

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011
Lessons: Isaiah 52:13 — 53:12 and Matthew 28:1-10

DO NOT BE AFRAID

It is quite natural to fear death and not only the process of dying which can be prolonged painfully but the finality of death itself. By nature, we fight to stay alive, and we fear the unknown. Life is precious, and we give it up willingly only when living becomes unbearable so that the desire for relief replaces hope for better life to come in this world, or when we see something even more precious than life for which we are willing to die.

For the victim of crucifixion, death became the only salvation, but its relief was withheld from the tormented so he could be mocked and held up as an example of what would happen to anyone who defied the power of Rome. Its purpose was not only to punish the offender but to demoralize any who might have followed him or taken up his cause. This brutal method of execution served as a public humiliation reducing its victim to an object of shame from which people would turn away in fear and disgust. It was considered rude and boorish even to mention crucifixion in polite company. The old popular hymn that called the cross “the emblem of suffering and shame” was quite correct in that assessment.

Jesus found something more precious than his life: God’s love for this world’s people and our need to become truly human and vital by responding to God’s love with trust and with a paid-forward concern and compassion for each other. Notice, please, that I did not say that what Jesus found worth his life was just a matter of getting us into heaven. No, it was and is and shall forever be all about God’s love for us and desire for our response. The relationship is the thing that matters. To be loved by God is to be truly alive and worthwhile. To know we are loved by God and so respond in kind, especially in the way we treat each other, is to be redeemed and in process of becoming the people God created us to be.

There is nothing automatic about resurrection. We have nothing born or built into us that enables us to live after we have died. Death is final for all creatures of flesh. The only challenge to death’s finality is God’s redemptive love for us. We are not made to live forever, but we are loved forever by God who alone is eternal. Here, then, is the hope and joy of Easter – that God’s love for us overrules the finality of death. Having loved us, God cannot bear to live on forever without us but longs for the one loved because love is specific. One person cannot take the place of another. We know from our own losses that the one who has been loved is remembered and never replaced. We, however, cannot restore life by

remembering. Our memories are just memories, even though we treasure them. But God is another matter. Jesus says to some of his critics who scoffed at the very idea of resurrection that God is God of the living not of the dead, meaning those God holds in the relationship of love are never dead to God. To be alive to God is to be alive indeed because God has the power to create life – to call it into being and give it vitality.

Easter is not just the triumph of God's power over death. Who that believes in God would question God's power? And who that does not believe in God would be convinced by the Easter accounts of the empty tomb or the appearances of Jesus to his disciples? For the skeptic, they offer no proof at all. For the one who believes, the great wonder of Easter is not that God was able to do it nor even that God would raise Jesus, the beloved Son. The two great wonders are that Jesus would give himself to suffering, humiliation, and death for us and that God would include us in his resurrection.

“He lives!” is a wonder only because he was assumed to have been utterly defeated and disgraced. His claims to any special relation to God or insight into the real nature of God's truth were presumed discredited. The way his life ended reduced him in the eyes of his followers to a tragic dreamer whose hopes failed and revealed him to the eyes of his detractors as a complete fraud. His resurrection vindicates him, but only for those who believe. For the rest he remains either a tragic dreamer, a great teacher too good for the world to tolerate, or a fraud. By the way, despite what zealous Christians might say, those who find Jesus a great teacher too good for the world to tolerate are not far from the kingdom of God. To want what he wanted for human life is to be on his side. To value compassion over success, healing over exclusion, forgiveness over revenge, shared humanity over superiority, and love over everything else is to stand with him. On the other hand, to confess him as Son of God and Savior but continue to reject compassion, forgiveness, healing, shared humanity, and love is to praise his name but stand apart from him in life.

Jesus' act of giving himself for us was not done to make us somehow magically immortal; he did it to restore the relationship with God that makes us truly human and alive. Without that relationship – that relatedness to God who loves us – we are not fully and truly alive as we should be even while we breath and walk this earth. We are made for relationship with God.

Now be very careful because we have reached the point at which some Christian preachers have done their best to scare people. *If you don't have a relationship with God, you're not living truly and you're not alive with eternal life. So, you'd better do what we tell you to get into a relationship with God, or you will be lost forever.* And so it begins, the scare tactic for trying to overcome people's doubts and reservations about the Christian message. To frighten them into believing, evangelists say, “You'd better get it done now

while you still have time because you never know when your time will be up.” To get people “saved,” they create an urgency of fear which masks the real urgency of God’s love for them. The result is that millions of earth’s people, believers and unbelievers alike, think that the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about heaven and hell and that salvation is all about avoiding punishment. That’s not right. The message is framed the wrong way if we call people to respond to fear rather than love and mercy and if we employ fear, guilt, and shame rather than taking Jesus’ way of meeting people with respect, compassion, and healing to give them hope and a new kind of freedom within God’s love. The goal is trust, not fear, and the urgency is that of love’s longing for our trust and our love in response, not that of threatened punishment.

No doubt we fell into the use of scare tactics because for a long time they seemed to work, especially in the days when the church could back up its threats of hell with brutality here on earth. If hellfire didn’t scare people sufficiently into compliance, there was always the last resort of burning them at the stake. Today, at least for this moment in history, we no longer burn people we condemn as heretics, although some calling themselves Christians send death threats as well as hate messages from the shadows of the Internet.

The true urgency of the gospel comes not from fear but from God’s love for us and desire to give us life that is validly human because it is responsive to love. Jesus did not sum up life as getting into heaven. He summed it up as loving God wholeheartedly and loving our neighbor as ourselves. The urgency of the gospel comes from love not judgment, from compassion not disgust, from hope not fear. But do the tactics really matter? Indeed the tactics matter! Jesus never accepted the blasphemous doctrine that the end justifies the means. He sacrificed his own life for the unworthy and unbelieving. Have we not noticed that zealous, judgmental religion prefers to sacrifice other people to its cause? He laid down his life for those who opposed him or who ran away and deserted him. How, then, can his followers want to kill or otherwise destroy those who oppose them in this world?

Is heaven, then, a non-issue? Is that what I’m saying on Easter Sunday? No, heaven is an issue in perspective, and it’s love’s perspective that counts. Easter demonstrates for those who believe that God’s own do not perish forever because God cannot bear to let that happen. “He lives!” is the first part of the message. Jesus Christ gives us the second part: “Because I live, you shall live also.” “Do not be afraid” the messenger tells the women and Jesus tells his disciples. You are loved, and God will not let go of you, not in life and not in death, either. So whether you are facing life and continuing to love, learn, and serve or facing the final unknown of death, trust God and do not be afraid. Because the love is there, heaven will take care of itself. Because the love is with you, you will be strengthened to meet the challenges of life you now live, not for yourself, but for the Christ who died for you and whose resurrection to new life keeps you connected to God, now and forever. Amen.