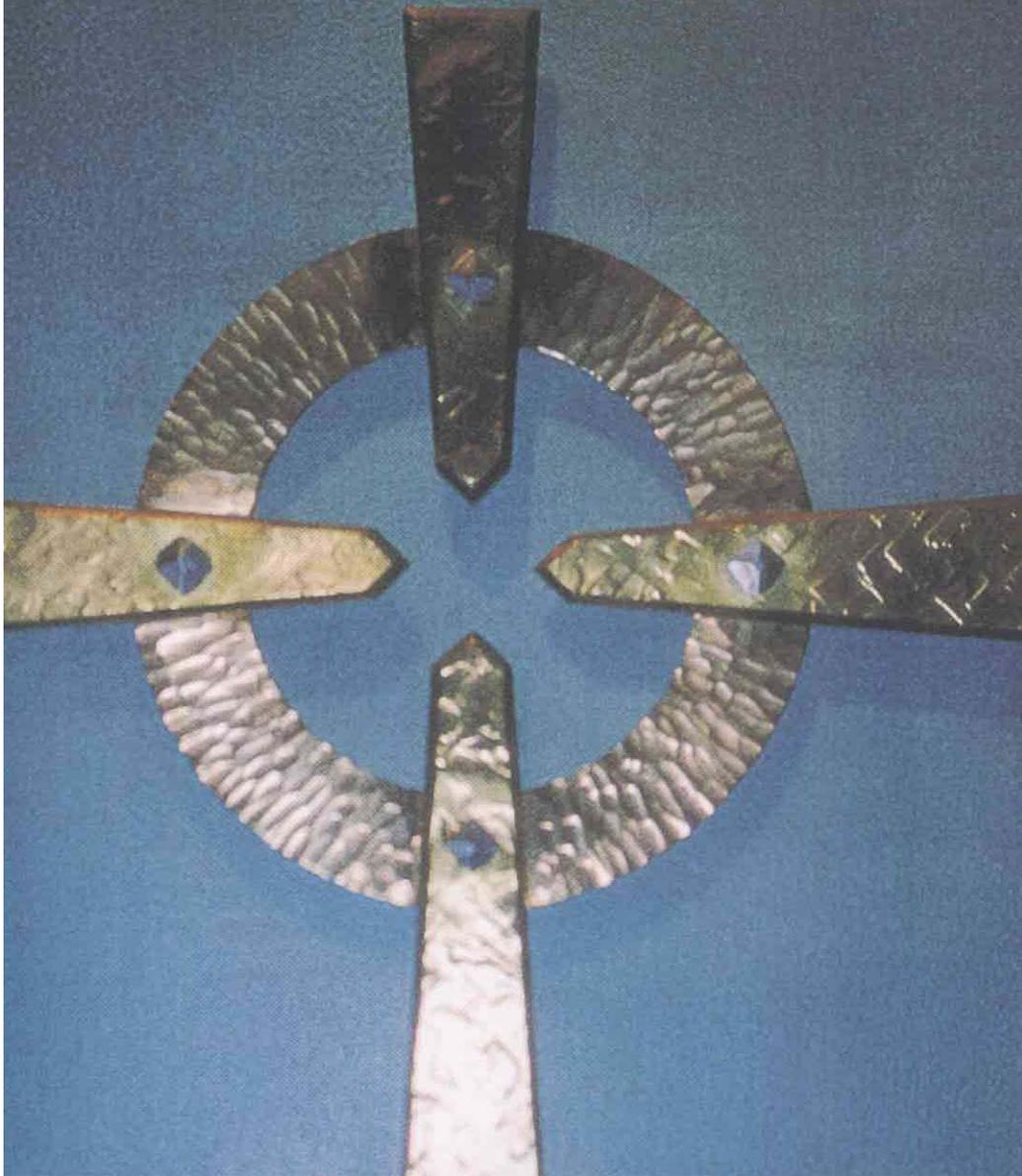


In a Nut's Shell

Sermons for Lent & Holy Week

by Bruce Van Blair



IN A NUT'S SHELL

Being twelve sermons (plus one)
for Lent and Holy Week

by

Bruce Van Blair



Copyright © 2003 and 2010 by Bruce Van Blair.
All rights reserved.

Cover Art
“Bronze Cross” by Russell Jaqua

Photo by Mariana Van Blair

Other books by Bruce Van Blair:

Eli and The Tiger

The Believer's Road

A Year to Remember

Invitation to a Reformation

Links to books, papers and sermons
available at
www.bvbministries.com

CONTENTS

DEDICATION	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
INTRODUCTION	ii

LENT

ASH WEDNESDAY	
<i>Depravity</i>	1
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT	
<i>Like Jesus?</i>	4
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT	
<i>Like Jesus – 2</i>	8
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT	
<i>Like Jesus – 3</i>	12
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT	
<i>Like Jesus – 4</i>	16
FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT	
<i>Like Jesus – 5</i>	20

HOLY WEEK

PALM SUNDAY	
<i>A True Chance</i>	24
MAUNDY THURSDAY	
<i>An Opportune Time</i>	28
GOOD FRIDAY	
<i>Is Christianity About A Cross?</i>	32
EASTER SUNRISE	
<i>Knowing Before We Know</i>	37
EASTER MORNING I	
<i>The Real Thing</i>	41
EASTER MORNING II	
<i>Are You Pitiful?</i>	46
TOWARD PENTECOST	
<i>Do We Love God?</i>	49



DEDICATION

With respect for the total ministry that these
few sermons cannot hope to represent;

with gratitude for the husband, father,
grandfather and brother whose life's work
has so importantly influenced our own;

with recognition of the commitment, purpose and love
of the Community Church, Congregational,
Corona del Mar community;

we joyfully sponsor the publication of this collection
as a small part of our celebration
of Bruce Van Blair's retirement.

We love you.

*Mariana Van Blair
Russell & Willene Jaqua
Brennan, Gretchen, Lucas & Jared Van Blair
Barbara & Dieter Schugt*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It will be several months before this book is an accomplished fact – if all goes well. But putting the final touches on my part of this project with my daughter today, I have been thinking about how much it takes to make even such a simple task as this collection possible. And so with gratitude, I remember:

Joey Moschetti, who has always been a superb encourager, and more than that, a trusted and skilled editor. Some people don't realize that a real editor is a lot like a nanny. You entrust to an editor all these very precious and personal concepts and notions that are parts of your inner self. You put them into the hands of another. Then you watch for a while to make sure they don't get hurt or abused or neglected. You want them to be cleaned, and nurtured, and maybe even dressed up better than ever, but not really changed – oh no! And you stand ready to grab them all back at any moment, if necessary. So thanks, Joey, that my ideas are so safe in your hands, and cleaned and dressed up so well.

Willene Jaqua, who is my daughter, and a much better writer than I. But it was her notion that this book of sermons would be a good “going away” present to the members of the Community Church, Congregational, in Corona del Mar, California, as I retire. I won't try to say here how much I admire and appreciate her, or how much I wish we were doing a book she had written instead of this one. But I am still most grateful for her impetus and thoughtfulness.

And finally, to all the members of the Community Church, Congregational (United Church of Christ) who have put up with me these past several years – and who have participated in the study groups and retreats, and who have been such a vibrant and interested faith family. I never preach to visitors, and seldom to the recalcitrant. I preach to those who care the most, and so these sermons have been for those who love Jesus, and who really want to walk the WAY He has opened up to us. Because they want to understand more and more what is behind what we believe, and what happens to us when we get close to the Lord, therefore I preach. If it were not for such pilgrims and good friends in the Lord, there would be no reason to preach this kind of sermon. And so I am incredibly grateful to them, for making my work seem so worthwhile, and so rewarding.

Bruce Van Blair
April 24, 2002

INTRODUCTION

It has been ever so many years now since I've sacrificed a lamb, or even a dove, on the altar to keep God's wrath from overwhelming or destroying me, or even just to improve my relationship with the Creator. I am convinced that the world is round (well, round is closer than flat); that Heaven is not just "up," but is a different dimension; and that Hell is not about physical flames – how do you burn souls with physical fire?

Theology is connected in strange ways to our concepts of the physical universe. Because the physical is always so finite and limited, it keeps us humble, among other things. However much we understand, it is increasingly clear to us that, as we mature, our understanding is always partial and incomplete. The desire to transcend and live beyond this temporal, broken world must not delude us into thinking we have escaped it, or into imagining that our minds are not limited by our experience here. No matter how far we go in our imaginations, we are still here for a while longer. Therefore, our notions of God, of true reality, and even of our own identity and purpose are always landlocked and limited by space and time as we experience it. That also means our understanding is terribly small. And that's fine, for now – as long as we remember it.

Incarnation (God coming in the meat) is an incredible expansion of our perspective, opening up LIFE and possibility enough to enthrall us for longer than we get to be here. But we must never forget that it is also God revealing himself, and God reducing down – a terrible reduction – to a level where we can comprehend some of it. It is mercy and grace and LOVE enough to make us gasp ... that God would do such a thing for us. Perhaps part of our gratitude should include a humility when we try to speak of it, write creeds about it, or explain it to other people. It's hard for us to be so grateful to Jesus on the one hand – to feel so much loyalty and love and admiration for Him – without starting to sound and act like little smart-ass know-it-alls on the other.

So it is imperative that we keep spreading the news of His love and mercy, because others who come here are as desperate to hear and experience it as we are. And at the same time, we must remember that we comprehend only the tiniest part of God's truth, purpose, and identity. Even Jesus, whose whole mission was to come to our level and be understandable, eludes us much of the time by what He does and says. And our best creedal description of Him (fully God and fully man) is actually gibberish to any of our normal ways of thinking. The paradox does not really define anything – it points to what is beyond our definitions.

Anyway, two thousand years later we are still talking, thinking, and arguing about it all. And what some of the cynics miss is that we are also still being transformed and uplifted and changed and filled with JOY and HOPE by it all. Some of us, and I am certainly one of them, have

a hard time imagining how we could go on breathing and striving if it were not for the revelation in Jesus Christ. Others, including many as devoted and inspired by their religion as we are by ours, find hope and purpose outside the Christian Faith. If we trust our Lord, and our faith, we know that God loves them as much as he loves any of us, even though it would offend them for us to explain why we think so. In any case, some of us have no desire to take anything away from them. But neither are we willing to let the world, or anyone in it, take our faith away from us. So we go on claiming it, and trying to explain what we are so excited about. Those who are interested are welcome to come explore with us and, if they get hooked like we did, to come try to live it with us. And if not, we wish them well – sincerely. Some things have to be God's problem. It's one of the few advantages of being finite creatures: We don't have to solve all the problems. After all, what can you expect from creatures with brains smaller than a volleyball? (Quite a bit, actually, but still ...) In any case, Christianity is not for those who need it. It is for those who want it.

And like many others, I still preach about it. Over the years, it has seemed to me that we are not doing nearly as well with this as our forebears did – explaining what we believe in the context of our perceived reality like they did in theirs. It's hard for me to imagine that anybody believes the Jesus story more than I do, but I don't imagine that story happening like many of the people around me try to believe it. And it often feels to me like they are just repeating what somebody else told them to think, without trying very hard to make it real inside themselves. This has a tendency to "compartmentalize" things: faith is one area of life, and the reality where we live is quite another – and the two are uneasy with each other, which makes it hard for the two to get together as a genuine WAY of Life.

So I am not hesitant or apologetic about "translating" what I believe, or what I think was really going on in the Biblical story, into language and concepts that I identify with. From my perspective, I never change the story (certainly not if I realize it). I only try to comprehend it. But I am under no illusions that I have it "right." I just have it as right as I know how to put it. And tomorrow I hope and expect to have it clearer still.

Each year, from Ash Wednesday to Easter, we ponder anew the core of the core of what Jesus' coming means to us. This is a series of sermons that go through the Lenten and Holy Week season and into Pentecost. I hope you will find that they open things up more than close them down. I hope also that you will realize that they minimize nothing of what was happening in the actual events, except by the inevitable limitations of human mind and language. And mostly, of course, I hope they will help you in your own pilgrimage. Jesus still needs all the friends He can get.

DEPRAVITY

Perhaps the most frequent mockery of Calvin, and hence of Puritans (our spiritual forebears), is aimed toward the teachings and sayings that might be lumped together under the title, “The Depravity of Man.” People don’t like to be called “depraved,” and, while we may each know some individuals we would consider depraved, we certainly don’t consider it fair or accurate for someone to put *us* into that category. We make mistakes, and it is uncommon for any of us to consider ourselves perfect, but neither do we think of ourselves as depraved.

It should not particularly surprise us that there are those who like to pick up on a word or phrase and, without any interest in where it comes from or what it really means, use it as a springboard for their anger toward religion in general and Christianity in particular. That very phenomenon is strong evidence for some of Calvin’s conclusions, though not exactly in the way these same people might think. In any case, Calvin was no Calvinist any more than Jesus was a Christian, at least not according to most popular conceptions of such things. And while I have no intention of teaching you Calvinism in one night or persuading you to love the word “depravity,” you ought to know more than most folk do about such things.

So it is true that “depravity” means wicked, or perverse; moral corruption; distorted, crooked. But behind the current definitions, you can still feel the *bondage* – yes? Something has been taken away. There is no depravity until we are depraved – that is, deprived of something. There is a distortion; the rightness has been taken away. In theological terms, the rightness – the glory of God, the rightness with which we were created – has been distorted or twisted until we are deprived of it.

I suspect there are some among us who would not find it hard to go along with the notion of “The Depravity of Man” just from thinking of some of the devastating experiences and situations we have lived through in the last one hundred years. If so much death, torture, disease, and starvation could be attributed only to natural causes, we might still conclude that we live on a depraved planet. But a very high percentage of the devastation is not only perpetrated by fellow humans, but perpetrated on purpose. EVIL. The Seven Deadly Sins run rampant. There is no family, church, company, government, organization, or group anywhere on earth that is not crippled in some fashion by the Seven Deadly Sins. And that means that nothing anywhere on earth is running anywhere near to its rightful design, or according to God’s plan. Depravity means we are not living according to our design – we are not matching the glory in which we were created. In short, we are in rebellion, estranged, alienated – running by our own will and way rather than by God’s. There can be many reasons for this depravity, this veering off the Path: ignorance, fear, loneliness, pride – and all the situations and circumstances that lead to such things (bad environments, accidents, betrayal, pain, loss, poverty, and so on). To be sure, none of this would be happening if God had

not given us “free will.” On the other hand, none of the value of what God designed and created would have any meaning without free will.

Stalemate. If God grants the potential for glory and love and character and purpose without the possibility of rebellion or self-will or evil choices, then it means nothing. On the other hand, no matter how high the purpose and potential, how can individual human beings make right choices all the time – from the very beginning – when we have had no chance to learn or understand or experience or comprehend consequences? Even if you don’t like my reminding you that this world is “boot camp” (our training ground for the life dimensions to come), you would have to expect *some* mayhem, wouldn’t you, when introducing creatures of free will to LIFE, no matter how great their purpose, their destiny, and their design?

So what have we got against the concept of depravity? “*Perverse and foolish oft I strayed*” I don’t have any trouble identifying with that, do you? (*Pilgrim Hymnal*, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is”) There are a lot of people whom we love even though they are not perfect. It doesn’t feel good or right to call them depraved, even if they do sometimes lie, cheat, hoard, screw, get angry, or fail to perform in ways we think would be more appropriate. Okay, so they *are* depraved, but we don’t want to talk about it or think of it in that way. They also do some very wonderful things – doesn’t that count too? Yes it counts, but does it cancel out the other?

So you see, it is possible to be full of love, and enthusiasm for life – full of gratitude and even joy – and still be very aware of The Depravity Of All Mankind. And in fact, a great many Calvinists and Puritans were exactly that. They had great regard for their own lives and the lives of those around them, yet at the same time they felt a conscious awareness of the gap between us as we are and the glory of God.

The real difference between us and them, I suspect, is that we don’t think about the glory of God as much as they did. “*All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*” (Romans 3:23) That does not mean we have failed to *be* God. It means we have not come close to God’s design for us – to the pattern and possibilities that God has actually built within us. We are not what God made us to be. And the full force of that statement is not merely that we fall short of what it would be wonderful for us to be. It’s much worse than that: We are made truly wonderful, yet we are not living by our true design. Something is being allowed to corrupt, sidetrack, reduce, spoil, and warp us.

Isn’t it interesting that the concept of our depravity is built on the assumption that we are created truly wonderful? If you aren’t much to start with, depravity isn’t relevant. “You were born a piece of crap and you’ll always be a piece of crap.” There is no depravity in that. Depravity is the amazing claim that something has gone terribly wrong. Most of all, depravity is the Puritan’s

awareness that God is incredibly wonderful but that, in our present condition, we are not matching that glory – we are not beings of character or behavior that fit in the Kingdom or company of God. In short, Calvinism (Puritanism) did not think itself inferior to what was going on around it in this world. But thinking of the majesty, purity, beauty, love, kindness, truth, and purposes of God, the Puritans realized they had a real problem: They knew they fell far short. They were a long way from home, and not just in time or distance. The quality of life, love, thinking, and intention was way below what it needed to be ... what it wanted to be ... what it was designed to be. A society that spends very little time thinking about the glory of God cannot comprehend what the Puritans meant by “depravity.” We think it was some kind of inferiority complex, and it was – but not anything close to what we mean by that term. We think they felt unworthy, and they did – but not in any way close to what we imagine by that phrase.

When I start to sense and realize the great distance between where we are and what we are designed to be, it makes me want to weep – not from mere sadness, but from a great and powerful longing. If it does not make you want to weep for longing, I feel really sorry for you. Depravity is bad enough, but intentionally blind, deaf, and dumb as well?

* * *

Which brings us to our second point. Awareness of the depravity – the contrast, the awareness of our loss and lack – to the Puritans, that was the beginning of spiritual awakening, the beginning of real LIFE.

If the stars do not call to you, if love does not scorch you, if you are not compelled and humbled by what you lack, then what kind of conversation can the Holy Spirit possibly have with you? We say we’re so tired of correction and challenge; we want to be accepted the way we are, be told we need to make no more improvements, wallow in “unconditional love.” Really?! What does that lead to? What could be more insulting? Notions of depravity never led to discouragement, depression, or despair like the modern notions of “I’m OK, You’re OK” do. Notions of depravity led to real hope: maybe we really do need God! And the spiritual transformations were not merely pious on the inside, though that was the driving force, and far more powerful than most folk in our culture seem to comprehend. The spiritual transformations led to outer effort, the so-called “Puritan work ethic”: we are here to accomplish, to build, to achieve, to settle for

nothing less than God’s Kingdom realized in us and around us.

Of course, humanity is still depraved, and we still live in a broken world. But what difference does that make to the awakened? They will live for what they have seen and felt and come to realize is a deeper, greater, unconquerable TRUTH. And long after our brief training ground here, this drama and pilgrimage will go on into eternity. You cannot discourage a Puritan. Oh, they have their bad moments of course, but you cannot discourage a Pilgrim – not in the long run. Or a real Christian, either. I mean, if they are not afraid of death, what are you going to do to them? They sing things like, “*This world is not my home, I’m just a-passing through*” (*Pilgrim Hymnal*, “He Who Would Valiant Be”) Who wrote the hymn we just sang? John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim’s Progress* – the book that used to be called “the New Testament of the common people.”

ASHES

Not everybody uses the ashes of Ash Wednesday in the same way. Some are conscious mostly of our sorrow for crucifying Jesus. Some are aware of promises – declarations made on Palm Sunday and not kept. Some are aware of personal and private sins – errors, mistakes, blunders, things withheld, things not done for Christ. Some just wallow in a private, personal “Slough of Despond,” as Bunyan called it, with no particular desire or expectation of ever getting out of it. Some say they feel “like worms” in contrast to the glory of God. But watch their lives before you judge their phraseology. Moses was “meek,” but only before God. Puritans were depraved, but only in contrast to the glory of God. And it *never* meant they were content to stay that way. It meant they really wanted to be open to, respond to, and trust the mercy and grace and providence of God in Christ Jesus their Lord. They named it “depravity” and didn’t like it! We leave it unnamed and seem halfway content to settle for it. Contentment is for cows, and unrepentant sinners.

In any case, that’s what the ashes mean to me: sorrow, shame, longing; awareness of depravity, awareness of the gap; a great hunger to get closer both to my Lord, and to who I really am. Those two always somehow go together, don’t they – getting closer to our Lord, and getting closer to who we really are. “*He who loses his life for my sake, will find it.*”

PRAYER

I am sorry, Lord, that I am so far away from what You made me ... so far away from knowing and loving You ... so far away from obeying and pleasing You. And somehow the road toward You – the road toward our true HOME – always starts afresh with awakening, and with sorrow and repentance. These are the ashes, the symbols of what isn't working – of what is burnt out, used up, wasted, destroyed, crooked, bent, distorted. We come to You with ashes, and You give us New LIFE: unimaginable forgiveness, and mercy, and grace. If we come to You with anything else, at least in the beginning, You just wait ... wait for us to awaken. May we not be asleep this night. Amen.

