

Date: March 27, 2005

SUNDAY: Easter

SERMON: Fear and Great Joy

Text(s): Matthew 28:1-10; Colossians 3:1-14

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This past week, while leafing through a magazine, I saw a small news item that I almost passed over. In the midst of the spectacle of the Terri Schiavo drama, one could be forgiven, perhaps, for not paying attention to the fact that this is the 20th anniversary of the phenomenon known as *perestroika*— or “restructuring” that then-Premier Mikhail Gorbachev of the old Soviet Union set in motion, and which eventually led to the implosion of that empire. While not nearly as compelling a human drama as the Terri Schiavo case, it was certainly of much more real import for the future of the world.

Seeing that article jogged my memory of a story that Charles Colson tells of an incident that he witnessed in Moscow about five years into Gorbachev’s reforms, that for him captured the real significance, not only of *perestroika*, but of Easter as well.

The event was the annual May Day parade, the celebration of the ideology of Communism and the might and power of the Soviet Union. That year, the May Day parade took an unexpected turn. Behind the usual marching formations of troops of the Red Army, behind the usual trucks pulling intercontinental ballistic missiles, behind the row upon row of tanks and armored vehicles, came a motley crowd of protesters, shouting as they passed the grandstand where Gorbachev stood, “Bread! Freedom! Truth.”

And behind them, came a group who even a year or two previously would never have been seen marching in a May Day parade. It was a group of Russian Orthodox priests in their black robes and carrying a 10-foot crucifix. As they passed by Gorbachev, who frowned down at them angrily from the reviewing stand, they hoisted the crucifix up high, so that it obscured

the posters of the faces of Marx, and Lenin and Stalin, and one of the priests shouted in a powerful deep voice, “Mikhail Sergeyeovich! Mikhail Sergeyeovich, Christ is risen!”¹

And so he is. This day, above all other days, bears witness to the truth of the old adage, “You can’t keep a good man down.” Marx and Lenin have passed from the scene. Stalin and Hitler and Chairman Mao have come and gone. Even lower-grade Hitler and Stalin “wannabees” like Miloslovich of Serbia, or Saddam Hussein of Baghdad have watched the sun set on their pretensions to godlike power.

As have those giants of world capitalism, those CEO’s of the new world order whose god was not a political ideology, but simply greed for money, and whose claim to fame was not that they murdered millions, but that they made millions of dollars by cooking their companies’ books. It’s unlikely that twenty years from now many people will even remember the names of Bernard Ebbers of WorldCom or Ken Lay of Enron, or John Rigas of Adelphia. Crooked corporate tycoons have an even shorter life span in our collective memory than murderous dictators.

But Christ remains, still a living presence with the power to draw women and men from all cultures and nations and stations in life to his light and the promise of new life for the world. Perhaps you may have read Nicholas Kristof’s secret report out of Zimbabwe this past week. He spoke of the rapid growth of the Christian faith in Africa and witnessed people walking a dozen miles each Sunday in order to get to church. Their political leaders have failed them so badly, and their lives are so wretched that Christ offers them their only hope.

For us, however, it’s not always as easy to discern where the power of the living Christ is at work in our own world or in our own more comfortable surroundings as it was for those Russian priests emerging from seven decades of repression or in the rapid growth of the Christian church in poverty-stricken lands far from ours.

And it's especially difficult when Christ's own followers, in his name, perpetrate violence or play political power games or justify discrimination and oppression of others. The American general in Iraq who openly proclaimed that we are fighting a holy war of Christianity against Islam, the Christian God against the Muslim God didn't do the rest of us Christians any favors, nor the millions of Muslims who reject the notion of holy war as well.

Nor did the pastor of the Florida judge George Greer, who ordered the feeding tube removed from Terri Schiavo. Judge Greer apparently is a sincere Christian and active church member, but he has been forced to resign from his church because his own pastor wrote a letter to the congregation denouncing him as a murderer, and other "good Christians" have threatened his life, all in Christ's name, of course.

If instances like those are our reference points, I can hardly blame those who are so offended that they turn their backs on the Church. I certainly don't want to be associated with any Christianity like that. There's no resurrection in it. It stinks of death.

But it's not only unchrist-like Christians who make it difficult to discern the presence of the risen Christ. Our world is characterized by increasingly sharp moral and political and economic polarizations that obscure our vision. We are like Pontius Pilate, when he had to decide how to deal with Jesus. Caught on the horns of the dilemma between what is right and what is tragically and politically expedient, we really don't know what to do, and we wish we could just wash our hands of the whole mess.

But we cannot. As Christians, we can only struggle painfully to discern how to think and live in light of our core beliefs, and particularly, in light of our belief that God raised Jesus from the dead. The Christ whose triumph over the powers of death we celebrate at Easter is the Jesus who, as the Apostles' Creed puts it,

"suffered under Pontius Pilate," broken on the wheels of political expediency and dominating imperial power. So when we celebrate the victory of life over the powers of death at Easter, we have to recognize that it is a victory that can never be achieved by any other means than the means by which Jesus achieved it— by refusing to play the world's games of power and violence and greed, and instead living as Jesus lived— in self-giving love and service, even at the risk of our own lives. Whatever else the resurrection of Jesus means, it means what the author of our epistle lesson meant when he drew a sharp distinction between the old ways of living versus the new ways of living as a result of Christ's resurrection, "*If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above,*" he says, "*put to death what is earthly in you, vengefulness, malice, slander, lying greed . . . and clothe yourselves with the new self that is being renewed in the image of its creator. . . kindness, compassion, humility, patience, forgiveness. . . In that renewal, there is no longer Jew or Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.*"

Even if you don't know what a Scythian looks like, it doesn't take a genius to see the difference between the two realities characterized by that shopping list of personal and social behaviors, does it? To be a Christian means we have to take that new reality seriously and begin to live in it.

