

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009
Lessons: Psalm 27 and Mark 16:1-8

BE STRONG, AND LET YOUR HEART TAKE COURAGE

“I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.” The psalmist hurls that confidence into the faces of his enemies and, more importantly, into face of his own fears. The danger is real and present, and so his, “Whom shall I fear?” speaks no armchair courage making light of life’s possible threats. His enemies are hounding him, and he is quite reasonably frightened. No one needs much courage when there is no present fear, as no one needs much faith when life presents no good reasons to doubt. The psalmist has cause to be afraid but, also, one very good reason to rise above his fears: his God is greater than his enemies, and his God’s love for him more faithful than the love of any human being. “Even if my father and mother were to turn away and abandon me” he says, implying confidence that his parents would not, “(even then) the LORD would pick me up and hold on to me.” God’s love is more reliable than even the strongest human love.

Ancient Israel had as yet no concept of life after death. So, “In the land of the living” meant what it says: *I believe my God will bring me through this present danger alive and well, that I still have more life to come and more of life’s goodness to experience.* The gospel of Jesus Christ offers no *concept* of life after death, either – no belief in a natural passage from life in this world to more life in another. Jesus’ resurrection does not simply pull back the curtain to reveal what had always been true but hidden; it creates a new reality that was not there before. When we call our funeral and memorial services, “Witness to the Resurrection,” we are not putting our trust in a concept of life after death; we are committing the people we love but can no longer hold and keep to God’s great love that can hold them and will keep them, until that day comes when at last death is no more and love can hold its own again.

God has given us resurrection hope. The Easter triumph of life is really the triumph of God’s stubbornly faithful love, God’s refusal to be done with us. It is that love in which we put our trust and to which we commend our loved ones when they die. We believe God reaches out in redemptive love to include us in Jesus’ resurrection, in his newness of life. In John’s gospel, Jesus tells us, “Because I live, you shall live also,” and the apostle Paul insists we are now adopted daughters and sons of God because God’s Son has brought us into the family. Jesus is the firstborn of God’s new creation, the first of many, because God refuses to give us up to death.

It is a struggle to live our resurrection hope in the face of life's present realities. In this world, all things die and pass away. Everything that has a beginning comes to an end, whether or not it has achieved its goal and purpose for being. For, say, an insect, that goal may be simply to reproduce before dying, and so the insect that fails to reproduce drops out of the genetic future of the species. But we are not insects, and God has made us for life that is abundant and filled with meaning. Because human life is so complex, with so many relationships and responsibilities, so many ways in which our lives are shared with others, life for us is always unfinished business. In this way, our personal stories are all like the Easter story in the Gospel of Mark: unfinished.

Christians were quick to see that Mark has no conclusion, no ending. The women go to Jesus' tomb and find it empty. The messenger from God tells them Jesus has risen, but they do not see him. Their instructions are to tell the disciples, including Peter, but Mark says the women tell no one because they are frightened. Then, suddenly, that's it. Where's the next paragraph? Mark's gospel ends abruptly with a word that means "for." For what?

I point out the clipped ending of Mark because it fits with our lives. Like those women, we have heard the message of Jesus' resurrection, but also like them where the story is cut off, we have not seen him risen. We live on the Saturday side of Easter, except that we have the promise. Jesus says, "Because I live, you shall live also."

You matter very much to God, not because you are better than other people or may even have stronger faith than most, but because God loves you. Love is not the same as a stamp of approval, but it does respect the one loved as the person she or he is, and love does grant dignity to you. What God wants is for you and me to trust that love enough to loosen our grip on pride, fear, resentment, and shame. Now, you might think I would say pride, fear, and resentment have us in *their grip*, which is true, but pick up a small child and sometimes the child you hold clings even more tightly to you. Likewise, I grip the fears that have grabbed me, and sometimes I hold them more tightly and persistently than they could hold me if I would just let go.

Many things hold us in their grip even long after their time has passed or could have passed if we would allow it: experiences of shame, doubts about ourselves, failures along the way (in school, in athletics, in dating), the judgments other people have passed upon us, fantasies that if we could only do this or achieve such-and-such life would be good, pride of possession, guilt about countless duties we can never fulfill well enough to make ourselves feel worthy or commendable. The problem comes when we grip those things back even harder than they hold us, when we will not let go. With God's grace comes the freedom to loosen our grip, bit by bit, until finally we can let go.

What is holding on to you or to me that seems stronger than God's redemptive love? Is it wrapped around you, or are you clinging to it? Countless adults are still trying to please their parents, to win their parents' approval, even many years after the actual parents have died. They were people, too – as imperfect as we are ourselves. So, it's high time to stop being the self-envisioned failure-child, the one that doesn't measure up, and start living in the freedom of the daughters and sons of God. Let go of what you think has you in its grip, and, yes, I'm talking to myself as well as to any one of you. Trust God, because the one thing that should hold you or me most securely is also the one that will not squeeze too tightly and bind but will let you be free, and that one thing is God's love for you.

Is that all? No, that's not all. Once I loosen my grip on my own fears, pride, or resentments, I can look around and see all those other people God loves, also, and loves every bit as much as me. Now what? Don't I have to be better than they are so I will be loved more? Aren't they the competition? Once I start letting myself be loved by God, I can start seeing other people differently. Envy is then replaced by respect, and scorn by compassion.

The number one significance of Easter is this: by raising him from the dead, God vindicated Jesus of Nazareth who was condemned as one who had it all wrong about God, about life, about the relative worth of people, and about the hope we may rightfully hold for our own lives. Jesus taught that God loves people; his critics said, No, God loves good people who keep the commandments. Jesus reached out to the sinful and shameful; his opponents said, No, let them change their ways and clean up their lives, then come to be welcomed. Jesus broke through social barriers that kept some people inferior. He challenged dishonesty in virtue and religion. He rejected the convenient beliefs that wealth was God's blessing for virtue and that good health showed God's approval. He took human life off the merit system and called for compassion. He worried less about moral hazard than failure to love. In almost countless ways, Jesus radicalized trust in God, and as his church we have not yet come to terms with how radical he was about God's love for all people and how strong a force for life trust in God can be, when it stays humble and human.

Easter does not put Jesus' cross behind us but always in front of us. Not by power and influence but by self-giving love, the world is blessed with life and hope. The resurrection stands before us the same Jesus who challenges our virtues even more than our vices, and who asks us to find God's love together. It is this same Jesus who was crucified who continues to call us, "Trust in God, trust in me also," and, "come, follow me." Yes, there are many valid reasons for fear and doubt, but let us not grip them more strongly than they grip us. Jesus who was crucified is risen. He was right about God. He was right to reach out to the shamed and broken, to forgive the sinful and welcome the outcast, to break through the barriers of prejudice and resentment, and to love people who could not love themselves. He lives. Therefore, *be strong, and let your heart take courage.* Amen.