SERVICE OF ASHES

I know the tradition, though I don't always follow it very closely. The tradition is to take the palms of Palm Sunday and burn them, then use them for the ashes of repentance the following Ash Wednesday (because we didn't really mean our *hosannas*). The priest puts them on your forehead with his thumb, making the sign of the Cross and saying, "Remember that you are dust ... and to dust you shall return." Or, "Remember that you are mortal."

I think that is very meaningful. But I use charcoal, a more refined and broader ash. Sin is deeper and broader than Palm Sunday, and sometimes we do mean *hosanna* and yet still are not beyond our own depravity, never mind the depravity all around us. And it is good to remember that we are mortal, but I have a much harder remembrance for us – one that breaks our hearts, and causes true repentance if we hear it and believe it: Remember that you are created a true child of God's. Remember that you are created in the glory of God.



LIKE JESUS?

We never talk enough about Jesus. Part of it, I think, is that some people get so caught up in the foolishness of scholarly technicalities that their minds stop working. Maybe we don't know *exactly* what Jesus said or did. Scholarship is often a game of "How much can you actually know with absolutely positive certainty, without any possibility whatsoever of any error, down to the last detail?" Many Christian liberals are frustrated fundamentalists, so they generate their own brand of literalist aberrations, except from the opposite end of the spectrum. Either way, on the basis of absolute certainty, I couldn't talk about my own wife or children. There is a difference between math and relationships. Relationships are messy, for instance, and meaningful. They change from minute to minute. "Bigamy" is a legal term, with a precise definition for one-dimensional people. But I am married to at least thirty different women. When I was young and dumb, I often got confused because they all had the same name and face of the woman I married, Mariana. Some men like variety, but I'm always grateful when I come home and discover that it's a Mariana I've already met before. Have you ever wondered why your husband doesn't like it when you come home with a new hair-do? He's confused enough already! At least you could have the consideration to keep the outside looking somewhat familiar. He tells you it looks nice, but you know he doesn't really mean it. (Just because he's confused doesn't mean he's stupid.)

Relationships and real people are not about precision. $2 + 2$ is a different realm. Her eyes can actually go from soft to fire in less than a nanosecond. And if you think it's always going to add up to 4, you might as well just head for the door and be done with it. By the time we write a definition of a relationship, it has already transformed – and maybe even transcended – several layers of reality. But we are going to define and describe Jesus the Christ – the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God – by the rules of some pathetic, precise pseudo-science? And if it doesn't add up to our satisfaction, claim it is all a mirage? Maybe if the priests had been married, they wouldn't have tried to write so many locked-down creeds, or at least they would have left room for the hairstyles to change. I have stopped trying to come up with excuses for why many modern scholars think it is their great intelligence that keeps them from faith. Truly brilliant people have usually been people of faith. Awareness and humility are our problems, not intelligence.

In any case, it doesn't matter what somebody else thinks Jesus is supposed to mean to you. It isn't going to be the same thing an hour from now, never mind a year from now. How many experiences will you have with the Risen Lord between now and tomorrow morning? Quite a few ... if you don't get mindless, or spend so much time reading The Book that you don't have any time left over for your own life. And every time life moves on, you will "hear and understand" through different ears and eyes the stories and encounters you find in the New Testament.

That is why the Bible never gets boring, never goes out of style. You can study it all your life and only become more fascinated. But don't be surprised if scholars who think they're really educated and erudite come along claiming we can't know enough about Jesus to have any relationship with Him. They say brilliant things like, "Will the real Jesus please stand up (yuk, yuk, yuk)." All that really means is that they don't get it. They think Jesus is a math problem to be solved. For them it's not a relationship – not an invitation from God, in Christ Jesus, to walk into a whole new WAY of Life. For them it's only words on a page. If we keep it words on a page, we can keep it meaningless. But that's not because we're so smart; that's because we are still in denial, determined to keep the Living God far away from our own motives and purposes and decisions. Sin is alienation, separation, aloneness, pride, rebellion, fear. Ph.D.s don't help with that stuff. Trust in God helps with that stuff. It is called "faith," and it has always required surrender.

It is Lent, and many of us use Lent to be more reflective than usual. In this church, we never give up anything for Lent as a punishment or discipline – as if discipline by itself carries some kind of value. Right discipline always has a desired goal in mind. An athlete goes into training not because training itself is the purpose, but to improve performance. Always there are some who lose sight of the goal and start training for its own sake. Always there are religious people who lose sight of the goal too, and start doing the rituals and disciplines for their own sake. That's when we get institutionalized religion – the form and structure without the Spirit. That's not okay around here. We do not read the Bible, pray every day, tithe, or do any of our disciplines for their own sake. The disciplines are chosen so that we may keep improving our relationship with God, and keep drawing closer to God. And relationship is not $2 + 2$, something to solve or fix. There is always more. And in fact, the closer we get to God, the greater our awareness of how much rebelliousness, fear, lack of trust, and doubt of God's love still exist within us. And so we want even more to be closer. And we realize God would be very pleased if we got closer too. So it's never the disciplines – it's the relationship we are after.

We make it so complicated, when it is merely difficult – and difficult in a way we wouldn't mind at all if we didn't keep making it so complicated. I had a date with Mariana once, years ago. But instead of that one date satisfying me for the rest of my life, I wanted more. There was more than a one-date possibility there. I don't know how I knew, but I could feel it. So I tried for a second date. Forty-eight years later, and countless dimensions beyond that first date, I'm still thinking that if I keep at it, I might get the hang of it after a while. But I no longer expect it to "work out" – whatever that phrase means – as if it were some kind of math problem, something to be "fixed" or solved.

Some of us have found ourselves on a date with God. *How* that happens is a whole different subject, but nevertheless, instead of that one date satisfying us for the rest of our lives, we wanted more. We started to realize that God was incredibly interesting beyond all words and definitions. So we started trying to figure out how to get a second date. Now here we are, years later, still fascinated and grateful for the relationship, which, we have long since discovered, isn't all sweetness and light – just like any real relationship. Nevertheless, as the saying goes, we wouldn't give it up for the world. And the longer we stay with it, the more we realize that the dimensions are endless and we have only barely begun.

Here's the point: When I started dating Mariana, I soon ran into a problem, an inescapable reality that I didn't even want to think about or deal with at the time. But there it was anyway. There was no escaping it. Fascinated with Mariana, I didn't want to pay attention to any problems, so for a while I tried to ignore it. But there was no help for it. I was forced to deal with the reality or lose Mariana.

It wasn't a really complicated problem, but neglecting reality was starting to *make* it complicated. You see, I didn't know I was going to meet Mariana, so I hadn't planned any space, money, effort, brooding time, gifts, travel time, conversation time, etc., into my life and schedule to make room for her. I was trying to make it through college, working five part-time jobs on the side. I was all used up. I had no room for her in my life. But there she was.

I want to suggest that all of us have this same problem with God. We are busy. We are all used up. Yet there God is, offering a relationship, suggesting we could be friends – closer even than lovers. An authentic Lenten discipline has nothing to do with “giving up something” because discipline is fun, or because depriving ourselves of something is holy or spiritual. A Lenten discipline is *the desire* to carve out more time and space for God. We do not have enough room for God, but there he is, willing and waiting.

Mariana came into my life at a very awkward time, pragmatically speaking. I ended up having to make a lot of changes and give up many things in order to have room in my life for a relationship with her. I gave them up gladly, but I did give them up. There was no other way. No one has time and room for everything and everyone in their life. I lost some other relationships; I had some big problems with my mother; it cost me some money I couldn't afford. And it has been doing that sort of thing ever since. Would I expect otherwise?! The great angst came not so much in having to give up those things; it came during the period of time when I was trying to keep it all the way it was before *and* add Mariana in – without making any changes, without making room for the new.

None of us get to have God in our lives, at least not enough to matter, unless we are willing to make the room. A relationship with God requires space, money, effort, brooding time, gifts, travel time, conversation time, and

more. We may think for a while that it shouldn't, or that we can fake it, duck around it, or be fast enough to stuff it in along with everything else, relegating God to spare time and fleeting moments. But if you think God will require less of you than a woman, you are deluded and in denial. If you think you can have a really good relationship with a woman and never spend any time or money on her, you are mistaken. With God, you can carry that to the tenth power. Why is God so demanding? Ask it another way: Does God know how relationships really work?

Of course, a few encounters with God and we want the relationship more and more. As we come to love God, any sacrifice is truly more than worth it. The angst comes during the time when we try to add God into our lives without making any changes – without making any room for the new relationship. So I repeat: a Lenten discipline is *the desire* to carve out more time and space in your life for God.

I cannot make an appropriate Lenten discipline for any of you. Once made, I cannot keep it for you. No matter how strong our fellowship, some things we must each still do ourselves. Nevertheless, we have often found it helpful to share a common theme as a faith family during Lent. This year I'm suggesting that we focus on Jesus. That sounds so standard and obvious that we tend to assume it – take it for granted. And to be sure, many of us *have* taken it for granted from time to time, but it doesn't happen nearly as often in the church as an outsider would assume.

So this Lenten season, I'm suggesting that we focus on Jesus, and specifically on the ways in which Jesus is your role model or, in the old language, your hero. Theologically, our claim is that God reveals himself in Jesus Christ: God reveals what God is really like more and better in the life, character, teachings, encounters, decisions, behavior, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ than anywhere else on earth. God reveals himself in other ways and places and through other people as well, but never as clearly and powerfully and directly as in Jesus the Christ.

The standard formula is that God reveals himself in the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. That is what sets Christianity apart from other religions. That is our claim, the core of the core. But to be clear and straight with you (which I am a lot more than some of you realize), we have a different emphasis in this church than in most of Christendom. Certainly not from all of it, but from most of it. Here, we put a great deal of emphasis on the LIFE of Jesus. The majority of Christendom puts all of its emphasis on the Death and Resurrection, paying very little attention to the LIFE – the person of Jesus of Nazareth. You can be a Catholic all your life, for instance, and never ask or wonder much about who Jesus was as a person, as a human being. Despite the Catholic doctrine that Jesus is fully God *and* fully man, the divine part – the miracles and the eucharist and the crucifixion – gets all the attention. From my perspective, that is a terrible distortion. Without the LIFE, I have no way to identify

very much with the Death and Resurrection. Without the LIFE, I maybe get theories about salvation and redemption and even grace, but I miss the love and passion and vision and struggle that make it real.

Without the LIFE, I get some hints about what God may be doing for us, but I don't know why or what it's really about. I know there is mystery, but this emphasis makes mystery the only thing there is. I get no hints about how to live my own life, except, of course, for generic commandments. Not that they have no value, but commandments don't add up to a WAY of personal prayer, or to a Path of obedience, guidance, vocatio, individual purpose, or identity. Without the Path, God loves me as a digit, not as an individual.

To put attention on the LIFE means we think of Jesus as a unique and incredible individual: who was also on a pilgrimage of His own; who was brilliant, and incredibly aware; who lived in the midst of overwhelming challenges and forces in the world all around Him; who became aware of God's presence, followed God's guidance, and opened up for us principles and approaches to life that, on the one hand, were a summation of the best wisdom and experience of two thousand years of Judaism and, on the other hand, were so dynamically new and powerful that even Judaism could not tolerate Him. Jesus literally blew all human wisdom and understanding of the true meaning of LIFE clear out of the water – and most of Christendom has been scrambling madly ever since to gather up the pieces, put them in a box, and nail it all back down into something safe and familiar. One of the best ways to do that is to pay as little attention as possible to who Jesus was, how Jesus actually lived and thought and made decisions, and what His *life* was really like and about.

In short, there is a way to focus on the “Virgin Birth” and the Crucifixion and the Resurrection that keeps us standing apart in a kind of respectful, awe-filled, reverential attitude of passive appreciation, but has no direct impact on anything we do, decide, or try to accomplish – and in fact makes it feel like something crass and blasphemous to make any connection between religion and the challenges we are struggling with on a daily basis.

Jesus the man ends up crucified because of the way He lived, what He cared about, the way He prayed, what He was trying to accomplish. Jesus the man calls us to come live the way He lived, to pray the way He prayed, to care and make decisions and believe and trust God the way He did. He calls us into a movement, a fellowship, a WAY of LIFE that He was *actually living* – and that He knows will bring us into a relationship with God as vibrant and real and dangerous as the one He had.

The Christ, without Jesus, is a spectator sport, merely philosophically fascinating, in theoretical ways, if you study it long enough. Jesus, without the Christ, ends in tragedy – man's inhumanity and injustice to man – poignant, but hardly a surprising new theme. The two together become Jesus, Lord and Christ: the Messiah,

backed by Almighty God, revealing a new WAY to claim our lives, our destinies, and our identities, each of us as a true child of a loving Creator who tracks, guides, supports, and nurtures us each individually through the pathos and confusion of this broken world – into awareness of His True Kingdom, and unto all eternity.

I'm not suggesting we take on all of that for one short Lenten season, just the LIFE part: Jesus the man. I'm suggesting that you each ask yourself afresh: In what ways is Jesus my role model, my hero? In what ways do I consciously emulate the sort of person I think He was? Your image of Jesus is a composite of what you have learned from the Bible and have experienced of His presence in your own life. And, unfortunately or fortunately, it is also much impacted by what you have learned from other people about what Jesus was like, whether or not they ever thought about it or studied the records.

All of this does not deter me from the assignment. Nor should it trouble you overmuch. What we get in the New Testament is a reflection of what Jesus meant to people who had experiences with Him. It is not about some creed or party line; it is not about some formula so we can “believe correctly.” The real meaning for any of us comes when we connect what we get in the New Testament with our own lives. Does Jesus heal you? Scold you? Tease you? Teach you? What you are becoming is what matters to Him, and that is changing all the time. If you find an encounter with Nicodemus or a parable that Jesus told instructive and illuminating to your own pilgrimage, then it becomes for you the Living Word.

Of course, we will not all see Jesus in the same light. You don't all have the same opinion of me or of each other, and yet we're all right here, doing what we do, saying what we say. Is that some huge surprise or problem? It's just the way life is. The truth is, if we really want to know Jesus, our other learning and relationships will grow richer and more interesting and more profound all the time. It is when we come to admire, appreciate, and love who this man was, and what He was like, that He becomes our role model, and hero. Then He has incredible impact on our lives, and on how we try to live them.

In what ways is Jesus your role model, your hero? It is a theme for our Lenten study and meditations. With whatever information you already have at your disposal, think about what kind of personality Jesus really had, what kind of character He had, what sort of person He really was. Don't just make Him into what you want Him to be, or think He ought to be. What was He *really* like: What did He say? And do? And think about? Imagine somebody like Him participating in conversations, meetings, and situations you are engaged in. Make some notes. Use pen and paper. Get it as clear and specific as you can.

We are saved by His Death and Resurrection. Just so. But we are won over by His LIFE. We come to admire Him, respect Him, wonder at Him, love Him – and follow Him – because of His LIFE.

PRAYER

Lord Christ, we do thank You for all the grace and mercy, for all the love and forgiveness, that have brought us to this day. Life is short, and the world looks a little crazier every day – scary but beautiful too – so full of pathos and opportunity, so laced with sorrow and interlaced with the divine. Grant us then, we pray – despite all confusion and hesitation – grant us a clearer WAY to walk with You: humble yet valiant, meek yet unafraid, loving yet faithful. Most of all, we pray that we may find, in the common and ordinary days and tasks that You bring us, a way to please You ... to follow You ... to become, by Your Spirit, more like You. Afraid of our audacity, but thrilled by Your promise, we pray together in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.



LIKE JESUS – 2

Humans have a great fondness for being unique, and for discovering or inventing something new. We somehow long to know something that nobody else knows, or to do something better, or at least different. It is partly why our species adapts and survives as well as it does. It is also why we sometimes forget or neglect the basics, and often lose or destroy what we once valued most. Human history is full of both stories.

To follow Jesus, we have to be willing to go where He beckons. To be like Jesus, we have to know what Jesus was like. Simple logic – simply neglected.

We can make such truisms enormously complicated, or we can simplify them into mere slogans that mean nothing at all. Nevertheless, intentional pilgrims return to such basics again and again. We are making no progress unless we take steps ... steps must be taken one at a time ... and so forth. Simple logic – simply forgotten. Some of the most important steps have been hammered out – tried and tested – in every corner of our heritage for thousands of years. We neglect them at our peril, no matter how smart and independent we think we are.

This Lent we contemplate one of the foundations, one of the cornerstones, of our faith: What impact does Jesus have on the model for life that we carry in our heads? This irresistibly calls us to check again what we think Jesus was like. If the model is vague, it can only lead us to indecision. If the model is wrong, it can only lead us astray. And then we must add: If the model is absolutely clear and we are absolutely certain, it can only lead us into spiritual pride, arrogance, and evil. That leaves us with a pretty fine line to walk – something about “the straight and narrow.” If the road cannot be walked in humility, it is not from God. If it does not require daily prayer and daily surrender, it is not of God, for we would not need God to be with us.

So we begin our efforts to refocus on Jesus with two admissions:

(1) The records of His life are not videotapes, and they are not precise enough to tempt any of us into absolutes or false pride. We have nothing, strictly speaking, that comes “out of the mouth of Jesus.” Somebody says that “Jesus said”; that is as close as we ever come. Somebody remembers hearing that Jesus did “this or that”; this is as close as we ever come. I happen to believe that Jesus set it up this way, and kept it this way, on purpose. He knew how to write, and chose not to. He knew the pitfalls of an overt, physical record. Always His emphasis was on the interior – the behavior must come from the inner relationship with God. He never compromised that principle, never gave us any other approach or way.

(2) The second admission is at least as hard as the first: What we do have is the record of what Jesus was like in the mind and heart of the early church. We do know what the earliest Christian communities told and believed about what Jesus said and did, and what He was like. Even though this often seems disappointing – not

good enough for us – nevertheless it was good enough to change the world, and to convert many of us nearly seventy generations later. So the bad news is, the record is faulty. The good news is, the record is not very faulty. And on other days, the good news is that the record is faulty, and the bad news is that it's not very faulty. That's just my reminder to myself that often I wish the picture of Jesus were not as clear as it is. My real problem is not lack of information, though I love to pretend at times that it is. The truth is that I know more than enough about Jesus to keep me occupied, challenged, inspired, and amazed all of my life. This also leads me into prayer, and humility.

Among other things, this means that I cannot give you a few crisp and clear slogans, each wrapped up in a snappy illustration, and send you off to be “Good Christians.” Others can, and do. They think I'm confused; I think they have no respect. I also know that you cannot live very adequately with *my* “picture of Jesus.” You must find and live with your own. As you know, I believe we should study the Scriptures constantly, and that they are able to continually refresh and inspire our awareness of Jesus. I know that people can also benefit from sharing their “pictures of Jesus” with each other. But for just the next few weeks, let me suggest that you not concentrate on learning more or reading more about Jesus. Rather, ponder and meditate on what you already know. One way to increase knowledge is to get more information. Another way to increase knowledge is to think more deeply about the information we already have. Our culture is big on the first way, and frequently pathetic on the second. Most of us already have sufficient information about Jesus resting on the surface of our minds. The longing of the soul is not to get more data up on the surface, but to bring some of it down – down into the inner labyrinths of our being.

I suppose we should start each of these sermons with the simple but profound question: Do you love Jesus? If we take that question as a test of salvation or a test of good character, it will do us no good. But if we let our mind ask our heart the simple, honest question – Do you love Jesus? – then we get a reading on how the relationship stands, at least on this particular day. Remember, relationships are not math. This isn't $2 + 2 = 4$. Relationships are dynamic, and meaningful, and messy. Our loyalty and love for Jesus are not the same yesterday, today, and forever. Not unless it's a sham, something we tell others because that's what they want to hear.

I'm not talking here about the Christ, or about the Son of God, however inevitably they may loom in the background. Do you love Jesus the *man*? Do you admire Him, respect Him, care about Him? Do you wish you could have conversations with Him, spend time with Him, ask Him a favor, do something for Him? All of these questions have to be pondered and answered before we can deal very seriously with the notion of following Him.

Not counting bad days and ugly moods, most of us do have high regard for Jesus. On some level, on any normal day, we do love Him in our own way. This love may go all the way from intense personal affection to deep respect for all that He did and went through for the world. In any case, our levels of religious involvement and growth are inescapably linked to the bond of love and devotion we have for Jesus. But a great deal of our culture's pseudo-religious behavior reveals that there is no bond of love or affection or loyalty for Jesus. We don't put all our little hurts, opinions, feelings, and complaints ahead of those we truly love; we care and work and strive and give – joyfully – for those we truly love. It cannot be faked, not over time. Looking good on the surface can be faked for a little while, but not over time. Much of the religious establishment of our culture and time seems to be focused mostly on looking good on the surface.

