

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 8 2012
Lesson: John 20:1-18

EASTER MAKES IT PERSONAL

Human life is relational; it is life shared in family and community. That statement sounds simple enough, but forces in our world deny it daily. The Bible insists that we need God, other people, and the human community so we can live as God created us to live and be truly human. Isolation is the nature of sin because sin is estrangement from God and other people. Evil is lack of empathy. To do evil, we must detach ourselves from our victims, refusing to see them as related to us, denying any shared humanity with them. For this reason, preparing people for combat requires dehumanizing the enemy, giving them scornful names and portraying them as monsters. It's like killing zombies on the game screen, because zombies are not living people. So, it's okay to destroy zombies because they aren't alive anyway, not even in the fantasy. But when similar dehumanization is done to real, living, human enemies, the results are horrible.

I have read that in the strife-torn school district of Washington, D.C., teachers and even the students are now called "human capital." Beware of terms that make people sound like things or stuff. People are becoming data, and a single datum (an individual) is nothing. If it differs from the bunch, it's called an outlier or an anomaly and disregarded as irrelevant. So, don't be out of step; don't be different. Children are test scores. Laborers are squeezed into a metric and told to keep the pace or be pushed out. Voters are demographics, and if you want medicine for your illness, you'd better hope many other people have the same disease, or your medicine may not be cost effective.

Easter is a pretty holiday, all pastels, hopping bunnies, fragrant blossoms, and tweeting birds of spring, and for many it has become little if any more than a rite of spring. Nature renews itself, and we relate that annual regrowth somehow to resurrection. There's even a small measure of biblical support for the connection because the ancients believed that a seed died when it was buried in the earth and was reborn or resurrected to new life as a sprout. In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses that image of the seed that must die so it can bear fruit, but he is not explaining a natural cycle; he is telling his disciples he must suffer and be put to death and must not turn away to save himself.

Easter is not simply the triumph of life over death, as though both were impersonal forces with life unexpectedly proving itself the stronger. Jesus' resurrection is the triumph

of God's love over everything the hurts and destroys. It is the triumph of the personal over the impersonal and of the human over all the dehumanizes us, reducing us to things, stuff, or data. For love, the person matters most of all. When a mother picks up her child at school, she does not give a test to see which might be the best child to take home; she picks up the child she knows and loves, the one she bore or adopted as her very own. She picks up the one whose troubles distress her, whose joys put a smile on her face, and whose losses tear at her heart. She takes home the child for whom she would lay down her life. That's what Easter is all about.

The resurrection makes life personal. Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus when he calls her name and cries out to him in joy rising suddenly from her despair, "My Teacher!" It's personal. It's relational. It's about love. The risen Christ is Jesus of Nazareth, Mary's teacher. When he sends her to tell the disciples who had abandoned him in their fear, leaving him to die alone, he calls them, not "my former friends," but "my brothers." When he tells her not to touch him yet because he has not yet returned to God, the wonder for us is not in the mystery of the process; the wonder is in the personal way he names God to include us in God's family. "Say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and *your Father*, to my God and *your God*.'" That's what Easter celebrates – not just everlasting existence in some impersonal mode of being, but the triumph of love over everything that estranges us from God and from each other. Jesus had every right to reject his faithless, cowardly, self-interested disciples, but he gave himself to overcome all the good reasons he could have to reject us. And we certainly give him and God excellent reasons to reject us, but God's love is stronger than our hostility, our sin, our selfishness, our raging shame and brutality, and even our indifference.

It has long been popular to see Jesus' resurrection as his triumph over his foes, the evil doers who tortured, mocked, and killed him. So we Christians put ourselves on the good side, the righteous side, as we put the Jews or Romans or unbelievers on the bad side. That's false. Jesus gave himself for those estranged from God, and his resurrection does not overcome his self-giving love, his suffering and dying on the cross. It does not put the cross conveniently behind us. Quite the opposite, Easter establishes Jesus' crucifixion as the full truth of God, the complete act of redemptive love that gives us new life and hope. Because of the resurrection, the cross stands forever as the truth of God's unrelenting love for us and commitment to getting us back.

So, how do we celebrate Easter? I don't mean the holiday. We have our pastels and flowers, our egg hunt for the children, and our songs of joy in life, and that's all good. I have no quarrel with the holiday. But my question is, How do we affirm Easter out there in the world when the candy is gone and the eggs have all been found, when the hallelujahs have been sung and the new outfits sent to the cleaners?

To be sure, we take comfort in believing that our loved ones who have died and left us are kept in the care of God, and that comfort is no small thing for love to know, for empty arms to hold and aching hearts to believe. That Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus when he calls her name is wonderfully good news to all who hope and pray that love will have its loved ones restored and relationship will triumph over the grief of separation. The defeat by God's love of everything that hurts and kills love in our world is what will turn sorrow and emptiness into tears of joy.

But we still live on this side of Easter, and we inhabit a world that has for as long as history been hard at work depersonalizing life and dehumanizing people. In the ancient world, the powerful and socially entitled had slaves; today they have wage slaves. Always, the world has reduced masses of people to obscurity, lack of significant individuality, and at best a lesser status as human. But that's exactly what was done to Jesus. He was reduced to sub-human. He was broken, and might have been left for the vultures if some people, mostly women, had not cared for his body.

His resurrection makes people our sisters and brothers by the bond of God's love for them and for us. Our differences don't dissolve the relationship and so do not justify our disowning each other. That doesn't mean we approve of or just ignore whatever people do. We don't do that in our families, do we? How could we? Human beings are capable of great cruelty and destruction, and even good relationships require forgiveness and healing. But we cannot disown each other or the people of God's beloved world. Easter makes life personal, putting respect and compassion high above utilization. Jesus Christ binds us together in a human relationship far more significant than our commonalities of language, nationality, skin color, or religion. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, who you are as a distinct person matters to God and to the community of faith – today, tomorrow, and forever. You, as you, are loved by God. That's not a stamp of divine approval. It's a love that refuses to let you go or be reduced to nothing by life, by sin, or by death. In the love of God, life is both personal and relational. Each person is unique and irreplaceable, and all belong to God together with Jesus Christ in his new life. Amen.