But that's just the question, isn't it? How does the resurrection of Jesus become the reality in which we live. How do we become renewed in the image of our creator? How does the truth of the resurrection of Jesus help us?

As I read through Matthew's story again of the two Mary's discovering that Jesus had been raised, one phrase really stood out, and it seems to me that it's a phrase that captures the whole reality in which we and everyone lives this side of Easter. And it may offer us a clue about how the resurrection of Jesus addresses us here

and now.

Matthew says that the women who came to the tomb, after hearing the news that Jesus had been raised from death, *“left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.”* Fear and great joy. What a curious description. And yet, the more I’ve thought about it, the more I think that just about all of us live between those two states of being most of the time, don’t we. We live between fear and joy.

Johns Hopkins University did an interesting comparison between the five things primary school-aged children in the United States feared most back in the 1960's and the five things they feared most in the 90's. Thirty years earlier, the top five fears in young children were 1)Animals, 2) Being in a dark room, 3) High places, 4) Strangers, 5) Loud noises. In the 90's kids were afraid of the following: 1)Divorce, 2) Nuclear war, 3) Cancer, 4) Pollution, 5) Being mugged.² Besides being a rather depressing commentary on the changes in American society in that thirty-year span, it also demonstrates that though the fears may have changed, they haven’t disappeared, and in fact, have become more intense and frightful.

Our ability to project what might be—what the poet Robert Burns called our ability to “guess and fear”— is one of the things that distinguishes us from other animals. There are all sorts of things, both real and imagined, that we fear. When we’re young, we fear that our school classmates will think we’re dorks or that we won’t be attractive enough to find a mate. As we age, we fear losing our physical mobility or mental sharpness. We fear that our children may fall in with the wrong crowd and be led astray or that one day they’ll simply turn into a video game. We fear certain diseases like cancer or AIDS or Alzheimer’s, and understandably, because they are fearsome diseases. We fear the possibility of terrorist attacks. We fear people who don’t look like us or who have different customs or speak a different language. We fear

that our retirement savings will run out before we die. There’s almost no end to the things we fear.

We know something about joy, too, though I suspect that we live in closer proximity to our fears than we do to our joys, much of the time. But which of us hasn’t tasted joy? We’re all feeling the joy that courses through us after a long Maine winter when we see the first crocus or the first daffodil, or the first songbirds returning to tell us that spring is coming if not quite here yet. Any parent who’s held their newborn baby in their arms knows about joy. I know Carol and I are joyously anticipating the debut of our first grandchild about six weeks or so from now. What is it but joy that lovers feel in each other’s presence? Often, we do sense God’s nearness and presence in our joys. In fact, Teilhard de Chardin once said, “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.”

Between fear and joy. That’s our address, isn’t it? That’s where most of us live, most of the time. And yet, it’s precisely to people like us, people who live between fear and joy, to whom the announcement comes, *“He is not here; he has been raised.”* Something has changed. There is a new reality that has begun. And that announcement is followed immediately by a command which sends the women on a mission: *“Go, and tell his disciples that he is going ahead of them to Galilee, there they will see him.”* Why Galilee? Because Galilee was the place of Jesus’ ministry. It’s where, in company with him, those disciples had begun to experience the new reality of God’s just rule. It’s where they had ministered to the needs of others, healing the sick, feeding the hungry. It was where in Jesus’ company barriers of race gender and ethnicity had been broken down and a new community had emerged. That’s where the risen Christ went, and where he summoned his disciples to join him and promised that they would see him. It was only as they would join him in the place of mission, of service, of reconciling those who were alienated and hurting and needy that they would see the

risen Christ. They would prove the truth of the resurrection in their experience of following Jesus.

And so it is for us. To begin to discern the truth and presence of the risen Christ we have to go to our Galilees, to the broken and divided and violent and hurting world outside our doors and take the risks of being agents of God's reconciling love.

Every time we summon up the courage to "*put to death what is earthly in us,*" as our epistle writer put it, we begin to experience the truth of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the new reality in which we have already begun to live. Every time we dare to forgive a wrong done to us; every time we dare to act lovingly toward someone who is unlovable; every time we dare to tell the truth in situations where a lie is more expedient; every time we dare take the risk of being hospitable to strangers or to those who are different from us, we make that new reality that God has inaugurated through the resurrection of Jesus a little more visible. We discover that even in the midst of fearful situations, it is possible to live joyously.

And as we demonstrate by our love, by our service, by our daring to take risks, by courageously standing up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, that it is possible to live joyfully in spite of, and in the midst of our fears, we proclaim to a fearful and despairing world that ancient and powerful affirmation of hope: "Christ is risen!" And we help to hasten the day when that same world, reconciled and made new will answer back, "He is risen indeed!"

1. Charles Colson, *The Body*, Word Books, 1992, 231.

2. *Back to the Bible Today*, Summer, 1990, p. 5