

Easter Sunday

A sermon preached at Second Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Nobody expected Easter. Nothing prepared Mary Magdalene for what she encountered out in the cemetery that morning long ago. Peter and the beloved disciple were unprepared for what they saw and experienced. None of the disciples expected the resurrection.

Mary came to the tomb when it was still dark. She expected to find a dead Jesus. She expected to find the smell of death. When she found the stone rolled away she suspected somebody had stolen the body of Jesus. When she saw the Risen Christ, she thought he was the gardener because Mary still believed in death, believed in the power of death, the lies of death. Mary Magdalene is a lot like us. We, too often, believe in death with far greater certainty that we believe in Christ.

We've come here this morning to hear a story that challenges our belief in death and its destructive power and its extravagant claims - the story of Christ's resurrection. Through that story, the church claims that God is in the business of life - giving life, expressing life, even raising the dead to life. The resurrection of Jesus is God's ultimate victory over God's last enemy - death. The Easter Gospel proclaims that Christ is Risen! Death is a defeated power! God is going to win in the end!

But there's another preacher here this morning. The preacher is Death. Death is a persuasive preacher. Death is the preacher of evil's most convincing lie. Death claims

persuasively that the God who promised to be present turned out to be absent. What makes Death's sermon so compelling is that it has so much evidence on its side. Look at the lifeless body, the vacant chair at the table, the empty crib! Death is a persuasive preacher.

But don't you believe him! Death is a liar! Christ is risen! God is going to win in the end! Death is a defeated power! Death has been mortally wounded!

"Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
... Death, thou shalt die." (Donne)

My job, this morning, is to contradict Death's claims and expose Death's lies.

In college I was involved in a ministry in the South Side of Chicago. We'd go down to the high rise apartments and play basketball and try to build relationships with junior and senior high-school boys. We tried to get them involved in discussion groups and Bible studies. On Sunday morning we worshipped at a large African American congregation. Probably a thousand worshipers filled the sanctuary. The service began around 10 am. The congregation sang hymns for about a half an hour. The choir sang. Elders got up and prayed. Scripture was read. Then the preacher would get up and preach a sermon that sometimes lasted 45 minutes. He preached like he was a boxer, like he was a fighter, like he was fighting death. And sometimes he'd collapse into his chair exhausted and fan himself. And the organ would play and the choir would sing and the elders would pray for him. And then the preacher would revive and go back to the pulpit and

preach for another 45 minutes. Some Sunday mornings we had as many as three sermons. The worship service did not end at 12. It went on till we got done. Sometimes the service lasted three hours or more.

After the worship service we had the opportunity to talk to the minister. One of us made this observation: "In my church back home," he said, "we have about an hour long worship service. Everybody complains if we go ten minutes over. But you guys go on for three hours and everybody stays. How come?"

And the preacher said, "The people in my congregation hear Death preaching to them all week, 24 hours a day. Death is a powerful preacher. Death preaches to them, 'You're worthless. You're hopeless. You're never going to amount to anything. You have no future.' Death says to them, 'Follow me down to the chambers of darkness.' All day long they hear Death preaching to them. I only have a few hours a week to counteract Death's powerful sermons. So we sing and we pray and I preach - I preach that Christ has defeated death. I preach that what God did to dead Jesus he wants to do to them too. But it takes time before they begin to hear what I'm preaching, that God is going to win in the end!"

About a month ago some of us attended a funeral mass at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic church. One of our neighbors, Christopher Senjia, left home about 7 one Friday morning. On the way to work his car slid out of control on the icy roads into the path of a Mack truck. He was instantly killed.

Death was having a field day. Death was strutting around bragging. Death laughed obscenely. Another victim. Another victory. But three days later, Christopher's friends and family gathered at Sacred Heart Church. We listened to a woman sing hymns proclaiming that God is going to win in the end. And readers got up and read the words of St. Paul: "In Adam all die, but in Christ, all shall be made alive." And Father Dooner went to the pulpit and proclaimed the Gospel, proclaimed the resurrection, proclaimed the defeat and death of death through the Lord Jesus Christ. And death went slinking out of that church, his great victory party ruined by a priest and a family and a congregation who refused to capitulate to death.

Reynolds Price, the award winning Southern novelist, tells about his struggle with cancer in a book entitled, A Whole New Life. In 1984 a tumor was discovered in his spinal cord. Death was licking his chops. Surgery and radiation caused Price to lose control of his lower body. The book honestly describes his feelings and frustrations as he went through that ordeal. But through his experience Price discovered that he has been called to live "a whole new life." He tells about two experiences on his road to recovery. One is a vision in which Jesus appeared to him on the Sea of Galilee:

"Jesus silently took up handfuls of water and poured them over my head and back till water ran down my puckered scar. Then he spoke, 'Your sins are forgiven.' To which Price responded, 'It's not my sins I am worried about. Am I also cured?' Jesus turns and says to him, 'That too.'"

The next day Price asked to take the sacrament of holy communion. In tasting the bread and wine he writes, "I

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experienced again the almost overwhelming force which has always felt to me like God's presence. Whether the force would confirm my healing or go on devastating me, for the moment I barely cared. No prior taste in my old life had meant as much as this new chance at a washed and clarified view of my fate...." The cancer has not killed Price. His book proclaims a faith that believes that God, not Death, is going to win in the end.

But there's another preacher here this morning contradicting Reynolds, proclaiming -

"That no life lives forever;
That dead men rise up never;"
Swinburne

- proclaiming that death is going to win in the end, whispering lies in your ears, saying that Death, not Christ, will have the final say.

So, who're you going to believe?

Most people don't choose to believe on the basis of evidence. Rather they believe, and then look for supporting evidence. That's what scientists do. They first have a belief, an hypothesis, which they test. They look for evidence to support their belief.

If you choose to believe that death will have the final say, you'll find ample evidence on the evening news and in the papers and at the movies to support your belief that death is going to win in the end. If you believe that death will have the final word - the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances and the changed lives of the early Christians will all be explained away.

But don't believe in Death! Believe in Christ! If you believe in Christ, if you believe in his resurrection - if you believe that God is going to win in the end - then you'll begin to find evidence everywhere... the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, the changed lives of the early Christians.

Believe in Christ! Death will not have the final word! Death is still powerful! Death still wins battles. But Death is going to lose the war. Death has been mortally wounded by the resurrection of Christ. Death will not have the final word. Depression will not have the final word. Poverty and disease will not have the final word. Cancer will not have the final word. Racism will not have the final word. Violence and war will not have the final word. Not death, but the God who comes to us - Jesus Christ will have the final word, and that word is Love.

God is going to win in the end!

I bet my life on Christ.
Through the clouds of Calvary - there shines
His face, and I believe that Evil dies,
And Good lives on, loves on, and conquers all -
For God is Love.
And you?
It's a choice.
I choose the Christ.

G.A. Studdert-Kennedy

Let us pray: Glorious Lord of life, by the mighty resurrection of your son you overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in him. Grant that we who celebrate with joy Christ's rising from the dead may be raised from the death of sin to the life of righteousness; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.