

Date: April 11, 2004

SUNDAY: Easter

SERMON: An Idle Tale. . . of Life!

Text(s): Luke 24:1-11; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26;

Isaiah 65:17-25

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As you are probably aware, virtually all pastors have the unhappy, but deeply meaningful privilege of helping members of their congregations and their families face the end of life. We are also occasionally asked to conduct funeral services for people who are not connected in any way to our congregations or any congregation, and of whom we have had no personal knowledge. As those of you who are retired clergy can undoubtedly attest, these occasions can range from the profoundly touching to the profoundly weird.

About 20 years ago, I conducted such a funeral for a man in the small New Jersey town where I was serving. When I met with the family prior to the service, I discovered that there was not a lot of deep grieving going on, and probably some secret rejoicing, or at least relief. Apparently, this man had been a something of a trial to his family. He'd had a very checkered record of employment, he hadn't been a particularly good husband or father, and he had spent most of his free time hanging out at the local Elks club drinking with his buddies.

Since I hadn't known him at all, I followed my usual practice in such cases, of inviting a family member or friend to say a few words of personal remembrance. The family unanimously declined, but one of the man's buddies from the Elks Club volunteered to do the honors. **Big mistake!** I sat there gnashing my teeth, while for twenty minutes, this friend held forth on the many-splendored virtues of his departed drinking buddy. And he arrived at the summit of rhetorical excess when he concluded, "And if there's a heaven, then George is certainly there sitting on a cloud strumming his harp and waiting to be reunited with his loving family."

After that, what could I say? The family certainly didn't appear to be looking forward with

great anticipation to this promised reunion with their dearly departed. In his own way, however, that well-meaning, but very silly friend gave voice to what is perhaps the deepest and most universal human longing, the longing to overcome death. We really cannot bear to think that death is the end of us or of those we love. Death is not only the one certainty that every human being faces—at least as certain as taxes—but it is also *the* great mystery, more so even, than the mystery of birth. We know where babies come from, after all, but apart from guesses and wishes, there is little that we can say with certainty about death, other than the fact of it. Death's inevitability provokes the asking of life's great questions: Why are we here? Is this all there is? Is death the end of us or is there something more? Aren't those questions the real reason why we're all here this morning to celebrate Easter? It's not just because we're yearning for the beginning of spring after the cold and bleakness of winter or because the Easter bunny took us shopping at Macy's or Filene's for a new outfit. It's not just because we know we're going to get to hear the "Hallelujah Chorus." It's not just because the church is decorated so beautifully with flowers. We have a yearning deep within us for eternity, for assurance that we're more than just a stew of chemicals and strings of DNA molecules that are an accident of genetic chance. We want to know that our lives in this world have a larger meaning. We want to know that our life matters in some ultimate way, enough so that death will not be the end of us. That is why Christians have told and re-told the stories of Jesus' resurrection for two millennia.

And yet, the narratives in our Gospels or St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians about the resurrection of Jesus or the vision of the new heavens and the new earth in Isaiah's prophecy appear to address a rather different and larger question, though as I hope we'll see, our more personal questions about the meaning of our lives and our deaths are also addressed in the process.

St. Luke tells us a story of some women who had been Jesus' followers, coming to his tomb early in the morning to embalm his body.

They discover the tomb is empty and the body missing. They're perplexed, Luke says, and well they might be. All sorts of possibilities probably cross their minds— everything from a conspiracy by Jesus' enemies to grave robbers. Probably the one possibility that never entered their minds was that God had somehow intervened and, in the case of Jesus, had overcome the power of death. In their world, as in ours, such things do not happen every day, or any day, for that matter. So Luke introduces two characters in dazzling clothes whose function in the story seems to be to point these women to the meaning of the empty tomb by jogging their memories. They ask the women a question, *"Why do you look for the living among the dead? Remember how he taught you while he was still in Galilee that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise?"*

Luke's story is very restrained and understated here. He simply says that they remembered Jesus' words, and went from the tomb to tell all the rest of the disciples. And naturally, the disciples received their report with great joy and rejoicing that now they had evidence that they would personally survive death and live forever, right? Hardly. Luke says, *"These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."* Exactly the reaction you might expect from a group of men who are congenitally afflicted with the inability to ever even ask for directions when they're lost. Who's going to pay any attention to a group of credulous, emotional women? They'll believe anything if it has a happy ending. But before we simply dismiss the disciples reaction as mere male chauvinism, we should ask ourselves whether we would have believed such a story any more readily? How many resurrections have you seen lately? Who could blame these disciples for being a little slow to get the picture? Luke's point, however, is that it is not the women's personal desires to overcome death that lead them to believe that Jesus has been raised. The beginning point is

when they remember what they learned about God's purposes for the world in the scriptures and from what Jesus taught them about the kingdom of God as they had lived together in community with Jesus and had followed his lead. Only later did the larger company of disciples also begin to understand that the news of the women was a great hope for them and for the whole world, and not simply an idle tale told by emotional women.