What happens when instead of that, we start to get some actual regard and respect and admiration for Jesus? Quite a few of you are finding out, more and more, what that's like. Some people love the community first, and end up loving Jesus because they discover that He is its source and head. Others love Jesus first, and end up loving the community because they come to realize that He loves it too. Either way, and inevitably, the working end of our faith and growth as Christians is dramatically linked to the bond of love we have with Jesus. I know many people who do not think this is so, and that perhaps I am in error. But it's fairly easy to check out: Spend some quality time thinking about Jesus – what He was like, and what He was about – and see what happens. If it has no impact on you or how you want to live, then what I'm telling you is wrong.

What follows is no substitute for your own Lenten meditations. It's just my way of trying to prime the pump.

What can we say about Jesus? He was a man of love. What others tried to acquire, He gave away: power, influence, long life, family, reputation, security. Yet in comparison to all other mystic, spiritual leaders, Jesus was very earthy. He loved to eat and drink with His friends. He was no ascetic, depriving Himself of available abundance or suggesting that anybody else deprive themselves – unless it was to get something better. There is a long spiritual tradition of negation: vows of poverty, vows of chastity, feelings that the physical realm is bad or wrong and we must separate ourselves from it to be spiritually alive. Jesus agreed with none of that and taught none of it. His life was not lived in deprivation. *"I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly."* (John 10:10) In comparison to the Buddha, Jesus is a raving optimist. In comparison to Muhammad, Jesus is too compassionate (that's not my prejudice; it's what Islam teaches). In comparison to Moses, Jesus is permissive, spoiling His followers shamelessly, accepting them before they deserve it. In comparison to you and me, Jesus is unimpressed by the toys and goals most of our society toils after.

And yet, every such statement leaves a misimpression. Now we have made Him sound easygoing, rather genial, perhaps rambling His way through life like a good-hearted friar. But no human ever lived with more single-minded

purpose, with more intense devotion to His calling. From King Herod to the most learned scribes in the land, from Pilate to His own best friends – and to Satan himself – *nobody* could deflect Jesus from His chosen Path. Of all the people I have ever known or heard about, Jesus is the most uncompromising. Yet compromise is considered a "good" word in our language today.

Every statement we make about Jesus seems to need a string of qualifiers. I don't think Jesus ever meant to be elusive or obtuse – *except* when He was in verbal battle with Pharisees, or telling parables, or somebody was trying to make it all sound trite. But Jesus *is* elusive because He does not fit into any of our handy, normal, expected categories. He doesn't *try* to keep out of them; He simply does not fit. So we call Him the "man of love," but that doesn't help much because half of us redefine love according to what Jesus Himself was like, and the other half try to fit Him into old definitions of love that don't fit at all – unless we refuse to pay any attention whatsoever to His story.

Much of Christianity, for instance, still tries to make "love" sound like something that makes everybody "like us," and something that keeps us out of serious trouble. *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself* – because then you will be successful and most people will like you." Clearly, if this is the case, Jesus knew nothing about love, since so many people hated Him so fiercely and He was always in serious trouble – from the very moment the Spirit, like a dove, descended upon Him at His baptism. *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself – because it pleases God,* and much of the world will hate you for it because the world is not at peace with God." Can you detect a difference between these two? So you see, if we bring the life of Jesus into the picture, it changes the way we hear everything.

While there are hints and fascinations in all of this, we need to grab hold of something we can work with, something we can measure against, and try to follow. Am I for LIFE? Are you for LIFE? If I see somebody do something wonderful, do I rejoice, or do I get jealous? Jesus was for LIFE! But having chosen a word, already we are in trouble. Some people define "life" as physical existence, and think that being "for life" means being for physical existence for as many people as possible, for as long as possible. Never mind *quality* of life; quantity is the only dimension, the only thing that matters. Never mind eternity or purpose or character or conversion, just get 'em here and keep 'em here as long as possible and maybe something good will happen. (Jesus would, and I believe does, shake His head in remorse: *"Leave the dead to bury the dead, but as for you, go and announce the Kingdom of God."* (Luke 9:60))

Jesus died at thirty-three – not a very good emblem for longevity. He turned a thriving, swiftly growing, successful movement into a tiny, gasping handful of traumatized losers. Though that wasn't the end of it, nevertheless it is not a very good emblem for anybody interested in quantity. Yet one of the overriding impressions of Jesus is that He was for LIFE, only not "life" as we define it – and He was against DEATH, only not "death" as we define it.

There are no adequate words. We speak of spiritual life, of eternal life, of LIFE in the Kingdom. And yet we see Jesus despising disease in the physical realm. Almost every time He heals, there is the hint of anger. He is angry that people are being *thus bound*. He heals as if He's freeing people from shackles, from hidden chains – contesting some hidden enemy's right to thus harm and hold them. He is displeased wherever life is cut back, held down, twisted, shamed. If popular interpretations of the Law of Moses are preventing people from helping people, then He is angry. I don't mean confused, annoyed, sarcastic, or resentful – I mean *angry*. And when Jesus gets angry, He does not lose His temper; He walks straight into it, over and over: "How dare you treat my Father's children in this way!" But ... but ... we are following the Law of Moses! "Who told you that's what it means? I don't care what you say or think – I just healed him, so what are you going to do about it?" "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*" (Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-11)

In our Scripture passage today, Jesus is just as angry at this freeload, lazy good-for-nothing He finds at the Pool of Bethesda. I'm sure there were extenuating circumstances. Who knows what complexes the poor man's mother or father may have bequeathed to him? Maybe somebody failed to appreciate his efforts at art in first or second grade. Jesus is nonetheless irate at what this man is *doing* with the life God has given him. Jesus heals the man against the man's own wishes, and He tries for the long shot – that the experience of healing might actually wake this man up. In the meantime, of course, the man returns the anger, and tries to get Jesus into as much trouble as possible. I doubt very much that Jesus was surprised. He circles back and lets the man have a second barrel, right in the face: "Give it up and get a life, or it will go worse for you than ever before – I have ruined your game for you." (That was verse 14, if you had trouble with the translation.)

Jesus challenged disease, fear, shame, and any structure, personal or nationwide, that held people away from the dynamism of spiritual LIFE – away from personal relationship with God. And He Himself worked constantly to awaken and encourage people to come into their own as God's people – as children of God, as citizens of the Kingdom – endlessly gifted, and eternally destined. Isn't that what kept happening in the encounters: with Mary of Magdala, with fishermen, with tax collectors, with anybody He could reach? They were not all called to change their outer circumstances, but they were all called to leave their former ways and reasons, and called mostly to leave their former estimate of themselves and the value

of their lives. They had to start reaching for, and receiving, a new identity – the New LIFE that God wanted for them. *That* is why we call Jesus the man of love.

But He was not "nice." He offended more people than we ever dare to. He had to in order to stay faithful, in order to keep honest and straight with God. *Real* love got Him resoundingly hated.

I don't know how *you* handle this information, but it has made it clear to me that over and over in my ministry, I've tried to put *being liked* above *being loving*. I've never found it easy or natural to get involved when I see people in bondage, whether to money or success or oppression or whatever. It's always easier to think first of "peace" and wanting the church to go well, and what will make the most people be approving and possibly then helpful. From watching the life of Jesus, however, I have to *make myself* think in a different way – to care from a different perspective – to put *being loving* over *being liked*. And as Jesus' life also proves, not everybody hates you for doing that. Many realize it is the best freedom and light and joy and LIFE there is. Their friendship is not based on "deals" or trade-offs, because LIFE and faith have no need or desire for such things.

Jesus was the Great Lover, Comforter, Healer. But He brought this compassion in a context so different that it belies the usual assumptions and expectations we have about love. He challenged everyone He encountered to come into New LIFE – into what He usually spoke of as the Kingdom of God. Equally, He challenged everything that was against this LIFE with God. Therefore, He misfits all our normal categories, drawing both more love and devotion *and* more hatred and jealousy than any of us ever have. If we follow, will we not also begin to draw more and more of both?

Being a "good Christian," as most of the world describes and imagines it, will never change the world, or us, or the people we love. Something about Jesus is outside the security-conscious, pleasure-seeking, accommodating lifestyles that most of us learn and live. That is one of the intriguing and dangerous things about wanting to follow Him. Yet we do – we do want to follow Him – for life is short, and He beckons us to things beyond all that we have ever wanted, or known.

Do you remember the benediction of Meister Eckhart?

*Henceforth may you be unbelievably happy,
Never overcome by fear and the fearful,
And always in trouble.*

PRAYER

You are the Potter ... we are the clay. You are the Creator ... we are the creatures. Why is it so hard to remember, Lord? It must be hard to work with us if we are stiff ... resistant to all Your suggestions ... complaining at all Your assignments ... demanding guarantees at the beginning of every new venture ... often rebelling before we have understood the destinations. Forgive us, O God, and grant that we may put more trust in Your love, and more trust in Your will and WAY. Let the recalcitrance, the stiffness, the resistance melt away. All the reminders are sweeping toward us: Palm Sunday, and Good Friday, and Easter. Come be our God, and make us wholly Thine. This we pray together in the name of Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.



LIKE JESUS – 3

I am not as impressed by statistics as some of my friends are. If 180 people attend church here on Sunday morning and suddenly it jumps to 200 and stays there, have we improved? I have no way of knowing. How can we measure the devotion and commitment of mere numbers? Do statistics reveal the heart? Something is attracting more people, but what? Hitler attracted a lot of people. Bears and flies are both drawn to honey. Would we rather walk the Christian Path with 5 others, or feel the exhilaration of 15,000 who name the Name but don't really care about the reality? No doubt there are more than 5 among the 15,000 who know the reality and are truly intentional about walking the Path. But how do we find them, and how much influence can they have on the attitudes and purposes of the lives of the 15,000? It's hard to escape it: life in the fast lane – and life in the numbers game – is also life in the shallows.

A recent Gallup Poll tells us that 41% of the people in the United States are attending church or synagogue on a weekly basis. Gallup reported this same statistic (41% in church or synagogue each week) in 1995, 1991, 1981, and 1939. Statistically speaking, the religious health and participation of our country is the same as it was 65 years ago, though over the years I have heard dire predictions about the demise of the church, especially about the younger generation and how young people aren't religious anymore or that the church isn't reaching them anymore. Often people tell me, from various stances and perspectives, that "nobody is religious out there like they used to be." But just like always, the statistics say that 41% of the people in our country attend church or synagogue weekly (which is better than the 4% in Sweden, and not nearly as good as the 89% in Nigeria).

More intriguing to me is that 90% of the people in our country claim to believe in God and pray at least once every day, and yet only 41% claim to participate in church or synagogue weekly. What about the other 49%? It flat out escapes me how a person can claim to believe in God, or Jesus, and spend no part of his or her life trying to strengthen any group or organization here on earth that bears His name. I have never been able to understand that. I must have a blind spot, and it must be a big one, since 49% of our population claims to love God but has no desire or intention of doing anything for him, or at least not so he will get any of the credit – that is, they love God but not in a way that anybody else might ever be drawn to him. It simply dumbfounds me that 49% of our population thinks there is no connection between belief and commitment. But at least the 41% *does* know there is a connection between belief and commitment. And despite all the dead weight, they manage to accomplish amazing things. And from everything I can see, they are having lots more fun and living far better lives for knowing it.

That makes me feel much better. Because if I thought 90% of the people of this country were praying every day, and being serious about it – taking it in any way to heart,

claiming any kind of loyalty or allegiance to God no matter how confused, inept, or prone to error or sin or mistakes – if I thought 90% of us were seriously praying every day and yet we were still in the condition and state we are in, then I really would be discouraged.

So I suspect that many people are sincerely claiming to pray every day, but they don't mean what I think prayer means. Perhaps they are talking about giving God a piece of their minds – ordering God around, giving God helpful suggestions, making requests, begging favors – but it has nothing to do with how they live or make decisions, or what they truly trust, or what they are living for. If that is what they mean by prayer, then I can understand why prayer isn't making much difference to them, or for them. I find it impossible to imagine that this whole country is waking up every morning and that nine out of every ten of us are laying our lives and our days before the Lord – waiting in humble obedience for the guidance, correction, realignment, and strength to do God's will – and then walking into the day with one purpose above all others: to be faithful and receptive and obedient to God throughout that day. It is hard for me to imagine that this is the reality behind our nation's life, when life in our country is still as scarred and marred as it is.

So I don't really know or care very much about the statistics. I do know and care quite a bit about Jesus. He's the One who points to LIFE and light beyond anything we have ever known in this world. He is the One who keeps claiming, with His own life as collateral, that God loves us and will save us, no matter what happens in this world – no matter what has happened, is happening, or ever will happen here. And for that very reason, I am more than curious about how He behaved as a man here: How did He react and respond to all the joy, pathos, anger, and love that goes on here? What did He think was important, and what did He do with His time and energy? What did He care about, and how did He manage and handle the things He believed within the context of all the demands, threats, and expectations of this life? It is a wonderment, a life-long wonderment. And especially so for those of us who decide that in some fashion we want to "follow" Him. Yes, especially so for those of us who conclude that if there is some way to translate from His time to ours, from His context to ours, from His identity and purpose under God to ours, then we have no higher agenda in life – no better purpose or goal or desire – than to *follow* Him.

When I think about what Jesus was like, from what we can tell from the records we have, for me the one thing that stands out above all others is that He was a man of prayer. His role models, His heroes, were some of history's most fervent pray-ers: Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, Isaiah (to name a few). Jesus knew their stories, admired them, learned from them, and put it all together in His own life. Behind all that Jesus did and said and refused to do, there stood their legacy. Yet

with and beyond that, the only explanation I can find – the only source, the only possibility – for the life He lived is this thread and theme that runs through it all: He was a man of prayer.

Saying that is not enough. There are many different kinds of prayer. It is clear to most of us that Jesus was saying more than “Now I lay me down to sleep.” He was saying more than “Please give me ...” or “Please protect me ...” or even “Please bless me ... or them ... or us.” On some profound level, that still sends shivers up the spine: *He was listening* – listening for the whisper of the ONE whose agenda was greater than His own. And when He heard ... when He *heard* ... well, “that was all she wrote”: Total obedience. Complete subservience. Or, to put it in our language and on our level, which is always precisely where He put it: when it seemed to Him that He understood what God was asking of Him, He went for it with single-minded, whole-hearted passion and devotion. “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” (Søren Kierkegaard)

We are impressed by Jesus’ love, but I end up even more impressed by His prayer, because that is *where* His kind of love comes from – this unusual, passionate, unnerving love that is for LIFE (but not as we understand it), and against death (but not as we understand it).

How I wish I could say something to inspire all of us to be more constant and obedient and joyful in our prayers. Surely it’s true that if we want to be more “like Jesus,” this is the most important of all. This is the source of all the rest. We can mimic all the other traits, characteristics, values, and morals that we find – or think we find – and still be off the mark or out of tune. The timing can still be off, or the emphasis somehow wrong, because we are still trying to do it without the Conductor – or we are still trying to be the Conductor ourselves.

Jesus, if you will indulge me, was the best First Violinist the world has ever known. Many others have played well, some could play nearly as well as He did (technically speaking). But though great skill is impressive, that was not His secret. Nobody before or since has ever watched the Conductor as well as He did. And if the sign came to change the beat, to stop or start or change the emphasis, He was right there – He stayed with the Conductor. No matter how strange or unusual it might have seemed to the familiar expectations about how the piece should be played – no matter how many traditions and assumptions surrounded and sealed the way the piece was supposed to be played – Jesus’ eyes were *always* on the Conductor. And if God changed the beat, Jesus was instantly with him – not wandering on through the notes on His own time for a half measure, or for two days, or for four years ... like I do. “Let’s change from Torah to Gospel.” *You’ve got it.* “They’re too frightened to think straight – we need to reveal the true extent of my mercy and grace.” *Absolutely – less judgment and more miracles, especially healing.* “Now, don’t make them weak or self-focused.” *No Sir – your Kingdom will always be the real goal.* “You’ve done it so well, and made it so clear, but they are still feeling hurt and betrayed – I’m afraid we need to demonstrate it.” *Well ... not my will but thine be done.*

When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the dove descended, so to speak. And our tradition still remembers what that means, still honors it in the ritual of baptism. But the change comes when we honor it in real life as well. If we want to be *like* Jesus, we must become people of prayer – His kind of prayer. That is what baptism means: The dove also comes to us. Receive the Holy Spirit. From now on, the old life – where we get to be the Conductor, for good or for ill – is dead and gone. And it doesn’t matter in the slightest whether it’s for good or for ill that we are trying to be the Conductor. It is our trying to *be* the Conductor that fights the Kingdom of God, not whether we are trying to do good or harm, or be selfish or unselfish. Christianity is not about whether we are trying to be good or bad. Christianity is about whether we are trying to *follow* the Conductor or *be* the Conductor (of our own lives).

You do know that most folk think religion is about making them be good, don’t you? And since they are already trying to be good (most of the time, and by their own best light), they don’t see any reason to become more religious than they already are. No church and no creed can make them want to be better or try any harder. And they are dead right about that. They are designed and created by God; nothing is wrong with the mainframe. In fear and pain we sometimes do a lot of evil, but nobody *wants* to be evil. We would all love to be good, to be far better than we are. The problem is we won’t follow the Conductor. We don’t trust or believe in God’s love enough to let go of our own conducting. So we keep trying to *prove* and *improve* and *impress* in ways that cannot carry us where we most need and want to go. Christianity is about whether we are trying to *follow* the Conductor or *be* the Conductor. I wonder if it would be okay to ask you to clarify this for people out there who don’t know this yet.

Some people think *you think* they are going to Hell because they are bad – and that they are bad because they don’t believe right. I *know* that’s not what you think, but that’s what they think you think. That’s because they have run into many Christians who don’t comprehend their own faith, yet. Hell is the aloneness and fear of thinking we have to be our own Conductor. Most people are already in the bondage of Hell and need to be freed. Why do you think it’s so hard here? “*Christ has come to set us free.*” (Galatians 5:1) It’s not about being bad or good. It’s about following a Conductor greater than ourselves. Many of you know this – don’t you think you should tell some of the others?

Have you received the Holy Spirit? Are you trying to let the Holy Spirit run your life – instead of letting your self, or letting somebody else? Are you trying to watch the Conductor? Are we people of prayer – a total-willingness-in-obedience kind of prayer? That is what matters – and where it matters – if we are trying to *follow* Jesus. According to the Gallup Poll, nine out of every ten Americans pray every day. But I don’t think this is the kind of prayer most of them are talking about. Is it the kind of prayer we are talking about around here?

Maybe we can at least confess together that it is the kind of prayer we *want* to have ruling our lives – the

kind of prayer we sometimes pray, and long to pray more often. It's a funny thing about the Christian Life: There is no way to cheat. We don't just "up and do it" one fine day because we take a notion to. We have to grow into it, even after we've decided we want it more than anything else in life. Deciding to be a great violinist is an important choice. It's hard to imagine anybody ever playing very well without making that choice. It's certainly the first step. But after that, it still takes years of constant practice. And we keep thinking it's the practice and our great playing skill that make all the difference. But how long have we been practicing and playing just as well as we possibly can? It is following the Conductor that makes all the difference. No matter how beautiful our notes, only the Conductor knows the true music. Notes all by themselves are no symphony, just as "Christians" running their own lives are never part of the Kingdom of God.

So we watch Jesus at prayer:

He spends forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry. And Jesus says to the tempter: *"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"* (Matthew 4:4) And usually people think Jesus means the Scriptures, but I think He means prayer even more than the Scriptures. (And the proof is that the Scriptures of His day could not contain Him.) Jesus spends all night in prayer before choosing the twelve disciples. He goes up the mountain to pray. He goes into the wilderness to pray. He goes to a lonely spot to pray. When John the Baptist is killed, He goes apart to pray. When someone is sick, when He is tired, when His strategy is in question ... Jesus goes to pray. And along with the obvious, there are entrancing hints: *"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."* (Mark 9:29) And all of us know about a garden called Gethsemane.

We hear Jesus talking about prayer:

The disciples figure out that prayer is the source of Jesus' wisdom and power and, when He returns from prayer one day, they say, *"Lord, teach us to pray"* (Luke 11:1-4) His reply we call "The Lord's Prayer," but it took years before most of them learned to truly pray it. And oh how we still long to be able to. We aren't talking about the kind of prayers we have time for in church. *"Go into your room and shut the door,"* He said, *"and pray in secret where your Father, who hears in secret, will attend you."* (Matthew 6:5-15) Don't pray like the ministers, heaping up empty phrases to impress people. (Well, that's not the only kind of prayers some of us ministers pray.)

And we hear Jesus say:

"Pray for those who persecute you." Do you do that? (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:28)

"Pray to the Lord of the harvest to send more help." Do you do that? (Luke 10:2)

"Two men went up into the temple to pray." God was only willing to listen to one of them. Do you know which one, and why – and do you pray like he did? (Luke 18:10)

"He told them a parable – that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." Do you know it? Do you get it? Do you do it? (Luke 18:1ff)

"Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." Do you believe that? (Matthew 21:22; Mark 11:24) A friend of mine says there's always a catch – and with Jesus, the power is always hidden in the catch. (Another friend said to me, "I never understood Jesus' parables until I started playing Super Mario Brothers. There's always another layer beyond the one I've figured out." He thought Jesus' parables were the computer games of the first century A.D., only they had a bigger payoff.)

