

Sermon, 8 April 2007—Easter Day, Sunday of the Resurrection
Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118; Colossians 3:1-4; Luke 24:1-10

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Today we hear the story of Jesus' Resurrection as Luke tells it in his Gospel. It is familiar to us: the women at dawn, arriving to embalm a corpse, finding an empty tomb, hearing an angel's announcement. All four Gospels tell this story, though all four Gospels tell it differently. In fact, their shimmering contradictory depictions, which we cannot quite bring into single focus, are themselves testimony that we are dealing with something greater than human beings can account for.

We are also familiar with the strategies used to make the Resurrection story even more familiar to us: Jesus' rising from the grave is a springtime picture of fresh vegetation unfolding, of seedlings bursting through frozen earth, of renewed hope as a new day dawns, of the way a beloved teacher is kept alive in the memory of his followers. But surely it is apparent to every one of us here that, if those mild normal occurrences are the reality that the Resurrection is meant to depict, then the symbolic depiction overpowers the natural occurrence. A resurgence of energy and intention and optimism is common in all of us, but why come up with this alarming and unnatural picture of it: this Risen flesh scarred from crucifixion returning? Why would anyone think that the mundane banal notion that hope springs eternal in the human breast—which it does because of the way our brains are hardwired—could be enduringly symbolized by these terrifying stories? His disciples encounter this dead man, alive again, his wounds still open, walking next to them unrecognized, entering rooms where they huddled behind locked doors, holding out his wounds for them to probe. If this is

wishful thinking, it has a psychotic, not a comforting, edge. A symbolic depiction is supposed to help us grasp the fact it represents; it is supposed to be easier, more accessible, more comprehensible than what it interprets. But in this case, if Resurrection is a picture of hope, the picture turns out to have more power to grip us than the human transformation it is meant to convey.

No, clearly, we have it backwards. Hope is the simpler picture, easier to handle. Hope happens, and we feel comforted and encouraged to move forward. But when we spend time with these Resurrection stories and contemplate them, we begin to realize that our evasive explanations—that his followers felt renewed conviction, and so sensed that their dead leader was with them again—these timid consolations are designed to shrink what is an unanticipated and world-overturning event into something that we think we recognize and that we hope we can benefit from and manage, like an affirmation taped to our bathroom mirror, until we realize we are not interested in the fading postcard after all, because it changes nothing.

No, my friends, the arrival of this RISEN ONE, holding power in his hands, holding the plucked sting of death in his hands, holding the keys of the broken gates of Hell in his hands, does not roll us back out onto the same highway with new gas in our tank. The Risen Christ appears and we fall to the ground in worship. The Risen Christ appears and our hearts burn within us in ways we did not expect and don't want to stop. The Risen Christ appears and we drop our loaded nets, leap off the boat, and swim to shore. The Risen Christ appears and we die to what we were and grope our way blind onwards to Damascus. The evidence is that the arrival of such a ONE changes everything in our life. It begins to make us like him.

If the Risen Christ has broken the gates of Hell, then how can I sit in judgment and draw up lists of what I condemn? No, we are all forgiven,

side by side, forever now. Whom can I be eager and satisfied to punish and banish, when God goes to such distances to forgive? If the Risen Christ has plucked the sting of death, then how can I scurry about in denial and hide in avoidance? No, we are lifted off the swift conveyor belt of our mortality now. What can I still fear, when God reaches right into a sealed tomb? If the Risen Christ holds power in his punctured hands, then how can I shrink back into evasions and boredom and inertia? No, we have been given all things in Him now. What is not possible to me when I receive that power? What can tear me from the hands that have been given all things?

The Risen Christ knows your cowardice and says “do not fear.” He knows your turbulence and says “peace be with you.” He knows your emptiness and breathes on you and says “receive the Holy Spirit.” He knows your skepticism and says “place your hand in the hole the spear made in my side.” He knows your hunger and says “come and eat.” He knows your pointlessness and says “as my Father sent me, so I now send you.” He knows your loneliness, even in the bosom of those who love you, and says “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Do not defend yourself against this story. It is not what you thought. It is perennially surprising. We cannot escape its subversion or exhaust its disruption of our life. Listen to the announcement the women received at the tomb. “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Notice three things about this.

First, the two men in dazzling clothes remind the women that they already know what is true. This is the great secret of all spiritual teaching. Spiritual truths are commonplace. The problem is that they are not believed;

and they cannot be believed until they are experienced; and our experience of them mysteriously lies beyond our own initiative. It is not up to us. The day comes when God verifies these truths in us, when the breath of God stirs them into life in us, when the finger of God wounds us and we feel then the bruise of the Spirit. We already know that God is love, that forgiveness is possible, that death is not the end, that the Spirit dwells in us, that we have nothing to fear, that new life is ours—just as the women knew about resurrection. But we do not believe these things.

