

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010
Lessons: Ezekiel 37:1-12 and Luke 23:55—24:12

OPENING TOMBS

To hear the Easter message of overpowering hope that penetrates even the darkest despair, we need to work our way past the distractions, and by distractions I am not referring to the bunny, the brightly colored eggs, or the new outfits for spring. I am talking about the message itself, the resurrection of Jesus. Because Jesus did not die for himself but for us, Easter is not for him alone but for us and so I am talking about the promise that even here and now, in this world where death still brings all life to a close, we can share in his resurrection and its victory over all that hurts and destroys life. Even further, because our hope in Christ is not for this life only, I am talking about the fullness of God's promise that Jesus' resurrection will prove at long last to be the dawn of a new creation in which God's redeeming love rules unchallenged and death can never again bring love to grief.

What are the distractions? To me, as I see Easter, they are attempts, often well-intentioned, to make this day and its radical message easier to accept and to assimilate into our accustomed ways of thinking. They are attempts to tame the Easter message so it feels good and sounds encouraging but does not disrupt our lives too much or strain our faith.

On one hand, there is the distraction of literalism. This morning, there will be sermons insisting that believing the Easter message requires taking every detail of the Bible's resurrection narratives literally. The assumption is that truth is always and only fact and that faith is just accepting the facts. Even where the Bible itself clearly does not intend something to be taken literally, as in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, such belief insists scripture must be taken literally anyway. Ezekiel tells us the vision represents God's promise for the restoration of Israel. The Jews exiled in Babylon feel as dry and dead as the bones in the vision. The idea of literally restoring flesh to the dried bones of dead soldiers whose time of life has passed is macabre and is not the message of Ezekiel. Literalism goes wrong, not by believing too much, but by listening poorly and thinking too little. It makes believing things hard to accept rationally an end in itself, rather than embracing faith as trust in God and the work of God's redeeming love.

This morning, there will also be sermons accepting Jesus' resurrection ONLY AS a metaphor for the revitalization of the discouraged and the renewal of hope for people who have been slipping toward despair. True, such a message at least speaks to our present needs

and seeks to make faith matter here and now, but what it offers is not sufficient to make hope real and strong enough to overcome the very real and powerful forces of destruction and death that bring love to grief and seem to take away life's meaning and purpose. The irony here is that this distraction from the Easter message is also a form of literalism but without the faith of the true believer. This metaphor-only distraction shies away from trusting God for what seems to us impossible.

Resurrection is not a natural event. There is nothing in nature that leads to resurrection, which is an intervention of God that ushers in a new creation such as we have never known. That's why Paul declares Jesus the firstborn of God's new creation which is yet to come but which has already dawned in Jesus' resurrection. What I say to you is what I believe: that Jesus' resurrection could be just a metaphor for revitalization within this life in this world ONLY IF God's love for him and for us were just a metaphor.

There is no natural triumph of life over death for the individual. In nature, life "triumphs," so to speak, in the birth of the next generation. The generational persistence of life is the natural truth for plants, insects, and every other living thing on this earth, including humans. The individual perishes, but the species persists. That's not the truth of Easter but merely the truth of nature. There is no miracle involved beyond the miracle of creation itself we perceive in wonder at such vibrancy in the world, such teeming competition for food and reproduction, such vitality all around us. But observation of nature tells us nothing of its meaning. Does it have value? Or does it just exist and keep adapting to survive?

Easter reveals the truth of God's love. Jesus went purposefully into the void of shame and death, the terrible nothingness that is the end of all things in this world and from which no one ever returns. But God could not and would not let him be lost forever in the nothing, gone beyond recall, beyond love's reach ever again. Such loss would truly be the death of God, for God is love, and the death of that love would be the full and final triumph of the void that swallows life and makes all love end in grief. But on Good Friday, the void swallowed the wrong person. Filled with God's love, the void could not survive. Just as the ancient Pharaoh of Egypt could not hold the Israelites once God committed to them as the beloved people, but had to expel Israel or perish, so the void could not hold God's beloved Son. The nothingness that is the destruction of all life cannot hold such love.

There could be no replacement for Jesus in the heart of God. No new generation, no church as the body of Christ, could possibly even begin to fill his place. We know how it is with love, do we not? No one can ever replace someone we love. There can be new love but never a replacement for the person taken from us. The newborn generation may bring comfort to grief but can never and should never nullify the love that grieves its loss. The particular person means everything to love, and no other can ever take that person's place.

The resurrection is God's refusal to give up Jesus forever. So he lives because God's love is the most powerful thing there is or ever will be.

Why did God go through such a nightmare? The answer is the same. The God who is sovereign over all things is compelled by one thing, and that one thing, which is the very nature of God, is love. God would not give up on this created world and let us go forever into void, lost beyond recall. Jesus united himself with us in our human life in every way. Our joys and sorrows became his. He took upon himself our griefs and our shame, even enduring on the cross our alienation from God which is the horror of sin. He was not the divine looking human, playing human, pretending to be human. He was and is forever one of us. And so Jesus promises, "Because I live, you shall live also."

"Can these dry bones live?" is a question to which we can surely relate. God's redemptive love does not wait until we die before taking action. We belong already to Jesus' resurrection, and so we look expectantly for God's grace to be at work in our lives here and now. To belong in this world to Jesus' resurrection is to join him in the work of God's redeeming love for this world and its people.

Death is negation of life, and there are many workings of death busy all around us negating people's lives. Every act of cruelty, every word of bigotry and hatred, every injustice in our systems for managing power and wealth, every decision to dehumanize a person for benefit to someone deemed more important, is a negation of life, a working of death in our world, a denial of the validity of God's love. But God has refused to allow human life to be negated ultimately, and the ultimate triumph of love works even now in a world that seems to have little understanding of how much it matters to its Creator and how much each person matters as a sister or brother of Jesus.

As Jesus' disciples and together as his church, we operate with the resurrection hope he has given us to meet the negations of life in this world and the denials of the validity of God's love for some particular person or group of people. Wherever there is hatred, wherever there is brutality and the shame to which it reduces human life, wherever there is fear and desperation, wherever people are written off as not worth caring about, there we must represent the resurrection power of God's redemptive love. God has refused to allow human life to be negated, and the triumph of love works even now in a world that seems to have little understanding of how very much it matters to its Creator.

Jesus Christ lives. And because he lives, we live with hope and grace in this world, and we shall live with him at last beyond the power of anything to negate life and bring love to grief ever again. Amen.