* * *

Once upon a time there were ten maidens. And usually their story is used to illustrate notions of being shut out of the "Second Coming." Maybe so, maybe so. But I doubt it.

The lamps are for light, and light comes from burning the oil – *and the oil is prayer*. At least that's what I think. The maidens wait for the bridegroom, who gives meaning and joy to life, symbolized by the celebration. To us a strange symbol, perhaps, but clearly a symbol of the Kingdom. In the Palestine of Jesus' day, the wedding celebration would have lasted about a week, and it was the business of the bridegroom to start it all by arriving at the most unexpected hour he could pick. That was part of the fun. And it was the business of the friends to be on hand whenever he arrived to claim his bride. The groom could delay for several days, if he chose. He was only required to send a runner just in front of him to cry out "The bridegroom is coming!" And the groom would then escort the bride from her father's house to his own house in a great and joyous procession. So you knew it was about to happen and you had some warning, but not very much. If you missed his coming, you were actually shut out of the week-long party and celebration. That penalty was part of the fun too – the stakes were high. It was your punishment for not being attentive enough.

That is the analogy Jesus chooses: The Kingdom is like a wedding procession. Oil feeds the light – prayer fuels our guidance and our strength. For a while we can run on past inspiration, but then the light goes out. Furthermore, we can never know when new inspiration will come – when we will get a new visitation, new instructions, a new assignment, or further instructions on the assignment we are already working on. But if we don't have the oil of prayer, we miss it; the party (the Kingdom) goes on without us – without our participation, without our awareness. Pretty soon we find ourselves wandering down some dark street, all alone, and we cannot even hear the music from the celebration anymore. Then we find ourselves wondering if there ever was a wedding in the first place; maybe we just made it up, our souls wanting it so badly that our minds merely dreamed it. You've been there? Oh, I have! And always it is because I have run out of oil.

Anyway, the bridegroom shows up and the foolish five say, "Loan me some of your prayers, for I haven't been saying mine lately." "Loan me some of your character,

for I have been neglecting my spiritual growth lately.”
“Loan me some of your relationship with God, because I’ve been busy with other things lately.” Some oil is nontransferable.

Above all other things, prayer is at the source of all the rest we know and admire about Jesus. But it was a very special kind of prayer: *humility in obedience* kind of prayer; *watch the Conductor* kind of prayer; *not my will but thine be done* kind of prayer; *there is no excuse big enough, no other purpose more important* kind of prayer. Thus Jesus kept accomplishing the impossible, because the impossible was not at all His aim. His aim

was to please and serve and obey God. Not other people, not pretty sayings, not things written in a book, not rules, golden or any other color – just God. His aim was to please and serve and obey God. And in order to do that, He constantly had to go to the inner place where the two of them could get it clear, and keep it clear, between them. Jesus was, more than anything else, a man of prayer.

In deep humility, but also with deep conviction, I suggest that if we want to be “more like Jesus,” this kind of prayer, more than anything else, is what we must practice.

PRAYER

You who are our Creator, we are grateful for this day in which to be alive. We do not know how many days we have, but we are grateful for this day. Often our minds are busy with all that is to come, and with all that scares us, and with all that we think is wrong. And sometimes it seems clear that Your presence is in those thoughts, calling us to do things we have not yet done. Yet we are also grateful for this very day. What a miracle it is to be alive in this moment, to know the people around us, to feel Spring spreading across the land. How incredible to have voices to sing with, minds to be aware with, and whatever it is You have put within us that feels love, and knows Your presence. Much there is to do, and much there is to come. But we are also grateful for this very day in which to be alive, Lord. Let us go on living it with praise in our hearts for You. And let us live it, we pray, with You ... and for You. Amen.



LIKE JESUS – 4

What are we doing here? Do we want to “make more Christians” so that they in turn can “make more Christians”? Well, I suppose so, yes, that would be fine. On the other hand, what’s the point? The fast answer, in some circles, is that we are trying to help Jesus save people – that is, keep them from going to Hell. Most of us in this church don’t see it in quite that color or light. Hell is a condition, not a place – more about attitude than about geography. Eternal life, though it has infinite longevity, is only appealing for its quality, not for its length. Things that last a long time are not automatically desirable, as anyone who has ever been sick can tell you.

Of course, from the Christian perspective, all of us are sick. We have a couple of serious diseases. One is called “mortality” – we are all finite, and rushing toward death. The other is pride (*hubris*), a condition that makes us want to stay aloof and act independent and superior to all other beings, human or divine. One symptom of pride is an increasing tendency toward alienation and separation – a condition called “sin” in the old language. And that condition leads us into ever-greater tendencies toward acts and behavior called “sins” that cause suffering and harm to others. Being in a state of alienation leads us toward alienating behavior; if we harm others, it causes alienation and separation. It is a vicious cycle: Being in a state of sin, we tend more and more toward sinful acts and deeds. As Jesus keeps pointing out, it is the attitude or stance of the heart that makes the real difference. And everything we do is either increasing alienation or drawing us toward God’s love.

This is God’s real issue with what we call “morality,” though it takes most of us years to figure that out. Why not commit adultery, for instance? Well, because God hates sex and doesn’t want us to have any fun, that’s why. Many people talk and act like that’s what the rules are about. The truth is, adultery breaks trust, the most important basis of relationship. Adultery is on the side of alienation. Even the adulterous relationship is forged in deceit and pain, and often cannot overcome its beginnings. God doesn’t punish anybody for committing adultery. Adultery carries its own punishment with it, because its principles are false. The truth is, sex isn’t very good for very long in that kind of setting. It is much better with someone you trust, someone who truly loves you in a long-range, committed relationship. So the commandment is only a summary of long-experienced truth. God actually loves sex and wants us to have wonderful fun. Adultery isn’t how we get it, not in the long run. Marriage isn’t either, for some people, but that’s for other reasons. There is more than one way to follow the principles of alienation. Am I confusing anybody?

Truth is even bigger on the interior, spiritual level, but on the overt, physical level, the problem with Godlessness (alienation) is that more and more we have our own self-interest at heart and do not have each other’s best interests

at heart. There is a cure for both diseases – mortality and pride – but as with alcoholism, sexual addiction, greed, prejudice, and many other diseases, most of us prefer to stay sick for as long as we possibly can. Hard to believe at first, isn’t it? I actually know some people with drinking problems who do not *want* to quit drinking. If I didn’t have such a good memory, I probably couldn’t believe it. I know how much fun they’re having, but I also know a much better life awaits them if they stop drinking. Yet they are eager to hang on to their increasing misery, trouble, decaying relationships, and self-loathing. For what?

Well, I know some people who hang on just as tight to their pride and mortality. They do not want Jesus’ love – God’s love revealed in the Messiah sent to us. They would rather hang on to their isolation, sorrow, depression, and personal hopes for personal security and safety. It doesn’t matter how wondrous the LIFE that awaits them, or how much they might accomplish with the Spirit’s presence and guidance. “Please, Daddy, I’d rather do it myself.”

Am I telling you things you don’t know? Not hardly. But just “knowing it” doesn’t help much. Behind such clear and simple-sounding phrases, there is a world of pain and chaos out there. We are all caught in it no matter what we do – no matter how good or bad or indifferent we try to be. And just taking our temperature doesn’t cure the disease. So what is our purpose in the Christian church? What is the goal we strive toward as we pour energy and thought and prayer into the Christian Life? Why do we worship together, have study groups and classes and retreats, baptize people, take communion, share more and more LIFE together? What is it that we are trying to accomplish?

Supposedly we want to “spread the Gospel.” But why? Because the Gospel will make a nicer world? We have been spreading it for two thousand years – is the world any nicer? Or maybe we see the peace of the Gospel itself spreading into each individual life, and we want that blessing for each individual person. Is that the motive?

On some level, in some language, most Christians see the world alienated from God and believe that Jesus came to heal the great gulf between us and God – to restore us to love and belonging within the right and rightful family of God. And the reality of this drama is that each of us (body, mind, and spirit) must move from seeing ourselves as individuals in an isolated physical world ... toward realizing that we are part of a vast Kingdom that reaches beyond the physical, beyond this world, beyond time as we know it – yet still is personal and meaningful – and that everything is connected because One Creator has designed it all with specific and caring intentions.

Then it becomes our purpose to find some way to live our own lives in the new awareness of this vast Kingdom to which we all belong. It becomes our eager hope that more and more of those we know and encounter will awaken to this larger reality, and tune their lives to the heartbeat of

this Kingdom of God, instead of to the isolated dissonance of some tiny, temporal, earthly environment.

Of course, here in this church, we live in what is often called the “free church tradition.” Our tendency is to down-play institutions, structures, and creeds. At our best, we play up the faith family – the Christian fellowship, the support community. It has seemed to us that institutions and hierarchies – while they define a clearer path and make behavioral standards much more explicit (often a very helpful thing, we must admit) – usually usurp the place and function of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individual Christians. We are impressed that Moses, Abraham, Amos, Samuel, Paul, Peter, Luther, Augustine – not to mention our Lord – all were called individually, and were dealt with individually. Their lives impacted institutions, but their spiritual guidance and inspiration and purpose did not come *from* the institutions or hierarchies. As we said recently, Jesus was a man of prayer. He was *not* a man of creed. Isn’t that interesting, in the light of church history? It is one of the many ways we try to honor Him but don’t bother following Him. Jesus was a man of prayer, not a man of creed.

What is our purpose? We are forbidden to make up purposes of our own, since none of us is the head of the church. It is our purpose that each of us will take orders from the “Head” of this body – from Christ. It is our purpose to be responsive to the Holy Spirit on a daily basis – turning our lives over each morning, for each new day. It is our purpose to prevent me from running your life, or you from running mine – that we might each be responsive to the Christ, who is our Leader. It is our purpose to be supportive, responsive, caring, encouraging – that all of us may be glad when the Holy Spirit speaks to any one among us, and that we may, insofar as we can, back up others in the assignments they are given. So we try to operate more like a family of friends than like a corporation or an institution. Nevertheless, it is the task of each one of us to pray in willing obedience and allegiance so that we pattern our own lives after the guidance of the Holy Spirit, not on pleasing each other or any other person or group on earth.

Some of you think trying to follow the Spirit’s guidance is risky business. We are never certain we “hear” the Spirit’s guidance clearly or correctly, and even if we do, it might lead us into difficult or even dangerous situations. Sometimes people you know, or know about, claim to be following the “will of God,” and you think they are evil or crazy, or both. Faithful people have been aware of and troubled by such things for thousands of years. Abraham wanted to settle for Ishmael being his successor because he didn’t think he would ever get Isaac; when he got Isaac, he thought for a while that he was supposed to sacrifice him. We have been terrified of the Living God since the dawn of time. Ever since Adam, we have been trying to put religious institutions and rituals between us and God, to protect ourselves. For as far back as we can remember, we have been alarmed by false prophets claiming to know the will of God when they did not, or when they were only saying things in God’s name to get their own way. Though far from the first to be angered by it, Jeremiah’s words ever ring in our ears: “*You have healed the*

wounds of my people lightly, crying, ‘Shalom, shalom, fa ain shalom.’” (“Peace, peace, when there is no peace.”) (Jeremiah 6:14)

So of course the life of prayer and obedience to God can be abused. Every good thing can be abused – it is Satan’s stock-in-trade. And the higher a thing, the worse its abuse can be. Can money be abused? Can friendship be abused? The higher the potential for good, the greater the potential for evil. So shall we abandon all promise and potential in order to keep as safe as possible? Live life as close to neutral as possible? Lots of people do. Some members of this church are angry with me most of the time because I never want to do that, and I never want any of you to settle for neutral either.

But one of the things we can do to improve the depth and perception of our prayer lives is to study the life of Jesus. We are not trying to turn into little Jesuses, but we can ponder the principles and purposes He revealed in order to follow Him better into living our own lives. At least I think this is so. In fact, I think it is embarrassing that we do this so little. Is it possible that we claim Jesus as our Savior but really don’t like Him – don’t want to be anything like Him? It is a question we must each answer for ourselves.

The great bugaboo of the “liberal church” in our day is represented by the word “inclusivity.” We must all be inclusive, at all times, in all situations. To be inclusive has become almost a synonym for being Christian. (By the way, I have a “lovers’ quarrel” with the liberal church, but it is still my camp. Some of you suspect there’s not much love left in this quarrel, though that’s not the case.) But what was Jesus like? Jesus the man – despite great faith and unlimited trust in God, despite the miraculous powers this gave Him, despite His passion and great love, despite His world vision and purpose to save or reconcile the whole world – Jesus was very aware of His limitations. He had a great humility, which the liberal church in our time usually lacks. *Awareness of limitations makes us exclusive.*

We are all being taught (badgered is more accurate) that we should always be inclusive. But Jesus never was. All are invited, but the gate is narrow. If we are not willing to let somebody through the gate who wants to come, clearly we are anti-Christian. But if we take the narrow gate away entirely, we are also non-Christian – which is, by the way, another way of being anti-Christian. “*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.*” (Luke 11:23) I’m not trying to make any of this up – I’m just trying to learn from the man.

Jesus knew He could not be everywhere at once, could not heal everybody, could not have a ministry in every nation that needed Him. He chose carefully – where to serve, whom to help, how to go at it. He chose twelve disciples, thereby offending all the others. He picked His place to work, leaving the rest of the world to the hopefully-spreading mission of followers. It would be generations and centuries before this mission of labor and love reached some. That was reality. Jesus knew His limitations – much better, it seems, than most of us know our own.

The fact is that Jesus, as a human in the flesh, was exclusive. He had no choice. He either dissipated His efforts in vague sentiment (walking around Palestine telling everybody to “have a nice day”), or He chose twelve, limiting the field to a disciple band of enormous focus. While we are human, while we are in the body, the Christian Way IS to be exclusive: to limit the field; to get focus, even if it hurts people’s feelings. Following Jesus often forces us to ask whether we are here to serve God or to please people. That was, as a matter of fact, one of Jesus’ issues: “*For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.*” (John 12:43)

Did Jesus love everybody? Heal everybody? Do everything He wished He had time for? Did He take every opportunity to do good that came His way? Do I get to “love my enemies” the way Jesus loved King Herod? “*Go and tell that fox ...*” (translated: piss ant, false prophet, deceitful fraud). (Luke 13:32) Do I get to love my enemies the way Jesus loved the High Priest, or some of the Pharisees? I think I not only can, but must – though that’s not what they taught me in Sunday School.

What percentage of the sick people in Palestine did Jesus heal? One-tenth of one percent? There were too many sick people; there were many other things He needed to do. What happened to love and compassion? Why didn’t He heal on other days besides the Sabbath, and at night? In the face of such great need, why didn’t He spend all of His time and energy healing? Wouldn’t that have been “the Christian thing to do”? Yes ... unless we allow Jesus the Christ to help with our definitions of what it means to be a Christian. If Jesus is our model, we have to change our minds about “the Christian thing to do.” *It is the Christian thing to do* to neglect some of the suffering people, some of the people in need, in order to focus on the vocation that God has assigned to you, and to truly love the people the Spirit sends you to. Do you know the difference between secular charity and Christian giving? Do you know what it means to be a bigamist? Do you know what it means to be a spiritual bigamist? To pretend love for everybody is to love nobody.

Our Scripture reading today is the story of Jesus when He goes north into the region of Tyre and Sidon. He is way out of His territory. I suspect He had to get out of Galilee for a while, to avoid arrest. He is also on leave for rest and relaxation. We have no notion how long He is away, for weeks or for months. Perhaps He intended to stay until things cooled down back home in Galilee. (How selfish of Him to go on vacation and neglect His ministry.) But He doesn’t want to start a new ministry in the region of Tyre and Sidon; He cannot keep up with what He is trying to accomplish in Galilee. So all He wants is some peace and quiet – a little time to recuperate, a little time to be alone. But this woman somehow puts things together and catches on to who He really is. And she is a mother and loves her child. But Jesus wants to keep His anonymity. He doesn’t want to start a ministry in Sidon. He hasn’t got the time or the energy. He cannot be everything to everybody everywhere – not in the body. So He is really quite nasty to this woman. What He’s saying is, “Please go away. Just leave me alone.” Jesus

knows what will happen if He heals this woman’s daughter: the word will spread like wildfire. Even in Galilee, He had tried to slow it down, asking everyone He healed to please keep quiet about it. He knows what the woman does *not* care about: one healing and His retreat will be over. So Jesus cuts this woman dead and doesn’t even acknowledge her existence – until her love for her daughter, and His own compassion, becomes too much for Him. But we still hear Him claim His true purpose: “*I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and to them alone.*” (Matthew 15:24)

In the end, Jesus gives in and heals the woman’s daughter. For many of you, that’s the good part of the story, and that’s what this sermon should be about. We should never consider our own needs and realities, and should always help everybody who needs it. By the way, Jesus immediately leaves the region and heads back to Galilee. His respite is destroyed. If He’s going back to work, it might as well be to where He belongs. He comes very close to the third wilderness temptation taking over His life, but He recovers by getting back to His own territory. And if you are comforted that He helps this one woman, be comforted also that He leaves everyone else in Lebanon and goes back to Galilee. It is the Christian WAY to know your field, limit your purposes, focus on what God has sent you to do – and *not* try to respond to need or want in general. Need and want in this world are *limitless*, and you are *limited*. Jesus knew His limitations in the body. He was exclusive – focused – dedicated to following His own mission by the guidance of His prayers. People wanted Him to stay, but He left. People wanted Him to change His standards, but He would not. People wanted to be His disciples on their own terms, but He refused them. We cannot say “yes” to God if we have not learned to say “no” to anything and everything else that might get in the way of that – no matter how worthy, or how much it might draw our compassion.

Every area of life I know about and care about – every area of life that has any meaning to me – is framed, understood, and experienced by exclusiveness, not by inclusiveness. Is everyone welcome to share your bed? Do you think you should be welcome to share everyone else’s? Does everyone have as much right as you do to the title to your home, or car? Do you still have any right to choose your friends? Don’t you know that calling everybody in an ethnic or racial group “good” is just as prejudiced as calling them all “bad”? We are trying to spread God’s love by shame and coercion because we are tired of it taking so long to grow authentically. “Inclusivity” is a word we use to try to persuade everybody to love everybody, whether they really mean it or not. “Let’s take all choice away and force everybody to accept everybody.” But love without choice has no value – and no power to redeem. Love apart from personal choice is not love. “I love you” means nothing if it is just a political or social slogan. True LOVE is always incredibly exclusive. Much of its power is in the choice. “*You did not choose me, I chose you.*” (John 15:16)

If you are accepted and included but not chosen, then when you get inside whatever you’ve been included in,

you will discover there is nothing there worth having. “Unconditional love” is like that: “I love you, but it’s nothing personal.” “All are welcome.” “I assure you that you are included and important, but if you ever need me, I’ll be off drafting resolutions and writing my congressman.”

Move into my world for a minute, where alcohol is not a pleasant social custom, used in a sane and pleasant manner like some of you use it. If I, or my alcoholic friends, are still drinking, we are not living a sober life. It doesn’t make a bit of difference what I say about it or pretend about it. It also doesn’t matter how valuable people tell me I am, or how much they rant and rave about how I’m included or accepted – conditionally, unconditionally, or any other way. The fact is, if I am still drinking, I am not living a sober life.

Well, if I am still alienated from God and running my own life, does it make any difference what creeds I say, what church I belong to, what reputation I have in the community, or how much anybody insists that God loves me? If I am still alienated from God and running my own life, you can hang signs all over me but the fact remains that I have no notion of what the Christian Life is like – what the Christian WAY is really all about. Christianity may invite everyone, but it is still a very *exclusive* WAY. And nobody’s rhetoric can get us into the Kingdom if we

won’t surrender our lives – trust the grace and love of Christ – and truly enter. The Cross of Christ does not mean we are forgiven; it means forgiveness is offered. The love of Christ does not mean we know and feel ourselves to be loved; it means the love is offered. But we cannot keep our pride and receive the love and forgiveness at the same time – any more than I can keep drinking and find a new and sober life at the same time.

Doing good is not the Christian WAY (any more than it is the Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Humanist, Atheist, Democrat or Republican way). Doing what the Holy Spirit asks us to do is the Christian WAY. We don’t get to take back control over our lives just because we think we have good motives. The Christian Life is about turning it over – the willingness to be humble servants, a decision to let the Holy Spirit be in charge. Jesus wasn’t the Christ because He did good. Because He was the Christ, He watched the Conductor – and did what God sent Him to do, in the way God asked Him to do it. We ended up calling it “good.” He couldn’t have cared less what we called it.

