Even laughter at funerals. God is able to continue life forever. Our faith is not a naïve death denying. It is a Creator and Savior God life-affirming even in the face of sin and death, even in the face of tragedy and chaos. There is a difference! Even those who don't claim faith seem to have this inkling of an idea, I think, woven into our spiritual DNA, that there is something that must last about us.

In Thornton Wilder's play, "Our Town," one of the characters says, "Everybody knows that something is eternal, and it ain't houses, and it ain't names and it ain't earth and it ain't even stars. Everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, something that has to do with human beings." There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being. Jesus gave a name and a way and a door for that vague something. Jesus gives us true life, but still, many doubt, and likely some of those who doubt are here today with doubts and fears. Let me spell out what I believe the most convincing proof of the Resurrection is for doubters. If you study history, you will find that many men gathered a following in Jesus' day. Many men were killed when they attracted too much attention. For the most part, they are simply just footnotes and commentaries in histories, almost completely forgotten. There is something different

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about Jesus. Things went the way that things always go when a leader is arrested. They scattered. They ran. They were human. They had self-preservation instinct that kicked in. We can't blame them for doing what's natural. They saved their own skins, they thought. They ran and they hid. Scripture says that they did this, and no one has trouble believing that part, but something happened you may never have thought about, and this may actually be more proof than the empty tomb. These functional cowards were transformed into fearless Apostles and evangelists who faced death publicly unafraid. And here's the question that leads to the proof. What changed them? What made these cowards hiding behind barred doors and shuttered windows change into fearless, public preachers of Jesus' good news? What made cowards into fearless heroes who almost to a man died for their faith? What made them fearless? What did they see? Go back in time to picture the mood of the disciples on Easter Saturday. They had loved Jesus. They had left everything to follow Him, and in Him they had experienced God's presence and God's love as never before. He had called forth something grand from deep within them, and they were given a sense of purpose. They had seen him heal the sick. They had seen him offer hope to the poor and the outcast, and after the glorious parade into Jerusalem, on what we celebrate as Palm Sunday, they expected Jesus to be crowned King and Messiah and to rule them, with them being his cabinet and advisors. They expected His elevation and their own. Instead, He was crucified. He was executed in a most brutal and painful way. The walls came tumbling down, and now, unbelievable insult added to injury, they had apparently broken into his tomb and stolen his body! So they barred the doors. They shuttered the windows. They hid in fear and trembling, thinking perhaps they would be next. They needed a Resurrection. They needed new life and new hope to change them. Perhaps, so do we! New life happens when you overcome, with God's help, the little bits of death that drag you down. God gives joy and life, power to overcome in life and gives the strength to find a disciplined way of new life, but whether it's an ordinary, every day problem involving personal habits or an extraordinary situation involving broken relationships or grief or a crisis of faith, all of us have pockets of death in our life. All of us have dark valleys to pass through. All of us have tombs and struggles and disappointments stealing our joy. Christ came through the bolted doors and the shuttered windows to give new life to the disciples, and Christ can do that for us today.

In a sermon, Johnny Ray Youngblood, pastor of St. Paul's Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, wrote this and said this, "Every time I see a man put down his bottle, there's a Resurrection going on. Every time I see a man go back to school to finish, there's a Resurrection going on. Every time I see a man hug his son after years of not speaking, there's a Resurrection going on. Or a marriage healed and so on and so on." Easter is

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not just an historical event to remember, once, long ago, God acted. No. The same God is here now, and we can experience God's power now. Right where it hurts, right in our own tombs, our own grudges, our own bitterness, our own lust, our own addictions, our own sloth, God gives joy and life and the power to overcome in life, and gives the strength to find disciplined new ways of life. If we miss that, we miss Easter. The creator God, the Lord of life, still gives new life. We can be given strength and power to move through situations to new life, new hope, new expectations. Easter still occurs.

I like the attitude of this poem. It is absolutely not a traditional Easter poem, but I like it. It's from a book called The Gospel and Jazz. I'm a fan of jazz. It's written by William Carter. It's called "The Music of the Saints." He writes, "You can punch my lips so I can't blow my horn, but my fingers will find a piano. You can slam the piano lid on my fingers, but you can't stop my toes from tapping. You can stomp on my foot to keep my toes from tapping, but my heart will keep on swinging in 4:4 time. You can even stop my heart from ticking, but the music of the saints will never cease." Real life is a fierce determination to live in a relationship with God. A relationship in which God always sends us out to be in a relationship with other people. Faith is a determination to trust God when you give out, and because you know God, expect the unexpected. Sometimes in the valley of the shadow of death, we, like Mary, are surprised and amazed by joy. You know it was still dark, it was still dark when Mary went to the tomb. Resurrection happens. It is good to remember while it is still dark, while it is still dark, expecting very little and getting everything. Mary, got so much more than just a body to bury. We worry and we fret over petty matters as if Christ has not already conquered our biggest problems, sin and death. We allow ourselves to be manipulated by the small pockets of death as if the Risen Lord has not ruled the universe always and forever will. Too often, we carry on our dreary business as usual, trudging deeper and deeper into our ruts as if the firstborn from the dead were not the beginning of a whole new order of creation. His life is the source of our life. His victory is the assurance of our victory. His promise is our hope. Do you hear your name being called? Do you hear Christ calling you to new life of new possibilities? It is not over. It is not over for any of us. If God could raise Jesus from the grave, then God can free us from the tombs of our limitations, of our fears, of our constraints. If God could roll away the stone that sealed Jesus in the grave, then God can roll away the stumbling stones that litter our paths. If God could shatter the chains of sin and death, then God can surely strike off every chain that keeps us from living fully and connected and abundantly. If God could open up eternal possibilities for a crucified man, lying in a borrowed tomb, then God can surely open up a new path for you and for me. It is Easter. Life continues again. Sin and death have no hold on us. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ. Amen.