The resurrection of Jesus is not just a personal hope that I will live again after death or be reunited with my loved ones (who may or may not be eager to be reunited with me). The truth of the resurrection says that my hope for eternal life as an individual is tied to the future destiny of the whole creation. What happens to the whole creation happens also to me. This is what St. Paul and Isaiah are talking about. Paul speaks of the hope each of us has in Christ of sharing in the resurrection, but he frames it in the larger context of God's purposes for the whole creation. Christ is, for him, the new Adam, the first-born of a whole new creation. *"For as in Adam, all die, so in Christ, shall all be made alive. . . Then comes the end, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and every power. For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. . . so that God may be all in all."*

What this means is I cannot be saved all by myself. I have no hope of overcoming the power of death all by myself. Resurrection is not a private spiritual truth. If there is no hope of resurrection for those who live under the power of death in the ghettos of the South Bronx, or the ramshackle trailers in Aroostook County or for the shattered lives and maimed bodies of people in Liberia and Sierra Leone or the war-weary people in Iraq, then there can be no hope for me. My future and the future of the world are bound up together, and both are tied to the future of the crucified man named Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is *"the first fruits of those who have died."* He's the

first representative of a whole new creation.

That's the vision also, in that wonderful oracle from the prophecy of Isaiah that we heard this morning—the vision of a “*new heavens and a new earth*,” where the power of death to disrupt and destroy life has been vanquished, a world where “*the wolf and the lamb feed together, where the lion shall eat straw like an ox*,” That new order is not somewhere “out there” on a cloud populated by harp-strumming happy souls; it is this world reclaimed, re-made, re-ordered a place where the human family will live together as God intended from the very foundations of the universe. Not in competition or in greed or in self-centered indulgence, but in love and justice and peace. And in this new world, the powers of death at work in the old order will have no place.

To believe in the resurrection, then, is in some fundamental way, to choose sides. It means choosing whether we believe that any talk of a divine purpose for human life in this world is an idle tale, and therefore not worth bothering about, and certainly not the ground for our personal hope. Or whether we believe that God not only has a purpose, but also the power to achieve it, and that in the working out of God's purposes for the world, we will find our own personal hopes for life that conquers death fulfilled as well. If we choose the first option, and many well-intentioned and thoughtful people do, then we are under no obligation to live in any way other than in the way that pleases us most. But if we choose to believe that God has given us a signal of the future destiny of our world by raising a dead man to life, then certain obligations follow from that choice.

From the start, Jesus called people to be a new community to live together in ways that characterize and anticipate that promised new creation. If we believe in the resurrection, then we have to become part of that community of people that practices justice rather than exploitation, acceptance rather than discrimination, forgiveness rather than revenge, hospitality rather than hostility, service rather than

competition. Why? So that we become the signs that God's re-creation is already present and will someday come to fullness. So that we can give hope to others who still live under the oppressive shadow of the power of death. So that we can be partners with God in this great work of recreation.

Choosing to be part of such a community is risky business, as disciples of every age have discovered. We've seen what happens to people who have tried to find a way out of the cycle of violence and tyranny and injustice and exploitation, who have dared to proclaim life in the teeth of the powers of death. We've seen our share of Martin Luther Kings and Bonhoeffers and Archbishop Romero, and countless others who have paid the price for calling people to live in a new kind of human community. The powers of death at work in the world make sure that we never run short of candidates for crucifixion. Yet it is only when we risk ourselves in the struggles of the world against the powers of death that we discover the real answers to our personal longings for life in the midst of death and beyond death as well.

William Stringfellow, a Christian layman and lawyer, who died just a few years ago, told about his own discovery of this corporate nature of resurrection faith. During the 60's, he was part of a Christian team of lawyers and other social activists working in East Harlem, in New York City, which at that time was one of the worst pockets of poverty and despair in America. All around him, every day, the powers of death were glaringly visible. Single drug-addicted mothers, absentee fathers, endemic alcoholism, children who had no chance at ever escaping the grinding poverty, and the pervasive despair and rage that spawned a culture of urban violence. And yet, here and there, he saw life emerging from the midst of death. Here and there, he discovered courage and faith and hope in people who, to all appearances had no reason for faith or hope. He saw, here and there, small groups of people working together to lift one another up and

advocate for one another and encourage one another and care for one another.

At a certain point in the late 60's, in the midst of his work in Harlem, Bill Stringfellow discovered that he had terminal cancer, and was not given much longer to live. He went through a devastating time of illness and radical surgery and personal struggle with the powers of death at work in his own body. Against all the medical odds, and to the astonishment of his doctors, he recovered and went on to live another 20 years or so.

In reflecting back on those days, he says that he's convinced that his own personal experience of new life in the midst of death was closely linked to his experience of seeing new life emerge from the midst of death among the people of East Harlem. Listen to what he says about that experience:

I doubt that I could have had the capacity to survive radical disease, unremitting pain and the shadow of death had I not spent those earlier years in the Harlem ghetto, discerning there something of the moral power of death, and learned from neighbors, clients, and Harlem inhabitants at large, something of the triumph of life which human beings can enter and celebrate despite death's ubiquity and strength. Harlem is the scene where I first comprehended the truth of the resurrection, and that prepared me more than any other single thing for devastating illness and ruthless pain. Had I known only what I heard about the resurrection in Sunday School or from the pulpits or from within the American white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethos, I believe I would surely have died--most likely toward the end of 1968.

Well, that may just be an idle tale. But I rather think Stringfellow was right. I think that there is no better way to discover the truth of the resurrection, or the personal hope it holds for each one of us, than to choose to become part of the community of people who believe that God has given us a sign of the future that awaits the whole creation. It is in the company of women

and men who dare to anticipate that future by living faithfully the way Jesus taught us to live, in risk-taking love and the struggle for justice and wholeness in the face of the powers of death, that we will discover the ultimate answer to our own deep quest for eternal life.