If we are followers of Christ, we do not do anything – good, neutral, or any other way – until we have permission from the Holy Spirit. And that makes it a very *exclusive* WAY.

PRAYER

Somewhere deep within us, Lord, we do know that You have been offering us abundant LIFE for as far back as we can remember. Much of the time our awareness has only picked up whispers and glimpses. We turn quickly to other things ... clearer, more obvious things. And they delight or amuse us for a while. We thank You for all the little delights of LIFE that keep us occupied: the games, the sex, the money, the birds, the flowers, and all the intriguing subplots of our material world. But we seek also Your Kingdom and Your presence. We live in the midst of the physical, but more and more we want to serve the eternal. Stay with us now, we pray, and teach us how the two may be truly intertwined. These things we pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.



LIKE JESUS – 5

Jesus is reassuring people, comforting them (*comfortes* = to strengthen). He is telling them they do not need to be afraid. And yet: Their priests are corrupt. Their king is a moral, spiritual, and Jewish disgrace. Many of them have concluded that the temple in Jerusalem has become a charade, a mere monument to a former age, and is being run by men who care more about greed and politics than about God. They are an occupied country, with Roman soldiers in control. Most of them have friends and relatives who have been killed or ruined at the whim of those in power, and there is no recourse. Some of them don't know where their next meal is coming from. None of them have any confidence that, by hard work and responsible living, they will be able to build security, prosperity, or any kind of decent lives for their children.

But Jesus is telling them: "Be bold. Do not worry. Have no fear. Never mind all the problems you focused on before you met me. Carry the message. Tell people about a new kind of LIFE. Live and act and speak in calm confidence." Have no fear? What's going on here?

Soon Jesus will be dead. In less than forty years, most of those listening to Jesus will be dead. All but one of The Twelve will have died a martyr's death. Paul will have been executed; Peter crucified upside down; James, the brother of Jesus, thrown from the temple parapet to his death (the third wilderness temptation has Satan daring Jesus to throw Himself from this same pinnacle; according to Eusebius, James was still alive after the fall, praying for his enemies until they first stoned him and then clubbed him to death). But have no fear! Hundreds of thousands of Jews will be slaughtered by Vespasian's army, and then his son Titus will take over. (Would you rather meet the son of Vespasian, or the Son of God?) Jerusalem will be destroyed, the temple will be torn down, and there will be no Jewish state on the face of the earth for nearly the next nineteen hundred years. But this Jewish carpenter says to His Jewish friends and followers: "Have no fear!" Excuse me? What's going on here? Did I miss something?

This is not the only time Jesus talks like this. In Matthew 14:26 and Mark 6:50, Jesus comes to the disciples across the water, and at first they are terrified. "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." Every time you pray, is that the first thing you hear Jesus saying as He comes to you? "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." If that is not the first thing we hear, we probably don't get any of the rest of it very straight. Fear corrupts everything it touches. "Fear is the mind killer." (*Dune*, Frank Herbert) Fear is the LIFE-destroyer. Fear and loneliness are Satan's greatest tools. Of course, Satan also lies a lot. But he lies to make us more afraid and lonely and discouraged and depressed. There is almost no damage we won't do if we get afraid and lonely enough.

Most of us have pretty clear memories of times we have let fear talk us out of good things, and destroy or warp events and seasons that were full of promise – times we let fear talk us out of being who we really are,

and out of doing things we should have done and wanted very much to do. And fear also talks us *into* doing things we shouldn't do, and would never dream of doing in our right minds. And behind the clear memories, are there not pools of dread in the mists and shadows of the mind – things that keep us vaguely uneasy but that we hope will just stay hidden and leave us alone? Fear kills LIFE. Fear is the mortal enemy of faith, and it is the inevitable telltale mark of the ways and places where we have not yet learned to trust God. It is said that "*perfect love casts out fear.*" (I John 4:18) In Christ Jesus, God reveals a perfect LOVE for us. But all our lives here, we struggle to believe it. And the level of our fear shows us how far we have come, in our pilgrimage, to trust and believe it.

We would be here the rest of the day if I tried to describe all the incidents in which Jesus tries to kill fear. He heals the Gerazene demoniac, and the people are filled with fear. He tries to call Simon Peter, but first He has to deal with Peter's fear: "*Do not be afraid.*" (Luke 5:10) Jairus' daughter is deathly ill and Jesus wants to heal her, but first He has to break the fear pattern: "*Do not fear; only believe, and she shall be well.*" (Luke 8:50) Of course, Jesus is only making noise; it's just filler, an idle comment. No need to pay attention. No reason to believe Jesus and know that if Jairus had not listened to instructions and turned from fear to trust, his daughter would have been dead that night. Jesus is running into too much interference: "Jairus, I can help, but you have to stop sending all these waves of fear." (You think sunspots cause communication static? They're nothing in comparison to fear.)

All through the story, we hear Jesus trying to get through to us: "*Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.*" "Fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows." "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" "So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4; Matthew 10:31; Luke 12:7; Luke 12:32; Matthew 8:26; Matthew 25:25; Matthew 28:10; John 14:27)

The fact is that from one end of the Gospels to the other, Jesus is fighting fear. Everywhere He goes, everything He does – always it is surrounded by fear, and He is constantly telling His followers to give up their fear. It is killing LIFE ... killing the Kingdom ... interfering with His power and purpose. It is the most frequent teaching, instruction, and command we have from the One we call our Lord and Savior: DO NOT BE AFRAID. HAVE NO FEAR. FEAR NOT. "*It is I; have no fear.*"

I hope you will leave here today with that phrase burned into your memory, branded on your hearts, blazing in your minds – until you can never think of Jesus again for as long as you live without hearing Him say, “*It is I; have no fear.*”

We think that fear is our friend. We think that fear will save us. We think it’s a barrier against our evil. If we are afraid of the consequences of doing wrong, maybe it will prevent us from doing evil, and help us to do good. How has that been working for us?

We think fear is an early-warning system. It helps us to work harder, stop at stoplights, remember anniversaries – to show up at the right time, for the right reason, with the right attitude. How has that been working for us?

We also think fear is the glue that keeps community and nation together, and drives us toward survival and success. Fear builds churches, pays taxes, curtails adultery, discourages stealing and murder and sloth. How has that been working for us? Never mind Heaven, love, truth, or things we might really value; if you don’t shape up and do what we tell you, you’re going to go straight to Hell.

More and more, I realize that the mindset of the New Testament was nearly the opposite of what most people think today. Conversion – waking up to the LIFE of the Spirit – was also waking up to the bondage we are currently under, realizing the extent to which we are slaves to the brokenness and alienation and fear of Satan’s rule. So many religious people today are worried that some day they might be thrown into Hell. But the New Testament is trying to reveal a WAY of Life that gets us out of bondage *now* – out of the Hell we are in *now*. The classic creed of the early church was that Jesus saves us from “sin, death, and the devil.” They didn’t mean in some future time, in case we were ever bad enough or unfortunate enough to encounter these possible, future enemies. They meant *now*. We are already in bondage, and Jesus comes to free us. Jesus says point-blank: “If you don’t recognize your situation, if you don’t know how sick and hopeless things are at present, then we have nothing to say or to do with each other.” (Matthew 9:12-13) Christianity is not about *staying* out of Hell – it’s about *getting* out of Hell! All the greed, anger, jealousy, pride, lust, and envy aren’t as easy to shake as we used to think when we were young. In fact, by ourselves, there is no way we will ever be free. IT TAKES A SAVIOR. And the first thing the Savior always says to us is: “We have to cut the fear. You must learn to trust me so much that you can begin to let go of your fear. Otherwise, you simply will not be able to follow me.”

We can barely imagine ourselves (never mind the whole world) changing our entire *modus operandi* – our entire attitude, our entire belief structure – from fear to faith. It is, nevertheless, what Jesus is asking: conversion = New LIFE = New Kingdom = new wine in new wine skins = a Kingdom not of this world. One of the many ways to see the dynamism and newness of what Jesus came to bring us and invite us into can be seen in the switch from fear to FAITH. What other motive could we live by – survive on – if suddenly all the fear were gone from our lives?

At first we gasp, and think it wouldn’t be possible to survive here. Love is so powerless, caring so anemic, motives so mixed (in our experience here) that at first we cannot imagine life unmotivated by fear. Could love and peace make us stop at stop signs? Could love and peace make us work hard to achieve and accomplish all that the gifts and guidance of our God asks of us? Could love make us save up for college educations? Could love keep us faithful to our spouses; keep us from stealing from our neighbors; keep us patriotic, and moral, and responsible ... without any fear involved whatsoever? Well ... YES! Genuine love could do all those things – deeper, stronger, more patiently, and more consistently than any “fear” ever imagined. IF we could ever find and trust real LOVE.

Gospel has always called us beyond Law, always told us that if we give up fear – the base from which all Law works – and turn in trust to the God who loves us, we will come into the presence of God above Law (higher than its requirements), not below Law (doing less than the Law demands). Then we would live in joy, in peace, in calmness, in trust. And our lives would be transformed. How surprising to realize more and more that this is what Jesus is constantly saying to us, trying to reveal to us, trying to call us into. A very different LIFE, lived for very different reasons, based on very different principles. But we have to turn from fear – all of it. Fear will always be around, will always be available in this world. But we can turn from it, refuse to let it be our motive – refuse to let it control us, direct our steps, make our decisions, guide our lives. Only, we cannot just do that by our own personal power or personal intention. That goes to the worst evil – to Nietzsche, Nazism, Stalin, and all the meanest bastards the world has ever known – trying to overcome fear by making others afraid, as if loading enough fear onto others will eventually make us immune to fear ourselves.

But most of us aren’t Great Sinners, any more than we are Great Saints. We just decide to keep the useful parts of our fear, and mix that with some of the love we also want in our lives. Of course, half of both is neither. It’s the Twilight Zone, purgatory, halfway between God and Satan – it’s the broken realm we live in. Fear and faith do not mix and mingle. Love is not willing to settle for half of us. Sooner or later, we are forced to choose: Fear or FAITH. Trust God, or stay in the half-life that gets sucked toward darkness. Now *that* is a frightening thought. But the truth is (at least it has always been true so far), I cannot use fear to propel me toward love. I cannot fear darkness enough to make me choose light. Only if I feel God’s love, and see the light, can I move toward it. And any way that I fear the darkness, no matter how logical or wise, only draws me toward the darkness.

We think fear is our friend, but what is the single greatest barrier between us and God? Or even between us and the LIFE Jesus invites us into, and tries to set before us? My greatest fear at the moment is that I will run out of time before I get all the way through this sermon. But just one illustration:

For years and years, I have attended Bible study groups that wrestled with Jesus’ teachings. Over and over, through all those years, I have watched group after group

come up against the precepts of Jesus: “*Turn the other cheek.*” “*Love your enemies.*” “*Take the speck out of your own eye*” instead of blaming or hating others for all that is wrong, Trust God. Turn will and life over to the Holy Spirit. Be willing to lose your life for my sake. Come follow me.

All through the years, I’ve heard very intelligent, highly caring, and devoted people – most of them sincere Christians and church members – talk about how hard it is to live by these precepts, how impossible it is. And I agree with everything they say. It looks just as difficult to me as it does to them. But what is the common thread running through all our objections and arguments? FEAR: Jesus, you are trying to take away our fear. You are suggesting we can live without our fear. You are saying that our fear doesn’t matter, or at least that it’s not important enough to keep us from living for the Kingdom, living for our God. We cannot imagine such a thing. There really are people and forces around us trying to do us damage. We need our fear to protect us from them. We cannot imagine giving up all of our fear. We could maybe live the WAY You are asking us to, except for our FEAR. We know what the world is like. We know what some of the other people are like. We are afraid *Your* WAY won’t work here. We are afraid, period.

And Jesus replies, in many ways, in many passages, and finally with His own life: I know what the world is like, at least as well as you do. I know what other people are like, at least as much as you do. But if you will not give up your fear, you cannot follow me – you cannot be my disciples, you cannot live for me or my Kingdom.

“*Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?’*” (Matthew 16:24-26; see also Luke 14:25-35; Matthew 10:34-39; Mark 8:34-37)

Why is this passage so hard to hear? Because it is asking us to give up our fear.

Jesus is called “Son of David.” He was of David’s line. Messiah, everyone knew, would be a direct descendant of David because David was Israel’s greatest King. David was, within the context of his time, a truly amazing king, almost beyond belief. Before that, and woven into it, David was one of the world’s most amazing warriors. Goliath was only the beginning. David inspired such courage and devotion in his men that his armies became invincible. He fought all of his life and never lost a single battle. People knew God was with him because no other explanation would suffice for his incredible feats. But in his own right, in hand-to-hand combat, David was pure, lethal magic. No one could stand against him. He killed so many men we cannot begin to keep track of it. From the brink of extinction, David brought his people into the only Golden Age of prosperity and prominence that Israel has ever known. He was the fabled King Arthur in real life, and he captured Jerusalem and turned it into Camelot. It was completely and totally impossible, but David did it anyway. Cyrus, Asoka, Hezekiah, Josiah, and Constantine

were very spiritual and religious kings, but no human king was ever more religious than David.

So what of David’s Son? Jesus killed no one. In fact, He preferred dying to killing – even at extreme personal expense. This we all know, and frequently forget. And though Jesus reportedly has more followers than His famous ancestor, it is hard not to suspect that, in reality, our world still admires the way of David more than the WAY of Jesus.

Jesus, we know, admired and honored His tradition. He learned from the heroes who came before Him, and He incorporated many things from the prophets and patriarchs and kings, turning the best of it into something very new, along with the genius and Spirit that He Himself brought to it all. What do the two kings have in common, this King of Israel and this “great David’s greater son” – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Two Kings: Both charismatic, beyond language to describe. Both immensely caught up in what they believed Yahweh wanted. Similar and inescapably connected, though dimensionally as different as night and day. Yet they were both amazingly humble, and they were both FEARLESS. What is the motto of King David’s life? “*I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.*” (Psalm 23:4) No man could fight as David fought unless that were his truth.

Jesus added many dimensions to this “fear not.” He feared neither death nor life. He did not fear poverty, or disease. He was not afraid to offend rulers, priests, kings, scholars, or friends – not Caesar himself, or even His own mother. He faced Satan, the threat of Hell, and the prospect of torture and death on a cross. Be clear: Both men knew fear. But fear could not control them. Fear was given no authority in their lives, no veto power, no place in the counsel chambers of their minds. How does a shepherd boy face Goliath? You listen to your God, instead of to your fear. How does a man face a cross?

If you are a Christian – that is, if you have been baptized, drowned, converted; if you have died to the old ways of this world and been raised to newness of LIFE in Christ Jesus; if you have sworn allegiance to a New King, whose Kingdom is not of this world – if you are a Christian, what is the one thing we should be able to expect and predict of you, above and beyond all other things? THAT YOU ARE FEARLESS! That you are no longer controlled by any threat, fear, bribe, or pressure this world can bring to bear. That was, in fact, the mark of a great many of the followers we call the “early church.” They were the *ecclesia* – the people of Jesus. And they were His fearless followers, unafraid to follow Him into new ways, new allegiances, new possibilities, new customs – and yes, into danger, anger, persecution, torture, and even death.

If you are a Christian, we cannot expect you to be right all the time, or good all the time, or pleasant or well-mannered or even well-behaved. After all, we are a fellowship of sinners. But do we not have a right to expect you to be fearless? What does it mean to follow the Fearless One, who constantly tells His followers, “*Be not afraid. It is I, have no fear?*”

So let me ask you: When you think of the Christian church today – when you think of Christians – is that the first thing that leaps to your mind? Is that your experience, your observation, your own involvement with the Jesus People? Is that what you thought, with a smile on your face, as you walked in here this morning? “Ah, this morning I will be in the midst of a fearless people. Here are the followers of Jesus – unafraid of this world, or anything in it. Unafraid of sin, death, Satan, Hell, or the Law.” I just named the things our ancestors said Jesus saved us from, didn’t I? Are you saved? Being saved has nothing to do with some picayune little formula about religious smugness or in-group acceptance. “Are you saved?” means “Are you fearless?” Have you turned your life over to Jesus – let Him take away your fear – so you can live the LIFE He invites you into?

It is not okay to live cut-back, shy, mousy, play-it-safe, never-displease-anybody-or-cause-any-trouble kinds of lives ... not in the name of Jesus the Christ. If we make mistakes, screw up, do damage, feel terrible about decisions or failure or things we should have done but failed to do ... that’s easy; we know where to get forgiveness and new chances if we really mean it. But if we will not go fearless, what can Jesus do with us? Every time He gets us near to something important or meaningful or about to break into our true purpose, fear will step in and take it all back down. Satan will see to it. That’s his job.

How dare we call ourselves Christians if we still walk in fear! Keep praying – keep inviting Him in. And every time He comes, listen for the very first thing He says to you: “*It is I; have no fear.*”

PRAYER

Infinite One, even if by Your love we learn to fear no evil, yet there are other things to fear. At least they strike us dumb with awe and reverence. Evil is shallow, but goodness and mercy and grace and eternal possibilities ... such mysteries do not fit into our finite brains and hearts. How can You love us so much? *Why* would You love us so much?

And maybe it isn’t quite the same as fear, but what if we never learn to honor the LIFE You have given us, or respond to the endless caring and guidance and forgiveness You keep sending our way? “Surely goodness and mercy” have followed us ... and continually follow us. Clearly it is flat-out beyond our comprehension. And yet some days we still wake up not expecting this to go on happening ... not expecting that You will still be with us ... not depending upon You to go on loving, forgiving, guiding, and blessing us. What a wretched lack of appreciation and trust is that?! Yet how can we presume so much, with no way to earn it, deserve it, or ever repay You? O God, Your TRUTH is so far beyond anything we have ever experienced. How can we get used to such awesome dimensions of LIFE and LOVE?

But since You won’t abandon us, we’re just going to have to learn to live with it – a little more each day, one day at a time. We will remember You more often. We will learn to fear evil less and less. We will adore and trust and obey You with more joy and allegiance each day. We will believe the unbelievable: that You truly love us. And we will follow our Lord – Your Christ – with more devotion each step of the WAY ... for YOU are with us. Amen.



A TRUE CHANCE

Palm Sunday is a pivotal event in the life and ministry of Jesus. Yet in many places, it is relegated to an incidental story – merely the introduction to Holy Week. It was a charming moment but it failed, so let's move on to the important events: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter.

The problem is, if we drop Palm Sunday out of the story, we cannot fully understand the Cross. Without Palm Sunday, we get theologies that no longer remember the human drama – theologies based on the precept that God killed Jesus, a sacrifice of the perfect man standing in for the punishment we deserve. Some of those theologies even go on to claim that without any response or repentance or devotion on our part, we are suddenly and magically “saved by His blood.” To be sure, blood is a symbol of life to the ancient world, and Jesus' blood is incredibly precious if we love Him. But that does not turn it into a magic potion.

What is the meaning of the Cross and the Resurrection? The truth never fits very neatly into mere words, but the truth is: we either kill our selves – or we kill Jesus. That is: we kill our self-will, our old way of life, and claim Jesus' WAY – or we keep our old self, and destroy any influence or authority Jesus might have over our lives. In the mystery of faith, if we kill the old self in order to let Jesus rule in our lives, then He introduces us to our true selves. The reality is that our self-will is not our true self, and it never brings us what we truly seek. Self-will is not our soul – our inner being – but is only a composite of the survival techniques we learned in the environment in which we grew up. Jesus knows us far better and deeper than that. But He does not show us our true selves until we grant Him permission to do so. And from our side, that means giving Him authority over our lives.

That is the meaning of the Cross and the Resurrection. And that is the meaning of baptism: we die to self, in order that He might come to life within us. No matter where we turn in Christendom, it is always about death and resurrection. And no matter where we turn in Christendom, it is also about how we duck and dodge and try to deny that it should have to come to this – that our self-will is in this far separated from God; that we, or our world, are in this much trouble. Always we claim we can get better if we try: our self-will can make it just fine if we concentrate a little harder; let's try some more controlled sinning before giving it over; conversion is such a radical solution, what if we don't like it – will we ever be able to get back to our self-will? Nevertheless, the truth is: we either kill our selves, or we kill Jesus.

But we wouldn't know any of this if it hadn't been brought to light for us on Palm Sunday. We are saved by the blood of Jesus not because it's a magic potion, but because it breaks our hearts in a way that finally brings us to understanding ... to awakening ... to conversion. Christianity is full of mystery and spiritual presence and power we never fully understand, but that's no reason to

cloud what we really can understand. If we do that, we simply miss the point of His coming and never come to the change: the awakening, the repentance, the New LIFE that is offered. This world is at enmity with God, and the Cross proves it beyond contradiction. If we do not see and understand this, even with our limited and earth-based minds, then we never come to repentance – we never come to the clear choice: Our world and its ways, or God's Kingdom and his ways. We kill our self-will, or we kill the will and WAY of Jesus (at least in our own time on this earth).

