

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2009
Lessons: Isaiah 53:1-3, I Peter 2:1-3, and Mark 10:13-16

QUASIMODO: LIKE A CHILD

I don't think anyone knows exactly how this day became known as Low Sunday, but intuitively we sense a letdown after Easter. Not only does attendance at worship drop dramatically from one Sunday to the next, but there is a feeling that the story is finished and we have closed the book. From Christmas to Good Friday, we follow the story of Jesus of Nazareth from birth to death, which would be tragic but for what originally was the surprise ending of his resurrection. The tragedy is not averted but overcome. Jesus does not escape death but passes through it and defeats it. So, it would be natural for us to see Easter as the grand finale, and my memory of that term comes from the Fourth of July fireworks where after the grand finale, we went home. "The strife is o'er, the battle done, The victory of life is won; The song of triumph has begun. Alleluia!" And then we go home.

It would be wrong to remove this song of triumph from Easter, because God's self-giving love has indeed overcome sin and death, opening the way for human life that is real and valid. But we are also mistaken to see the resurrection as the end of Jesus' story when it is the beginning of our own story with him. We misunderstand completely if we take the gospel's promise as merely extended life Jesus has won for us so that we can pass from this world to heaven and just go on living forever. The message of Easter is not infinitely extended life but new life for those who die to the old ways of alienation, of self-centered and self-absorbed living in either pride or shame. The promise that gives us our resurrection hope is for newness of life, starting now, and this new life is what becomes eternal.

We need to rid ourselves of magical thinking, and I'm not talking about stage magic or Harry Potter but about the religious idea that God does something *to us* that magically changes everything without changing our minds and hearts, our relationships, or our responses to other people. The notion that God will somehow transform me from one kind of person into another with no active participation from me makes no sense. The apostle Paul tells us to *work out our own salvation* because God is at work within and among us. Newness of life starts happening here and now, and the changes have to be real. But for changes in me and my life to be real, I must become actively involved in making those changes. *I want bigger, stronger muscles.* Fine, then pick up heavy things, often. *I want to learn to draw.* Then take a course and practice, a lot. *I want to be well-read.* Then get a library card and start reading. *I want this resurrection hope to replace both my false hopes based upon this world's empty promises and my own discouragement with life and quiet*

despair of myself. Then start meeting life's challenges and discouragements with trust in God, on the terms of Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. This movement toward trust is different from the passive, magical thinking that expects God to take control and just make everything work out right for me, like magic, even if I take little responsibility. Jesus calls me to take responsibility but in faith, seeking to work in his way because I trust God to be at work in me and my life.

From Jesus, we learn what matters and what does not. In him, we see what it really means to be human in a dehumanizing world. He who restored dignity to the humiliated, welcomed outcasts back into the community of God's people, healed the sick, comforted the troubled (but troubled the comfortable), challenged the virtues of the proud and the judgments of the exclusive – he who persisted in the face of all opposition and disbelief, whether hostile or just too defeated by life to open up to hope – he is the one to follow into the new life. Because the resurrection vindicates Jesus of Nazareth, I have much to *unlearn* about God, other people, and myself. My judgments about who should be proud and who ashamed no longer stand. What we have not often told people is that when our sin, guilt, and shame are destroyed by the crucified love of God, our virtue, merit, and pride are destroyed also. Neither pride nor shame can endure in the embrace of such love. So, we have much to learn and much to unlearn.

How do we get started? Or if we've already started, how do we begin a new stage of progress? In our Visioning Statement as a church and the eight directions we have set as priorities for pursuing the vision, we call upon ourselves to seek "spiritual development" in a variety of ways for a varied congregation of people. We are not uniform, and we do not wish to be forced into a mold that would make us even appear to be uniform. Your life story so far is very different from mine, and the newness of life to which Jesus Christ calls us respects our differences. As a church, we have rejected the notion that "one size fits all," in the faith. What Jesus offers us is not a pattern for life but a dynamic, flexible, in-motion way of life developed through our changing responses to God, other people, society, and self. It's not, "Look like this, think this way, follow this list of do's and don't's, and walk in lockstep with the rest of us." No, we are learning to trust God's love for us and respond to it by learning to love other people, the world God created, human society as God calls it to become, ourselves and, yes, God. Why did I not put God first in the list of those to love? Because religion has a way of stopping there, and if I do not love my sisters and brothers, then my love for God will be a pretense.

This Sunday after Easter, Low Sunday, has another name as well, a curious name preserved into modern times mostly, I suppose, by Victor Hugo's novel known in its English Translation as, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*," a title I have read Hugo himself did not approve. The baby who would grow up to be the physically deformed man who rang Notre Dames' bells was a foundling, left on the cathedral's steps on this Low Sunday called also

Quasimodo Sunday. So, he became known as Quasimodo. That strange name comes from an old liturgy for the day that opened with the second verse of our reading from the First Letter of Peter. “In like manner” or “in the manner of” – in Latin, *quasi modo* – “in the manner of newborn infants.” The physically deformed man is childlike; some of the religiously esteemed in the story are spiritually deformed.

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—

Now, countless sermons have taken off from this reading and, even more so, from Jesus’ declaration that we must become like little children to indulge in every conceivable twist and turn of contrast between adult sophistication and childhood innocence. I suggest we read the verse that comes before this one, because it states the same admonition in the negative: “Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.” The simile tells us to be like the newborn hungry to be fed, eager to receive. It is the grace of God we need, because grace overcomes and pushes out both the pride and the shame that keep us alienated from each other as well as from God.

We are not being urged to simplistic thinking. In fact, the very word translated “spiritual” in this reading refers to *reason* and the reasonable. So the spiritual is not set in opposition to reason and sense. We are not babies. We should be questioning, thinking, and striving to make sense of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the resurrection hope in which it calls us to live. We are thinking beings, and thinking the faith is the way we take it into ourselves, as the infant takes in milk. We work at thinking through our faith so we can learn to think through life in faith. *How do I see this new situation in my life from the perspective of God’s love for the world and Jesus’ call to follow him in trust?*

Memorization has its value, but memorizing something does not make it mine and certainly does not make it true for me; only understanding it can make it mine, and only by applying it to my life can I make it true for me. Likewise, simply deciding to “believe” something in the very limited sense of accepting it as true without question accomplishes little of value because it fails to change the way my mind operates in the rest of life. In computer terms, faith is not a data file; it’s an operating system. For those not computer-minded, faith is not a set of beliefs; it is a new way of thinking about every matter of life, resulting in new values and priorities, new ways of responding to people, and a completely new sense of self in the world. Too many Christians have been told faith is a set of answers. *Here they are, believe them.* No, trust in God’s love raises questions, and faith’s questioning is the *quasi modo*, the new mode that makes us comparable to newborn infants in our desire for the grace of God that changes everything in life and in us. Think the faith, question the faith, live by trust in the God who loves you. Amen.