There is no blame to this. Something in us conspires to keep us asleep during the concert of life. If original sin means anything, if our fallen nature means anything, if our separation from God means anything, it means this entrenched inability to know our self and to know the Spirit that holds our souls in life. When we are asleep, we do not even know we are breathing; when we are awake, we do not even know we are conscious; when we are conscious, we do not even know the breath beneath our breath, the mind behind our mind, the Spirit within our spirit—but these are what make every breath, every thought, every openness beyond our self possible.

The day comes when the Spirit of God rushes over the abyss of our being, and we will remember on that day, what we knew was true, but what we see we had never believed, because we had not yet experienced it. So, when God stirs in you, the words from the empty tomb will come to life in you: “remember what you were told—the children of humanity are betrayed and crucified and raised up again.”

Second, the two men in dazzling white robes remind the women that what they thought they knew was true was not. The Messiah they expected and hoped for was the one who would pragmatically fix the unpleasantness of their life. He would defeat the Romans, reestablish the throne of David,

and restore the Kingdom of the Jewish people. The Son of Man, as Daniel foresaw, would receive dominion and glory and kingship, and he would reign forever. And the Jewish people, who had endured so much, would thrive, each man under his own fig tree, surrounded by his descendants.

Jesus, however, refused to be determined by those expectations. What *he* said of the Son of Man is recalled by the two men in dazzling robes: that he would be handed into the hands of sinners, crucified, and raised again. Jesus overturned the expected role.

Dear friends, that is the second caution in this message. Christ was not raised to fulfill your expectations. Christ was not raised to make your life run more smoothly. Christ was not raised to reinforce who you think you are or what you would like to be. He himself crouched in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, hoping the cup would pass him by. The two men remind the women that even the Risen Lord was not what they had hoped and even he could not avoid what terrified him. He refused to reinforce in his followers and in himself what they and he preferred, so that he might let God be known in him.

The danger for us, like for the Jews of Jesus' day, is that we think we know what a savior is, and we use categories from the past—both our personal and our cultural past—to determine that. Every generation hands over the Son of God to sinners, to those who prefer their own ways over God's. We must be careful to understand that the sinners in Jesus' case were the virtuous who wanted a Messiah on their terms, to further their goals, to reinforce their identity. We want the Savior that helps us avoid pain, that enables us to bypass death, that removes unpleasantness and obstacles, that helps us get our way. "Remember," the two men said to the women, "he told you that the Son of Man must be crucified."

Dear friends, the hardest thing is for us to give up our expectations while we hold on to our hope. God will be true to God's promises, but God will not live out your fantasies. How can you have new life, when you are determined not to let go of the old? The Savior of your nostalgia and avoidance must be handed over—and this will feel like betrayal to you, but you will see that the tomb of what you think you have lost will turn out to be empty. The Messiah of your childhood wish fulfillment you must nail up to the cross, so that the Risen Once can be known to you. O happy fault, when our apparent faithlessness is the occasion for God's manifest faithfulness!

Finally, the two men in dazzling garments asked the women, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" To the extent that we expect God's presence with us in terms entirely determined by outmoded formulas, we seek the dead among the living. The terms for God and Christ hammered out by our ancestors dry up and crack and fall apart as they are handed down. Do not avoid the Risen One by pretending that some antique account which defies sanity is what you are asked to affirm as true for you. God is omnipresent. That means, not only that God is present in all things, but that to God, everything is present. God is by definition what sustains the present. God at this moment is making in you the pulse of your blood, the rise and fall of your breath, the flickers of your thoughts. Not only yours, but the same in the person next to you: their blood, their breath, their firing surging brain, rising and falling as yours does.

But this, which you share with every creature bound to death, wondrous as it is, is not yet the wonder of God, who from nothing makes what is, who from our sullenness and resentment makes in us forgiveness and gratitude, who shows us that our addictions and despair are nothing more than a distorted and ingrown desire for spiritual life, who transforms

our rage into a vision of justice, who transfigures our fear into tenderness at the fragility of life, who deepens our grief into the knowledge of how deeply we love, and who from our alienation raises up a sense of the untouchable holiness at the heart of our solitude. To God be all thanks and glory! And this creating of us and redeeming of us and sanctifying of us never ends, but is new every morning, if you are willing to seek the living, and not the dead.

Jesus, you see, is not risen into the past. This is not an event now two thousand years old. If he is risen at all, he is risen into God. Where else could he have gone from our reality bound by space and time? And if he is in God, then Christ himself is part of that constant present which is the reality of God. And if he is in the present, then he cannot be far from you, and you can never be out of his reach, and to encounter him is to enter the everlasting present of God, who as Eternal Source, as Only-begotten and Risen Word, and as Life-giving Spirit, one God, we praise today in the power of Christ's Resurrection, as we hope to rise with Christ to praise God forever.