Many threads and themes come together on Palm Sunday. Jesus is declaring His true identity for the first time in public. Prior to this, He has hinted, implied, demonstrated, teased, told stories, and done deeds that can only point to this conclusion. But none of it was clear or bold enough to get Him officially arrested and killed – until Palm Sunday. It had been enough to get Him killed *unofficially* before Palm Sunday, if He hadn't been too cagey for His enemies. But now the die is cast: Jesus has declared Himself the Rightful King, the long-expected Messiah. He drops His disguise and rides into Jerusalem in a manner nobody alive at the time could miss or mistake. He rides through the Golden Gate, straight to the temple mount – the religious and political center of Judaism and all Israel – and He claims the authority to purify and re-dedicate the temple, as the True and Rightful Priest and King of Israel – the Messiah, the Son of David – and more. Don't stop at the details and miss the message. The colt ... the waving palm branches ... the garments being thrown down in front of Him ... the shouts of *Hosanna!* (“*Save us now! Save, I pray!*”) – the details are only significant in the light of the incredible declaration of His true identity. It all points to one conclusion: Jesus is the long-awaited, long-expected Messiah. Jesus is the Rightful King of Israel. Jesus is God's “Chosen One” – the focal point and fulfillment of Israel's destiny and purpose.

The evidence was overwhelming for anybody who was not determined to ignore it. There should have been little doubt left in anyone's mind. Only the Messiah could have the power that Jesus was displaying. Only the Messiah could have the wisdom and understanding that Jesus was revealing. But people also assumed that the Messiah would use military might. They assumed the Messiah would smash anybody who got in the way or disagreed. Jesus' failure to do this smashing and destroying is why Jews do not believe in Him to this day. It is why many “Christians” do not fully believe in Him either. At least half of Christendom is still waiting for Jesus to “come again,” to “return” and do this smashing and destroying because He didn't do it right the first time. We are waiting for kingdom come ... waiting to give our full allegiance and support ... waiting – when the Kingdom has already come and Jesus is already in our midst, *waiting for us!*

Sorry, I digress. Back to the story. Jesus is not living a one-dimensional life, though lots of people try to picture it that way. He is in deep conflict and contention with many of the most powerful leaders of His nation: King Herod wants to kill Him, and so does the High Priest; most of the Sanhedrin is willing to condemn Him; it's no surprise that the Sadducees are angry enough to commit murder. The surprise is that so many of the Pharisees – the most respected and sincerely religious reformers of their time – are also ready to do away with Him.

The point is, if Jesus had just been only praying up north in Galilee, none of this unpleasantness would have developed. If Jesus had been merely teaching and healing, none of this anger and opposition would have built up. It makes no sense, on the one hand, to keep insisting that Jesus is sweet and nice and asks us only to be pleasant to one another, when, on the other hand, we finally realize that incredibly sincere and religious people are so angered and threatened by Him that they turn Him over to Roman authorities and insist that He be executed. It makes no sense to pretend that Jesus is *only* a healer and a teacher. It makes no sense to see *only* the spiritual part of His teachings. Jesus is killed because He is trying to take over the nation – because He is claiming to be the Rightful King. And He is doing it so successfully that those who are in positions of power know that if they don't stop Him, He will in fact succeed – He will in fact supersede them. He will in fact *become the King*. The part of the story many people refuse to notice is the part that makes it very clear that it is Jesus who is pushing it – it is Jesus who will not let it alone. It is Jesus who is the aggressor. Palm Sunday is what makes this all too uncomfortably clear. And I suspect that's why we don't want to be very clear about Palm Sunday.

Oh, do not miss it! Jesus rides into Jerusalem and He takes over the temple. He teaches there and proclaims His Kingship each day – to the rising enthusiasm of growing crowds – from Palm Sunday to Thursday night. And every attempt to discredit Him only increases His reputation, highlights His wisdom, and increases His popularity. The authorities are beside themselves. Something must be done to stop Him. And Jesus just keeps pushing it: “I am the Messiah. These leaders you have at present are frauds. They do not live or speak for God. They cannot lead you to salvation or peace. Choose me. Follow me.”

Of course we have our reasons for not wanting to see this very clearly. We have strong and important motives, however conscious or semiconscious, for *wanting* to keep the story from making very much sense. I want Jesus to seem sweet and loving so I never have to give Him any other right or authority to challenge me or my life. I want the crucifixion to come out of nowhere, be somebody else's fault, and have nothing to do with Jesus' challenge or claim to be *my* Rightful King. But the truth is, Palm Sunday is a pivotal event in my personal life also – and in your lives, as well – and not just on that long-ago day in Jerusalem. And I don't blame you for not wanting to notice it, because I know how much I try to avoid noticing it. Only, then we don't get in on the story. We don't get

to be part of His Kingdom. We don't get to have Him for our King.

Jesus rides into our lives just exactly the way He rode into Jerusalem those many years ago. And He asks us to depose the powers and authorities that rule over us, and to claim Him and coronate Him instead – just exactly as He did in Jerusalem. And we get exactly the same choice that Israel got. We know deep within that He is who He says He is, but we don't want to give up control of our lives any more than the folks in Jerusalem did so many years ago. We want to stay in control of how we live, what we do, how we do it, what we live for. And our whole culture and education and training urge and confirm that we should stay in control and run our own lives. But Jesus keeps pushing it. Yet even as He pushes, He leaves it up to us. It is our choice. We cannot have Him as our King unless we claim Him so. But the claim itself is so annoying and disturbing and compelling that we cannot just let it be. We must choose Him ... or find some way to kill Him – some way to silence the claim; to mute it, gag it, or shut it away somewhere so we can go on doing things our own way without hearing His call.

Oh yes, Palm Sunday is pivotal! Jesus claims His true authority, and sets the choice before us. Rejecting the choice *always* leads to crucifixion. He never leaves it alone. He always pushes it until we choose, one way or another: “coronate me, or kill me.” Therefore, if we choose not to have Him as our King, we spend enormous energy trying not to notice that we made this choice, and even more energy trying not to notice what results from it. We don't recall making any choice; it didn't really happen; it wasn't real; it was somebody else's fault; there's no such King, or Kingdom; maybe the translation is wrong; maybe it's all just myth or legend ... and on and on. But the trouble is, when we run our own lives, they get smaller and more meaningless as we go. And sometimes more bitter and painful and cruel, too. And what if we choose the other way? It's called “conversion” – a New King to rule our lives, and a New Kingdom to live in and to serve.

Here is my point, and for me the core and essence of Palm Sunday: Jesus made a clear bid for Kingship, and set the authentic choice before His followers and all Israel. If He had not done this, the Cross would have lost much of its personal power and meaning. To put it another way: If the nation *had* chosen Jesus, with conviction and allegiance, *Good Friday would never have happened*. His death was the direct result of their refusal to acknowledge His Kingship. And it wasn't just that some opposed Him and some loved Him. Those who loved Him did so with such careless, faint conviction and devotion that – despite all the signs of danger and desperate warnings all around Him – when Jesus needed them most, they were confused, scattered, and demoralized, and they betrayed, denied, and abandoned Him. The True King died all alone, without one single friend – without one single subject standing beside Him to object to what was going on, or to defend Him. There is nothing ethereal or difficult to understand here. It is just too hard to face ... too hard to admit ... too hard to repent.

But among other things, that is what the Cross truly meant to His first followers. They had been given the opportunity – not in theory, not in some mystical way, but in flesh and blood – to declare Him their King and Messiah, and they had missed it badly. The result was horrible beyond endurance. He didn't just die for them in story or song – He died because they had let Him down. They knew He was their Rightful King, and they had not shown up for Him. They abandoned and deserted Him. The reality of that blasted them out of whatever remained of their old lives and values and self-will. They had been given the choice of living for this True King, and they had not taken it. So when the choice came again, after His Resurrection, THEY TOOK IT. Indeed they did! Never again would they leave or betray Him for the world's threats or favors. They made mistakes, but they also lived and died *for Him* – no longer for themselves, and no longer for anyone else, unless they thought it was His will. And it has been so ever since, for anyone who has come from Palm Sunday to the Cross.

One more thing: If we get it clear, know the principles, and choose Him for our King – what about faithfulness in following Him? On Palm Sunday, Jesus reveals a major principle of the Kingdom: He sets before us, in the real world, an authentic choice. He gives us A TRUE CHANCE, and makes the offer authentic. If we have chosen Him as our King, aren't we to follow this same principle in every area of life where we have mission, purpose, authority, opportunity? That is, should we not be offering people a true chance to live a WAY different from what's going on all around them? To set before people a true chance to choose Him as their King? And I don't mean in some wooden formula or creed. Palm Sunday was powerful precisely because it was so carefully thought out and implemented, and was a real choice in a real situation – right in the middle of all the realities, power plays, threats, and structures of a very real world. Will that not require of us what it required of Jesus: hours of thought and prayer, the help of friends, courage, trust in God, trust in God's future? And should we not also be aware that people will often hate us for it, fight us over it, abuse and malign us because of it? And can we not also

trust and pray that some of them will eventually change their hearts and minds? I don't doubt for one minute that even though Jesus knew it was possible – and eventually certain – that He would be killed for offering us the authentic choice to choose Him for our King, He also knew that thousands, and then millions, would redeem that failure and enter His Kingdom before they were through here.

Do you not set such higher choices before your children? And do they always hug you and love you for it? Not always at first, you say? Do we not find ways where we work to put a higher, better WAY of doing things before our associates? And do they always thank us, and help us to move things in that direction? Not always at first, you say? Everywhere you go, wherever you have gifts or opportunity, are you designing a mini-Palm Sunday, with Jesus as King, with His values and purposes as the true goal?

Of course! That's why life is so exciting – and why you are always in so much trouble. And it's also why some people keep circling back around, becoming dearer and deeper friends than you ever imagined possible in your former life. And that's why you discover that Jesus is still right beside you, doing with you, and through you, what He has always done: the Redeemer, the Reconciler, the Messiah, the Christ of God.

Jesus will be King only if we choose Him – of our own free will. He was able to make this choice – the choice of choosing Him for our King – available to all humans, down through all generations. Every Palm Sunday reminds us: He is still our Rightful Priest and King. And each of us, in every new generation, still has the chance to decide whether to claim Him as our King or to go on serving the usurpers. That's the eerie and incredible new dimension of Jesus' Messiahship: It is not earthbound or landlocked. It is a Kingdom not of this world, and yet it is here and real and waiting for us just the same. Convert ... switch allegiance ... turn will and life over to Him ... tune to the purposes and values of His rule – because He is **HERE**. His Kingdom has come, and it is available to all who choose it. And it is a Kingdom that does not end.

PRAYER

Well Lord, are we ready to welcome You? From out of the dim corridors of an ancient heritage, we remember hearing it. From passionate prophets of unyielding devotion, we remember hearing it. From men whose faith was so bright, even thousands of years ago, that we still remember their names, though we don't always remember why – from Jeremiah and Isaiah and Paul, we remember hearing it: *"You are the potter ... we are the clay."*

Thy Kingdom come, Lord, and finally with our full agreement, our desire, our rejoicing, our cooperation. Much as we need and appreciate Your endless love, we long for the day when You can come to us and not be crucified. Much as we need and appreciate the proof of Your true authority and power, we long for the day when we can know with confidence that Your love is for all eternity. So ride in on us again, this day, and we will try one more time not to turn You away. Then teach us how to pray and what to do when the world tries to steal You away from us again, in the night, when we aren't looking. Give us courage, also, to sing, *"Hosanna! Blessed be He who comes in the name of the Lord!"* Amen.



AN OPPORTUNE TIME

God is about to do some incredible, amazing, and beautiful things. But first the humans have to have their say, try to fix it their way, try to make life safe and good by their own best wisdom and efforts. I guess we also have to find out what God's response will be to us – what God will do about it when we insist on having it our own way.

This is the night we celebrate our Lord's last supper with His disciples. To do that, we need to have our minds free to be with Him, not struggling with the details. So before we go to this communion meal, let me remind you of the setting.

The timing is like this: The Jewish nation, to which Jesus belongs, is getting ready to celebrate Passover, their most important commemoration. It is the heart of their remembrance of how God had delivered them, under the leadership of Moses, from bondage in Egypt some 1,300 to 1,500 years before Jesus was born. Jesus loved this festival at least as much as you love Christmas or Easter.

The Last Supper, we think, occurs the evening before the Passover feast. Passover will begin Friday evening when the sun goes down, the beginning of the Sabbath. So Jesus shares the Last Supper with His disciples the night before, on Thursday evening, when He tells them He longs to eat the Passover meal with them again but will not get the chance until they can all do so in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Luke 22:16) He will be dead by this time tomorrow night. He will not live to see Passover.

Maundy Thursday is loaded and laden with the immediacy of Jesus' approaching death, which the disciples cannot quite fathom or face. I still identify with them. I both do and do not understand it. I have and have not faced it. I want to enjoy the meal, and nothing is more important than being with Him, but I cannot shake the foreboding and the realization that everything has gone wrong. Love and sorrow mix and mingle, and they cloak this night with meanings and feelings beyond all utterance.

Maundy Thursday occurs on three levels all at the same time: political, relational, and personal. Jesus is in a political drama with the leaders of the Jewish state – that's political. Jesus is having a banquet with His closest and dearest friends – that's relational. Jesus is experiencing the hardest and most crucial day of His life on the inward level of His own faith – who He is, what His truth is, what His life is for and about – that's personal.

ON THE POLITICAL LEVEL, Jesus has taken Jerusalem by storm. Since Palm Sunday, He has been teaching in the temple all day, every day, with huge crowds in approving attendance. According to the Gospels, many lawyers and doctors of the Law step forward to see if they can discredit Jesus before the people. None succeed. The Jewish temple police cannot try to arrest Jesus in broad daylight because they would be mobbed by His followers. Not only are the temple police afraid of the crowds, but a riot would bring in the Roman soldiers, and

that must be avoided at all costs. So they cannot arrest Him in the daytime, and they do not know where to find Him at night.

The impact of Jesus' message and ministry is no doubt appealing to many of the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for Passover. He is fresh and exciting, and His influence is starting to sweep far beyond the supporters who have gathered at His request. Remember that at this time in history, political power and religious power are the same thing in Israel – there is no separation of church and state. The people in leadership do not dare let Jesus carry His popular movement into the High Holy Days of Passover week. In other words, though they are not sure, they fear He may have enough influence with the masses to actually take over the leadership of the country. They also fear that if He does attempt it, whether He could win or not, the confrontation between His group and the establishment would very likely end in Roman intervention. If any disturbance even hinted at a riot, Roman soldiers would be sent in to quell it. That is not a Roman threat, that's a promise. And where is the Roman garrison? Right there at the end of the temple courtyard. The Jewish leaders know that if Roman soldiers ever move at Passover time, the result would be an enormous bloodbath – just as Jesus Himself had warned on Palm Sunday. And indeed it happened about thirty-seven years later: In 70 A.D., Rome so obliterated the Jewish nation that it no longer existed politically in our world for nearly the next nineteen hundred years – not until your lifetime. No “fun and games” going on here, friends. Jesus is playing for keeps in an extremely volatile time, and so are the Jewish leaders who oppose Him.

The political situation is that the leaders *must* stop Jesus before Passover begins. He knows this better than they do. Jesus has been planning it for years. He knows He is the Rightful King (the Messiah), and He wants the nation to accept Him for what He is. But because of *who* He is, Jesus will not coerce or use physical force. The people must choose Him of their own free will. Of course, the political leaders do *not* know Jesus' convictions on such matters. They are genuinely afraid that at some pre-arranged signal, all His followers will pull out weapons and attempt the usual sort of coup. As those in power begin to realize that Jesus is really serious, as they awaken to the pressure He is exerting in this already terribly dangerous time, they grow frightened, furious, and determined.

Jesus sits at the table this night knowing that the opposition will make a move. They have to. He has left them no choice. It isn't by magic that He knows. By this time, His enemies probably have a whole string of plans set in motion to apprehend Him. The pressure on His friends and disciples has become enormous. That Jesus is right, and that everybody else is wrong, isn't as clear to them as we might think. Any one of them could crack, and Jesus knows it. Every relative, parent, sweetheart, and friend of

anyone close to Jesus – especially the inner twelve – is being pressured to “help us find him”; “help us to save the nation”; “we only want to talk to him”; “he’s young and headstrong and doesn’t realize what terrible danger he’s putting us all in by stirring up the people this way”; “please, just help us find him – we only want to reason with him.” Yeah, right ...

Nor is it by magic that Jesus knows that Judas has succumbed. If somebody is truly close to you, can you not tell when they change? Does a wife not know when her husband takes a lover? Does a father not know when his child has disobeyed? Do we look into each other’s faces to see and read nothing? We know unless we don’t want to know, or unless we haven’t been paying attention. Of course we know. And in comparison to Jesus, our radar is bent and rusty. In any case, Judas Iscariot (Greek form of *Judah*), “the man from the city” (*keriotha* often used to mean Jerusalem), has more relatives and friends in the area than any of the others, and hence more pressure per square inch on him than on the others. Most of us have “betrayed” or “denied” Jesus in one way or another, for far less cause, when friends and loved ones started putting on pressure. It’s not hard to understand poor Judas. When battle lines form and people start choosing up sides, and all sorts of unverifiable information is filling the atmosphere until everything seems confusing, it’s not hard to comprehend Judas’ mistake. Betrayal isn’t the biggest tragedy for Judas. Killing himself before he discovers forgiveness is the real tragedy.

ON THE RELATIONAL LEVEL, Jesus is saying goodbye. He wants to find ways to help His disciples remember and understand. It will be up to them now to carry on what He has started. He wants them to love and support each other. Otherwise, He knows they will have small chance of keeping the message alive. On top of that, He loves them. So He prepares a banquet for them and gives them some things to remember, and some instructions. He gives them “time-release” keys that will later reveal to them a far greater understanding of the power and extent of His love for them – and, inseparably, of God’s love for them. So it is a night of sayings and images: washing feet, body broken, blood poured out. We still only dimly reach toward the full mystery and significance of it all.

THE THIRD LEVEL IS PERSONAL. Jesus is up against His own moment of truth. Is He really willing – is He able – to go through with this? Does any of it really matter enough to make it worth such a price? Will anybody actually remember, or understand, or care enough ... that He should go through with this night? This night which is about to turn into a living nightmare? The world is crass, people are self-centered, everybody eventually dies, lots of people are killed unjustly ... so what good will ever come of His throwing it all away at thirty-three?

The Last Supper is inseparable from the agony in the Garden. There is no place in or around Jerusalem where Jesus can make it through this night. But there is one place He *can* go: North! Galilee. Home. RUN! If Jesus goes back to Galilee, nobody will come after Him. In that act, He abdicates the throne. The pressure is off. He can teach,

preach, heal, and tell parables to His heart’s content for fifty years; the authorities might make disparaging remarks, but nobody is going to care enough to come after Him. God help me, after all these years, when it comes to this night, *I still want Him to run*. Quick! Please! Before they come! But that’s the heart talking, and it doesn’t *want* to understand.

Do you remember the story of Jesus in the wilderness, right after His baptism? Forty days led by the Spirit and tempted by the devil. And at the end of those days, when Jesus had not fallen for any of the temptations, the text says, “*When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*” (Luke 4:13)

All my life, I have wanted that to be a misprint, a mistake. Why can’t that be one of the verses some careless scribe added later? That is not how it’s supposed to be. It’s supposed to read: “Jesus, having proven Himself wise and valiant beyond all the devil’s wiles and expectations, convinced the devil that He was unreachable and untouchable, *and the devil never bothered Him ever again.*” That’s how it’s supposed to be. That’s how we keep trying to pretend it is and ever shall be for us.

“*The devil departed from him until an opportune time.*” That is the real truth. That is what we need to know for ourselves, after we have seen how it was for Jesus. If the devil wouldn’t leave even Jesus alone after pounding Him for forty days, do we have any reason to suspect that our own temptations are over? We think we’ve been through a lot, that we know some of the ropes now, and so most of the worst tests are behind us. Am I the only one who likes to spin that yarn in my mind?

There have been many “opportune times” for Satan to tempt Jesus since those classic wilderness temptations. Many people and many circumstances tried to steer Him off His course. Sometimes it was His relatives, many times it was His supporters, and even sometimes His best friends. (“*Get thee behind me, Satan,*” He said to Peter.) But this night comes the lollapalooza: a sane and sensible little temptation, a temptation to undo everything His life has been about. North. Go north. Run! It’s simple. It isn’t worth it. Just leave. Quick. NOW! Before they get here ... before it’s too late.

As we stare at His story in wonder and compassion, can we also learn for ourselves – learn what it will take to follow Him? There is only one way to prevent Satan from continuing the endless temptations, the ceaseless efforts to booby-trap our lives: walk away from God’s plans and purposes so consistently that Satan is reasonably content with us. If we are no threat to him, Satan will leave us pretty much alone. The Spirit may hound us, but not Satan.

So, what do we expect? What do we know with absolute certainty? Well, we know that if we walk with Jesus, we can keep walking *through* every temptation. But that is very different from thinking we can walk without being tempted. So the other thing we know with absolute certainty is that Satan is always waiting for an opportune time. And from time to time, a real beauty of an opportune time will come along. Sometimes we even help set it up.

Satan will especially wait and watch for a time when we are feeling weak, tired, discouraged. He will wait for a time when we feel confused, deserted, abandoned. When we know we are weary, when we feel ineffective, when we know hope is at low ebb, then comes the lollapalooza: the temptation to undercut the whole show, and ruin everything we have worked and lived for. Of course, it may not seem like a very big temptation at the time. Just a simple “This isn’t working, let’s go north.” But it is still a clear change in direction, against all the prayers and efforts thus far.

We could talk for days about illustrations, but just one connector and you can take it from there: When do married men or women have extramarital affairs? When they are feeling good, strong, successful, and happy? When they know themselves to be part of a loving family? When they are excited about their work and their purpose here? Not very often. Most of the time, affairs are symptoms of depression, defeat, an inward discouragement, despair. Affairs are escapes into a fairytale world where, for a while, they feel more important, the center of caring attention once again. But of course the illusion doesn’t last, and the crash is great.

Affairs are a moving into sickness, not health. No wonder so few of them work. I have seen a few work, but it’s the hardest way to put a real relationship together. Both people must wake up, keep the love, find healing and forgiveness, survive all the wreckage, recommit to each other on some real and permanent basis – and if by some miracle all this is managed, then the two are only back up to zero, to the “break-even point,” to a starting place.

At an opportune time, when we are at low ebb, comes the lollapalooza: a temptation to undercut the whole show, to destroy all that we have been living for – the temptation to run away, to hide, to start over. “A geographic,” it is sometimes called.

So it is with Jesus on this night. RUN! Go north. Go home. The authorities will never bother Him again if He does that. It will be over. He will no longer be a threat, or worth their trouble. The crowds will look for Him tomorrow and won’t find Him and they will be disappointed, but they’ll get over it. They don’t understand any of it yet anyway. They will forget. Besides, if He stays, they will melt away when it comes to the real power play.

Liking Him and thinking His mission and message are appealing are one thing; facing Roman steel is quite another. Jesus knows all this. All He has to do is start walking north. Soon ... now ... HURRY! (Can we hear Satan’s drum beat?)

So Jesus tries to pray. And the voice screams at Him: “This is stupid! This is useless! Get out of here! Leave – NOW! No good will come of this. You’re not the only one who might get hurt. Nobody will understand. Nobody really cares. RUN!” Jesus has wrestled with this voice before, again and again, all through the years: dear angel of logic and practical right, high angel of light – Lucifer. And what a hummer he is on this night, at this “opportune time.”

What an absolutely amazing thing for us to look up, blink, and find that Jesus is still there. This is the height of the human side of the story. This is Jesus’ hardest moment – and finest hour. From here on, it will be out of His hands. First, the humans will take over. After them, the fanfare and the miracle and the mystery belong to God. But this ... this is the warrior soul, and the naked commitment that Jesus brings to meet it. *Not my will but thine be done*. So Judas comes, in his terrifying innocence, and Jesus is still there. Jesus’ friends and family do not want Him to be there. The Jewish authorities do not want Him to be there. The Roman authorities do not want Him to be there. The disciples do not want Him to be there. And Jesus doesn’t want to be there. *Nevertheless, not my will ... and not anybody else’s either*. That’s what a lot of people seem to miss about Jesus. He is not living to please other humans any more than He is living to please Himself. He lives to please God, and tells the rest of us to do that too. *Thy will be done*. So Jesus is still there, waiting.

This is the night. It is going on at all three levels at once: political, relational, personal. It all culminates here. And everything – the whole mission and ministry of Jesus – stands or falls from here. It is Maundy Thursday, from the word “mandate” – Day of Command – the day of the mandate: from God to Jesus ... from Jesus to the disciples ... from there to here ... from then to now ... and to us. Will we live for ourselves, or for Him? Will we stay with Him – see it all through with Him, and for Him? Or will we run?

PRAYER

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord, and we are on it. We sometimes scream and rant and fret and swear, and say that we don't want to be on it, that we would rather be elsewhere. Until we stop and ask: Where would we rather be? On some desert isle? In some make-believe story? Perhaps in our own real world, where we are rich and privileged and blessed and fortunate, though all who are around us are starving and wretched and hopeless? No Lord, we could not stand that either. We would like to be rich to help the poor. But better to be together with the poor and the sick and the dying, than alone and rich ... or alone and well ... or alone and uncaring.

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord, and we are on it. We thank You for that! We thank You for thinking us worthy of experiencing LIFE in Your dimensions. We thank You for all the joy and pain of LOVE and LIFE. Forgive us for complaining. Forgive us for wanting to escape. Welcome us anew as we turn toward You, we pray.

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord. Shape us as You will. We come rough-hewn – raw material – knowing not our true design or frame. Cut away as You must. Shape and form until we understand. Give us the likeness of the One from Nazareth, the Son of Man, in whose name we pray. Amen.



IS CHRISTIANITY ABOUT A CROSS?

To touch this day with words is impossible, hopelessly inadequate. Truly, I apologize. *Not* to touch this day with efforts to comprehend is also unthinkable. I can only do the best I can, knowing it doesn't matter. Jesus is the One who will accomplish it, no matter what my words imply. Paul once commented to the Corinthians that he had decided to know nothing among them "*except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*" (I Corinthians 2:2)

One still sees beautiful gold and silver crosses of exquisite design worn by many people. The cross, indeed, appears in endless forms throughout Western design and architecture, and one doesn't have to go to church to see crosses everywhere. On the other hand, it is difficult, though not impossible, to go to most churches and *not* see a cross. Even at this church, we have overcome our Puritan resistance to symbols enough to have 14 crosses up here in the chancel area (not counting my stole). Down where you sit there are 72, one on the end of each pew. There are 144 more on the hymnals we use, and another 15 in the foyer. We are surrounded by 245 crosses, not counting the ones many of you are wearing.

It is as if we think we cannot be reminded too often. It is as if we feel there is some power in the symbol itself. Without thinking, or maybe even without believing, the residue of the centuries clings to us and we sense rather than think that the Cross may be useful for warding off evil, or as a talisman or amulet of power. Even many macho, red-blooded athletes make the sign of the Cross before engaging in the contest. But ask one of them, "What is the significance of the Cross? Why do you make this sign before entering the challenge? Do you hope to die like the One this emblem represents?" What would they reply?

I know what some of you have replied when asked about the Cross. Some of you claim to have no interest in "that side" of Christianity. Some of you claim great interest but continued confusion on the subject. Some of you tell me deep and powerful concepts, if I can entice you to get past the memorized phrases and pat language. It seems to me that the Cross has become an awkward subject in many churches today. Some congregations are so busy honoring it that they resent any questions probing its meaning. Others are so busy finding new truth that they neglect or forget the Cross altogether. It's enough to prompt a modern Christian to inquire: Is Christianity still about a Cross? And I mean a real one, however long ago – one made of wood, with blood running down it.

It has been said that Jesus died to save us – that Jesus died on a Cross to save us from sin. It has been said that Jesus paid the price for our transgressions – that the guilt was ours. It is implied and often said that because of our sins, and if justice is to be served, we deserve and even

require a sentence of death – but that Jesus died in our place, taking upon Himself the punishment that we deserve. In this way, He stands in for us, sacrificing Himself for us, freeing us for another chance, or maybe many chances. It is said that on God's ledgers, we owe a debt we cannot possibly pay. And that Jesus, infinitely righteous Himself, has worth and value enough to pay that debt on our behalf. And that the Cross is both the proof and the collateral for that transaction – proof that Jesus chose and chooses to pay that price for us.

It seems to me there are many among us who do not understand these phrases. We may have a strong emotional reaction to some of them, but their content still eludes us. I know some people – and I do sincerely hope that I am one of them – who would die for Jesus any time He asked them to. On that level, it doesn't matter very much whether you or I or anybody else *understands* exactly *how to explain* what He did for us. I don't think that Peter was anywhere near as good a theologian as Paul, but either one of them would have died for Jesus any time He asked – and both of them proved it.

The Christian Faith is more than mentality, and most of us don't "think" our way into loyalty or devotion. But we are also called to be messengers, evangelists (*euangelos* = bringing good news). So the heart forces us to train the mind. Our loyalty to the Christ calls us toward as much understanding as we can find, so that we may share it, bear witness, show gratitude. I didn't say Peter was a bad theologian, just that he wasn't as good as Paul. To be fair, Peter didn't grow up speaking Greek and Hebrew, studying the Scriptures, or going to rabbinical school. Neither did most of us. But we can still ask: Does Christianity have anything to do with a Cross? Do we understand anything about it in our own minds? And can we discuss or explain any of it when we are talking with others?

I know some people – and I am one of them – who know all the familiar phrases and usual explanations about Jesus dying for us, and yet I still cannot make any sense out of it the way it's usually explained. Not to boast (it was my own hunger that drove me to it, "humble country pastor" that I always wanted to be, started out to be, and still am in many ways), but I have read with passion and eagerness Bultmann, Tillich, the Niebuhr brothers, and Barth; Ferre, Brunner, Baille, Knox, and Pannenberg; Aulen and Fox and even Luther, Calvin, Augustine, and Paul (and many others who literally are not worth mentioning), trying to understand the *intellectual* significance of the Cross.

How does the execution of a criminal in Jerusalem in A.D. 33 – on the other side of the globe, and a language and culture apart from us – have anything to do with a friend of mine who got a girl pregnant but he doesn't love

her and feels terribly guilty about it; with the girl who doesn't feel at all guilty about it but who is nevertheless broken-hearted; or with the coming baby, who is what we call "innocent," yet that innocence isn't going to change one whit the kind of world he or she is about to be born into?

This executed criminal from that far-off Cross is going to save all three of these people, if they will allow it – if they will receive it and accept it. But how?

Now, some people can walk off right here, realizing the whole thing is preposterous. I no longer have that choice. I truly believe (with more certainty than the fact that I'm standing here) that Jesus really is going to save those three people. I keep seeing it happen. I have watched His power at work for many years now. I don't ever expect to understand it all, but if I'm going to worship the Lord God with all my mind, I have to keep asking: What the Heaven is going on here? How is it that the Cross (and what happened there) keeps reaching us? What is He doing? What can I say to somebody who gets burned by the sin that rules here, inside and out, so that maybe they can find Him faster and cooperate with Him sooner?

* * *

I will tell you some things I don't believe. And then I will tell you some things I do believe, but with barely any chance to explain why. Then you can drop it or pursue it as you like.

(1) I do not believe that God "wanted" Jesus to die. I think God would have been far more pleased if we had crowned Jesus our King and let Him lead us into peace and love.

(2) I do not believe that Jesus died to appease God's anger toward us.

(3) I do not believe that God killed Jesus. It seems clear to me from the record that we did the killing. It was humans who killed Jesus – not God.

(4) The altar sacrifice analogy doesn't work for me, unless I explain it in a very different and convoluted way that would take hours. Though the analogy is used by Paul and featured in the book of Hebrews, using it is extremely treacherous for those of us who did not grow up in a culture and religion where animal sacrifices are a daily part of temple worship.

I know that these things "I do not believe" are being told and taught in most of the churches of Christendom the world over: It was all the preordained will of God. Jesus was born to die. Judas had no choice but to betray Him. No other outcome was possible. God was in the background, choreographing it all, needing – requiring – the death of his Son to keep from destroying us. Justice demands it. We are helpless "onlookers" – spectators of this, the greatest drama in all history. And it was the *act* of sacrifice – the blood and the death – that is itself the "saving power."

I do not believe any of this. It makes no sense. Somebody tried to explain it from a world long ago, but I find no faith in it. I find only superstition. It is justice, not love, that rules this scenario – no matter how much love motivates the sacrifice. And it is an ancient world –

which believed that sacrifices to the gods were absolutely necessary to survival – that still instructs this kind of concept and belief: we tried for centuries to find a sacrifice good enough to get God on our side, but no number of animals, however perfect, were good enough ... until finally God helped us to find the perfect sacrifice – God's own Son. Very impressive, if you grew up accepting the necessity of altar sacrifices to appease the gods. But I did not. More importantly, I grew up *not* believing it *because* this same Son of God revealed that God was not like this – was not, never had been, and never would be.

Judaism was born, so to speak, in the incredible experience of Abraham discovering that God does not like human sacrifice. His son Isaac was spared, and never again were Jewish people to offer their children to God as altar sacrifices. Abraham got it. Abraham understood. The world moved into a whole new dimension of religion, and then mostly went right back to the same old ways, concepts, and errors. Abraham got it, but God couldn't get it? Is that what we still believe?! God could not understand? God stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, but still thinks the sacrifice of his own Son is not only necessary, but some kind of supreme blessing to mankind? If you think I'm being sarcastic, let me suggest that you have never heard a more pure sarcasm, nor one more filled with sorrow and anger.

God does not like – and will no longer accept or permit – human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10; Leviticus 18:21; 20:3), yet God doesn't mind sacrificing his own Son in order to save us from his own wrath? If that's the mechanism of salvation – the explanation, the truth – I will happily insist on staying lost, and damned too, if that's the deal. Of course, the only reason I can pretend to be so brave is because, for other reasons, I trust Jesus more than any sacrifice you can name.

* * *

What I do believe:

(1) I believe that Jesus was the Highest Earth Agent of The Creator Of All That Is. The titles are *much* too low but, at the very least, Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son (as we say) of God. He came in due season, as the Scriptures promised, to take over the leadership of Israel – God's chosen people – that they might truly become a light to all nations. Jesus, by incredible genius of strategy and planning, built a strong spiritual movement, and He came, in fulfillment of the prophecies, to declare Himself the True King of Israel on Palm Sunday in A.D. 33 (or so).

(2) I believe that Jesus came in spiritual power, appealing to people's true and inward religious belief and faith in God, rather than basing His mission on traditional outward political, military, or ecclesiastical power. This baffled both His friends and His enemies. But His bid for power, for leadership – to be acclaimed the Rightful King of Israel (the Messiah) – was genuine, authentic, and, in the end, crystal clear.

(3) It is a fact (not just my belief) that Jesus' identity, power, and authority were rejected by Israel. And yet, because of the superior planning and strategy of Jesus, His death could not be accomplished in secret, or later

denied, or ever swept under the rug. He was perceived to be such a dire threat that He was murdered in cold blood by the most religious and moral people the world has ever bred, under the auspices of two of the most justice-oriented systems of government the world has ever known. But in the end – despite the setting and the context; despite the teachings and the ministry and the healings and the miracles; despite the prophecies and the popularity of the movement of John the Baptist and then of Jesus Himself – in the end, not even one friend, not one single, solitary human being, stood with Him against the lies, the evil, the torture, and the death that was decreed. That's the real Cross – made of wood, with blood running down it.

I know people who are not moved by that. But I am. That touches me more than anything else in this life ever has. That hurts worse than any personal toothache, or failure, or shame. It is more devastating than disease, or poverty. It is more difficult to bear than any anger or fear or loneliness or loss that I have ever known. And while your pain and trials may be greater than my own, you would be foolish to conclude that I have had a soft or easy life. I'm simply saying that it wouldn't matter to me if it happened two *million* years ago – not when it gets that clear.

If God was ever to send any agent, at any time, to any place on earth with a chance for a fair hearing, a fair shake, and maybe even an eager welcome, Jesus got and took that chance when He came to Israel in the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Israel had been talking of, studying about, dreaming of, and hoping, praying, and begging for Messiah to come for almost a thousand years. You would think there might have been a better reception. But Jesus was left to die. And more than that, He was brutally killed, against all the rules, *despite* all the rules ... against and despite all of the hopes and promises and faith we have ever claimed – as individuals, as a people, as a race, or as a religion.

(4) The result was not that God changed his mind about love or grace or anything else. Every time *we* learn anything, we think *God* is getting smarter. But God has never cared very much about our religious mumbo-jumbo; he has cared only about the heart, the motives, the intentions by which we desire and long to know and please him. But after the Death and Resurrection of Jesus (and I have never been able to think about one without the other) – after the Cross – people started changing. People started believing that the heart and mind of God were finally revealed, and that the heart and mind of God were not at all like what we had supposed. In other words, people started waking up – finding their own hearts and minds changing, because their minds were now changed about the heart of God.

It probably started with Peter, and the rooster's crows. I suspect maybe Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus tumbled next. In any case, one at a time, from that day to this, people have learned the story, confronted that Cross, and something has twisted inside them beyond all repair: There is no help for us here. The unthinkable has happened. The unimaginable has occurred. There is no place on earth left to turn – not if we are so frightened and tortured and

twisted that we will murder the Son of God who has come to help us.

We are beyond human repair. Left to our own devices, we will never get to any level of development worthy of eternal life, nor will we be able to endure it if it is offered. We are not good enough, and our systems and methods are not good enough – and they are never going to get good enough, not as long as we do it our way. *Nothing saved Him*. Our justice didn't save Him. Our court system didn't save Him. Our religious teachings didn't save Him. Our compassion didn't save Him. Our gratitude for His healing and preaching didn't save Him. Our most enlightened self-interest didn't save Him. Even our friendship and loyalty and love didn't save Him. It's OVER. All the pretenses are gone. That Cross has unmasked us forever. The denial and the excuses are laid bare. Furthermore, if that is the outcome for someone like Jesus, what chance is there for any of us? We keep thinking that if we just improve, we'll be okay. How improved do you have to get?! If Jesus isn't safe here, what about us? Our only hope is to hide in the dark and pray that God is blind, and that the society around us will not notice us.

(5) Jesus took away our pretense and denial. The estrangement, mistrust, and fear – the anger between us and God – there is no more pretending they don't exist. There is that Cross. I might like to imagine or wonder or fantasize that it is different now, or that we are different now. But I know it's a charade. There is still that Cross. How do we hide from its light? God is not the enemy. Never has been. God has always tried to help, and we have always refused it. That's what the Cross reveals.

Millions of humans have suffered and died throughout history. That's part of the tragedy, part of the way of sin and death that we live under. Millions of humans have suffered, but only One has been able to make it clear that it is because we are estranged from God, and because we do not trust God. Only One has been able to make it clear that God goes on loving us, all the way – and that it was even God who was behind His coming.

(6) The Cross wasn't the end, it just tore away the murk and fog – the mendacity. The people who have seen the Cross, from that day to this, have quit on this world – totally, flat-out, all-the-way quit. They know there's no hope here: If that's the way it is, if that's the way we are, then there's no hope for meaning, or truth, or love, or joy – not for us. Even if we thought we loved Him and hated to see Him die – but still wouldn't lift a finger to save Him because we were too afraid – that still means there's no hope. The difference between the good guys and the bad guys is no longer relevant. He's dead, and He will go on dying here forever ... unless a New Kingdom comes.

Only then, in the true and honest despair of the Cross – having suffered the loss of all human hope and promise – only then do we see for the first time a LIGHT that we could never see before. And it is so huge and beautiful that it's very hard to comprehend how we could not have seen it before. The Risen One begins to appear. So help me, I think His Spirit has always been here, trying to appear to us, but through all the denial and baloney and posturing and pretense, we couldn't see or hear or admit

the presence. Now, with everything gone and no excuses or justifications to cloud the vision or throw dust in the air, we start to hear and see: a Kingdom not of this world; our own lives bought with a price; ourselves loved and forgiven beyond the deepest darkness we could ever have imagined ... in but not of the world ... Lord Christ, my life is yours.

I have no better words than Paul, the reformed religious murderer: "*Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*" (Galatians 6:14) As far as Paul is concerned, if the world kills Christ, it is the world that has died. Paul has lost all hope in it. And, as he has been saying over and over, he has lost all hope in the righteousness that comes from our laws and efforts to be good or bring improvement. And he has also been crucified to the world, which means he doesn't try to win its favor anymore, nor will he be surprised if the world turns on him. If it turned on Jesus, it will turn on anyone. There is nothing Paul wants here anymore – only the chance to follow the crucified One into His True Kingdom, into a whole new reality.

From the outside, the confusion is great because utter despair and darkness turn so quickly to pure light and joy. The Cross is so grim, it destroys all hope. Yet in that very destruction, it reveals true HOPE at an entirely new magnitude. That makes perfect sense to an insider, to one going through it. But someone trying to understand from the outside can only suspect some form of delusion or madness. How can we rejoice in the loss of all hope, or in the awareness that everything we counted on or lived for is a mirage? We rejoice because when we see the mirage for what it is and stop trusting it altogether, then for the first time we see the True King and His Kingdom, in surpassing beauty so wondrous that all other longings seem like mere smoke that has blown away.

Did Jesus die for us? Of course He did: He refused to run from all our anger and stupidity and efforts to control and silence Him. And apart from His death, we could never have understood the magnitude or the depth of God's love – or our own refusal to receive it. And yes, I take it personally, more personally than anything else that has ever happened to me. But I wish we would get the phraseology straight. I don't mean that nobody has said it right; it's just that we don't hear it like they meant it. Jesus did not die *for* our sins – that is, to make up for them, or to cover them, or to pay some debt so we wouldn't have to. Who started the rumor that God cannot forgive unless you pay him off? Jesus died *because* of our SIN. He died *because* of our anger and fear and pride ... *because* of our aloneness and alienation ... *because* His quality and

manner of life so terrified us that we killed Him. Why did Cain kill Abel? And Jesus takes away none of the discipline, struggle, and challenge of growth and learning and changing that are necessary for us – as anybody who has ever tried to *follow Him* finds out in a big hurry. Jesus did not die *for* our sins; He died *because* of our sin – because of our alienation from God.

Did His death take away our sin – our alienation and separation from God, our animosity and hatred toward God? I cannot speak for you, but I find it hard, even impossible, to see that Cross and keep my anger and animosity toward God. (Unless, of course, I think it was God who killed Him, which I do not.) Paul keeps saying "it reconciles" – it brings peace between us and God. It gives us a very different awareness of the mind and heart and purposes of God. Especially, it changes our total awareness of how much God cares – and how personally he cares, and how consistently, and for all people in all generations. Is Paul correct in this? It has been my experience thus far.

A lot of words. Too many words. The Cross breaks our pride (*hubris*), once we truly see it. It destroys our independence, our isolationism. We turn our hearts and lives back toward God. Before the Cross, we could go our own way if we chose to, and the highest aim in life was to have things our own way, even if we consciously asked God to help us *get* our own way. But our way can never work – it can never get us what we want, where we want to go, or closer to who we want to be. There is that Cross, proving it. The world is wrong – wrong enough to kill the Son of God. It is the blind leading the blind.

Not everybody who sees the Cross realizes its message at first. But more and more of us do. We need God. Those who know this also need each other. So we head for home, like all prodigals do when they awaken. We turn will and life and heart and mind and soul toward God, as Jesus did – as Jesus showed *us* how to do. And that doesn't mean we do it for ourselves but in a different way. It means we let God help us – all the way, and every step of the WAY. *That* is how the Cross saves us. Not magic, not ritual, not superstition – conversion. Life in a new direction ... for a new reason ... by a higher TRUTH.

Is Christianity still about a Cross? Or, as people ask me from time to time, "Why do they call Good Friday 'good'?" What is the best thing that ever happened on our planet? What has done more good for more people than any other single thing? Well, we need Easter, and Pentecost too, for the full answer. But we cannot get to any of it except by way of the Cross. The Cross tears away the blinders ... and opens the WAY.

PRAYER

Well, Lord, You told us quite some time ago, but from the beginning: if we want to follow You, we have to take up our own crosses – our own deaths – in order to do so. We have never really understood that. We have never *wanted* to understand that. We have spent nearly zero time trying to understand that. We have filled our lives full of every kind of activity imaginable, trying to keep from understanding that. But we have wanted to follow You – and we do want to follow You. We love You, and You stand for all the true and beautiful and whole things in LIFE that draw us, and lift us, and haunt us ... that fill us with a HOPE and a PEACE to make our experience here worth going through. Your life was about a Cross. Make our lives about a Cross. Gather us around *Your* Cross. These things we pray together in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.



KNOWING BEFORE WE KNOW

It's Easter, and I would like to talk about your resurrection, and mine. I would like to talk about death, and dying your way into LIFE. Something about Easter makes me want to talk about *everything* – all at once, all at the same time – precisely at the time when we probably need the fewest words, and more time to just let things sweep over us, and into us. But hopefully you will indulge me for a little while, because if I don't get to talk about Easter, I'm just going to shrivel up and die.

WE KNOW MORE THAN WE THINK WE KNOW

That's my first point, in case you're still waking up. We know more than we think we know. Everybody here knows that life on earth is not the end of our story. It may be a muted note for some; it may not be a very fully developed, conscious conviction for others. But somewhere within, everybody knows it.

It sometimes proves out in strange ways: A hardened criminal with no regard for God or humankind suddenly risks his life to save a child. A self-centered, shallow young person suddenly abandons greed and games to risk life and limb for country. In how many ways, over how many centuries, have we seen humans choose to do what makes no sense at all – except for some inner light that sees a future and a meaning far beyond this realm and time. Of course, sometimes we laugh it off and call it “instinct.” Call it anything you like. We know more than we think we know.

Easter is not about eternal life. Easter is about Jesus' authority in an ongoing mission to earth. I say “ongoing” because it did not start with Jesus' birth, and it did not end with His death. Sometimes we Christians need to remember that Jesus did not invent God – He reveals God. God has always been at work for us, but we didn't know it – or we had such a dim comprehension that some days it didn't even overcome our fear and loneliness. And despite all that Jesus did to reveal and reconcile and save, some of us *still* have dim days. Easter is the beginning of the second phase of the mission – Phase II of “The Occupation.” A vastly superior BEING from beyond our world – beyond our space and time – is trying to take over life here. It is a war, and we fight hard to keep our sovereignty and independence so that we can go on doing things our own way. It takes us all a long time and considerable experience before we figure out that this vast and threatening BEING is our Creator – and that he loves us, belongs here, and should never have been ostracized in the first place. In fact, most of us would never even have considered such a thing if it had not been for Jesus.

But we need to know that we can trust Jesus, and can go with Him into this very new WAY of Life, this very new WAY of thinking and being. After all, it's pretty hard to switch everything and start believing that our worst Enemy – the BEING who makes it so hard here – is actually our best and dearest friend. Or, as Jesus put it,

“Abba” ... Daddy ... the loving Father. But Jesus keeps reminding us that it is Abba who sent Him, and that He only speaks and acts in Abba's name.

This is what got Jesus killed, of course. To most of the troops on this planet, it looks like a ruse – a mean and dastardly deceit on the part of the Enemy to make the take-over easier, to take us off our guard so The Occupation can proceed with less resistance. In the eyes of most, Jesus is the epitome of the quisling, the traitor, the ultimate Benedict Arnold of the human race. His real mission is to turn us over to the power of the invading BEING – to turn us all into the slaves of God: On your knees. Pray every day. Seek only his will – that is, “*Not my will but thine be done.*” How stupid does He think we are?! That's what most people think. So we killed Him.

But if the Enemy really is the Creator/God who made us and loves us, there is no choice, finally, but to send such a One as Jesus, and to give Him authority and full support. And Jesus will do everything in His power to reach and persuade us – except He will not force us, or physically hurt us. That would undo the purpose itself. So we go on encountering Him after a death that could not stick. Jesus is revealed as the One stronger than sin and death – the One we can trust and follow. Wherever you were before or are now, whomever you are now or were before, whatever you did before – come with Him now. That is the Easter Message.

Maundy Thursday is about His obedience. Good Friday is about how much He cares, and therefore also about how much Abba cares. Easter is recognition of our True King, the ONE with authority even over death. So we can join His Kingdom whenever we are willing. It also means, along the way, that our “knowing about eternal life” can now come out of the shadows or out of the dim corners of our awareness, and stand out clear and strong in all our perspectives. The Enemy is not our enemy – it is actually Abba, who loves us and wants us with him forever. No loneliness or fear can stand against that. Jesus is not quisling, but Messiah – Savior and Son of God. And we are grateful beyond ways to say, even in small and personal ways. I have a mother and father and friends and loved ones who have passed on, but Jesus has canceled out the concept of “goodbye.” We shall meet again. Since I am one of those people who hate saying goodbye, I string with Jesus. It's just a small, personal thing – one of the little perks of the Christian WAY. It certainly is not the core or reason for my faith, but I am grateful nonetheless.

I am chattering on here, about things beyond our knowing. And partly it's to hold us here for a little while longer, so you will have time to feel the dawn, and greet your Risen Lord anew and within. The Risen Christ is here more surely than you or I, and is more aware of you than I am (and I'm more aware of you than you think). The Risen Christ cares more for you and about you than the person standing next to you, which hopefully is saying a very great deal indeed. He is risen! (He is risen indeed!)

This is always true, and again and again we discover it ... learn it ... forget or neglect it ... then learn it again. As it dawns on you afresh this morning, claim it, go with it. Don't mind me; I'm just chattering to give your soul a little time to wake up, and stretch, and take flight.

The disciples all knew that Jesus would die and rise again. That is: After looking back, they tell us that they remembered Him telling them ahead of time. *"From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'"* (Matthew 16:21ff)

They knew more than they wanted to know, more than they thought they knew. But even *they* didn't fully face it at first, or truly admit it or acknowledge it. But they knew it. They hid part of it, even from themselves, in a cloud of unknowing, so they could go on living on a more familiar, comfortable level of consciousness. Why do they remind me so much of you? Well, they remind me of me too, but I don't want to talk about that. Why do they remind me so much of you?

We know more than we think we know. And Jesus resurrected – Jesus backed by God's authority, Jesus alive with us and beside us – gives us courage and trust enough to dare to wake up to what we know. The disciples did, eventually, and more and more. None of them lived lives anything at all like what they would have had they not known Jesus. That opens the skies for every one of us, and puts us into LIFE in ways and on levels we would not have dared to touch or dream of touching before. Instead of just playing around at the corners of life, we can string with Jesus. You think it sounds too serious? Not at all. It is far more fun to *live* the TRUTH than to just admire it from afar.

**If we know more than we think we know,
WE ALSO KNOW MORE THAN
WE CAN PUT INTO WORDS**

The worst thing about Easter Morning is the words. I love to talk about Jesus, but I hate not having anything better to do it with than mere words. Music helps a lot, but even music is restricted to notes and sounds. It is all so "tame," so mundane. Sending a boy to do a man's job is nothing in comparison to sending mere words to speak of the Risen Christ.

I remind you, from time to time, that the Bible – however much we revere it, study it, and feel exceedingly grateful for it – is so inadequate to its task because it is mere words. It is mere words pointing to a Living WORD: the *Logos* of God. Some people are put off by the fact that the Bible isn't perfect, that it doesn't make everything crystal clear with a power and a precision that convince us all totally in a single instant. Others try to pretend that despite all evidence to the contrary, the Bible is all these things, and is able to do this very thing. And if there is anything you don't get totally clear at first glance,

it's because *you* are wrong, ugly, and bad. For shame! "But I'll give you one last chance. I'll explain it to you. And then if you don't get it, it must be because you hate God and are not destined for the Candy Store." What incredible assumptions, especially the assumption that human words on a page can capture and clarify the truth and power of Christ. I have been studying the Bible in study groups for over forty years, and I promise you: the only time it is incontrovertibly clear and true is when some pathetic little dictator is stopping all the fun, shutting down the growth, and refusing to let the Holy Spirit get in on the conversation.

Why did the angel lie? (Matthew 28:7) The angel says to the Marys that Jesus is going on ahead of them to Galilee and they will see Him there, in Galilee. But before they can leave the Jerusalem area, before they can even get to the disciples and deliver the message from the angel, Jesus Himself greets them and gives them essentially the same message over again. Is this to prove to us that angels don't know everything? Maybe this is to inform us that we no longer need angels; Jesus, now that He is resurrected, will take over and deal with us directly. I love the point, though I doubt that Matthew intended it. Nevertheless, Matthew has the disciples seeing Jesus on a mountain in the Galilee region (presumably Mount Tabor, where the Transfiguration took place). Luke thinks all these things happened in and around Jerusalem, and that Jesus never went to Galilee in His resurrected form.

Matthew didn't have a word processor, and probably neither time nor wealth enough to edit what he wrote. Luke didn't have a Bible dictionary to consult, nor did he know what Matthew was writing. I'm just being playful, to remind you that humans make mistakes, have gaps in their knowledge, repeat what other people have told them without checking it out for themselves, and get in a hurry and don't always say everything exactly as they mean to. I have a word processor and I work hard on my sermons, editing and reediting until time runs out and everybody is sitting here waiting for the service to begin. And never in my life have I preached a sermon I didn't wish I could change and improve some, if I'm dumb enough to read it after I preached it. Remember that with comfort when it comes your time to speak. And stop using it as an excuse not to speak, now that it is so clear that you too are a witness. Christendom does not rest on perfect rhetoric; it never has, or none of us would be here. Be comforted, and start carrying your share of the message.

We all know more than we can put into words. So did the early disciples. They did the best they could with what words they could find at the moment. And so must we. Now I want to up the ante, if I may.

Do you remember the ancient creed of Christendom that Jesus was "fully God, and fully man"? Behind these words is a great implication that is sometimes missed. Jesus was not "fully man" as I am a man. Fully man – fully human – is not something I have ever been. I don't know for sure, but I have my suspicions that it may be the same for you. The image is within, but we are still in process. Some days we are mere shadows of what we

have been created to be. Some days we are really sad, depressed, discontent, unhappy ... and we aren't even sure why. But that's why: we are not being who we truly are. Jesus was *fully* human. We see in Him personhood, awareness, healing power, wisdom, compassion, fearlessness ... and a devotion to God that is enough to make one weep for the sheer longing of it.

For instance, He is so tender with the woman who anoints His feet with her tears ... and so scathing with the self-righteous religious pricks who think they're the only ones God loves because they're the only ones who have ever done it right. Oh God, I wish I could be like that! But that woman would have embarrassed me beyond all composure. And the self-righteous often give donations to the church, and are almost always doing a little something for the poor; after all, that's an integral part of the mythos of being better than others. No, I am not fully human – not like Jesus was. It's not something we can just “up and decide to be” one day. It takes a lot of growing into. And even beyond that, it takes a lot of help from God.

But because He was fully human, Jesus could die. The Cross is the final proof of His humanity. And even though we have no time to go into it, we killed Him because the fullness of His humanity made us look so bad by comparison. The old Cain and Abel syndrome, transposed to a higher key. It's always that way with Jesus. We either have to find some way to kill Him – kill His influence in our lives – or declare Him our King and go with Him. We don't always understand how He keeps doing that to us, but it is His vocation and purpose. And the problem with Jesus is that He is so incredibly good at whatever He does. He keeps forcing that choice with all of us. Most folk try not to notice for as long as possible.

Easter – Resurrection – of course is on the “fully God” side of the ledger. Death could not hold Him! That ain't human! God backed Him up – made it clear that our concepts of reality and of the real magnitude of the drama going on here are way, way beyond what we thought. It means that Jesus' authority, from our perspective at least, is unlimited – limited only by the carefulness with which He uses it, and the compassion with which He treats us. He could always, at any time, smash or coerce us into conformity with His mission. Only that isn't the mission or the purpose. His only concern is for our authentic growth and awakening. We must come into our fullness. Jesus has plans for an eternity that can only be served by true beings coming into true LIFE because we see it, and want it, and choose to go for it.

The fullness of God cannot be stuffed into a finite body of flesh and bone. Jesus couldn't wait to get out of His, if we notice some of the things He said. It's amazing how so many of us want to stay in ours as long as we possibly can, no matter how decrepit and worn out they get. That longing is one of the many hints God built into creation. But despite our confidence in our intelligence, we are pretty slow to pick up on a great many things.

Anyway, Jesus in the flesh is not the fullness of God. But the phrase is still accurate for us because Jesus reveals

God more fully than anything we earthlings have ever contemplated before. All our concepts of fear, wrath, judgment, punishment, condemnation – and even our concepts of reward and acceptance – they all still exist. But they have to be reworked in the light of the God revealed in Christ Jesus. Compassion, mercy, grace, forgiveness – and yes, love – are all seen in a different light since Jesus came. And they are seen to be major attributes of God in a way never considered before Jesus came. Even religions that don't accept or honor Jesus have been infiltrated with this new light, after being in competition with Christianity for two thousand years now. And Jesus, not very jealous of earth names or titles, just smiles. A mission is a mission, however it is accomplished. “A rose by any other name ...”

Well, this is getting much too serious for an Easter Sunrise. But Good Friday is the humanity, and Easter is the divinity. And the incredible, unimaginable thing about Easter is that Jesus is inviting us in. “Come on into the divinity with me – the water is fine!” *But, we say, we don't walk on water like you do.* “Hey, have you forgotten everything I ever told and taught and showed you? Trust ME! With my help, you can do what I do. Come on in. Eternal life is for you, too. It's why I came. It's what I'm about. Trust ME!”

If we know more than we think we know, we also know more than we can put into words, and WE KNOW THAT KNOWING IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

I love Easter, and Easter Sunrise, above all other church celebrations. But how glad I am that Christianity is not just about Easter Morning. On that first Easter, the disciples were in for a big surprise. They found out that what they had been told would happen had actually happened. How totally shocking to discover that this Jesus, whom they trusted and loved beyond all other beings on earth, had actually told them the truth. He had risen and was appearing to them. But one morning wasn't enough. It was followed by an even bigger, quieter, deeper surprise – a living with the Holy Spirit of Jesus that kept on transforming them through all the remaining days and years of their lives. The big deal is not in seeing Him for three minutes; the big deal is being able to live with Him for thirty or forty or sixty more years – and forever after that. That is what is truly exciting. That is what we really care about, and celebrate, on Easter Morning.

How sad it always makes me that so many people only know Christianity on an Easter-Morning basis. What's sadder than a one-night stand with a person who could have and should have been a lifelong mate? I'll tell you: A one-morning stand with Jesus is even sadder. A one-morning connection with the Savior, Leader, and Lord Of All Eternity is possibly the saddest thing we could ever put into human language. But things are what they are. And it ain't over til it's over. I keep getting it. You keep getting it. You never know when somebody else will blink, and that funny look will come over their face, and they'll start to come awake and alive to the message. That is as joyful as the other is sad.

We know that knowing is only the beginning. We know that we do not yet fully live as if we believe that He is risen. Sometimes the fear and loneliness start to reinvade us. But we are getting closer to it, closer all the time. When people get a little crazy and there is no pattern to it, I start to worry. But when people get crazy and you can see and feel the pattern and devotion, and you know they are seeing the Kingdom beyond this world, then you know that the Lord is near.

WE KNOW MORE THAN
WE THINK WE KNOW.
WE KNOW MORE THAN
WE CAN PUT INTO WORDS.
WE KNOW THAT KNOWING
IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

And I am very glad I get to know all these things with other crazy people like you. He is risen!

PRAYER

Great Lord, have you any notion how strange it feels to us that You should care so much? Have You any notion what gratitude and wonder we feel, when it all begins to break through to our consciousness? You gave us big hearts, but it is surprising they do not burst with such awareness. Thank You, Lord. Thank You for Easter. For the One you sent – One great enough to make it possible – and for Your own love, which designed it, framed it, supported it, fulfilled it.

O Lord our God, grant that we may not merely praise Easter, or salute Easter, or say nice words about Easter. Send the truth deep within us, to change and redeem us, until it comes out again in the very way we eat, and breathe, and work, and make love – in all things whatsoever that we may ever do. In the name of Jesus the Christ, who rose that we might also rise, joyfully we pray the gratitude of our hearts. Amen and Amen.



THE REAL THING

Though many of you rejoice and delight in the images usually associated with Easter, I have never been particularly interested in them. I do know that “Easter” is the Saxon goddess of the East (*Eostre* or *Ostara*), whose festival was held in the Spring, and that April was called *Ostermonath*, the month of the Ost-end wind, the wind from the East. Surely Spring is beautiful, the flowers are lovely, the birds sing wonderfully, and some of you get very turned on by it all. I have no desire to weaken your appreciation of Mother Nature, or to suggest that it is not connected with your awareness of and appreciation for the Creator. I simply confess that I don’t have much interest in the trappings of Easter. I prefer Autumn. Springtime and the flowers don’t talk to me like they do to most of you.

I am not, however, as narrow-minded as some of you suspect. I’m the one who encouraged us to have an Easter-egg hunt here at our church for the children each year, even though I know it’s an old Persian custom – a Zoroastrian practice to give a *Pasch egg* to each other as a symbol of creation, and as a reminder that Ormuzd (*Ahura Mazda*, The Wise Lord) and Ahriman (*Angra Mainyu*, The Spiritual Foe) are still fighting over the egg of creation, and that you’d better side with Ormuzd unless you want Ahriman to win and bring everything to the depths of darkness and evil.

But personally, I am not very interested in Easter eggs either, or in Easter bunnies, though I’m one of the few people who knows why they hide the eggs. On the other hand, I am endlessly interested, fascinated, and enthralled with the Resurrection of Jesus. It is increasingly difficult for me to understand how anyone can endure this life without knowing the Resurrection. It is hard for me to fathom how anyone goes to work in the morning, comes home at night, or pursues any interest or activity in any area of life ... without knowing the Resurrection. I cannot comprehend how anyone can *truly* love their children or their mate, cherish their friends, or team up with colleagues ... unless they know the Resurrection.

If I looked into the eyes of my son or daughter or wife, or any of you, and thought, “It is all soon over ...” – well, there are days when I might like to hang on to that thought for just a fleeting moment, but that’s only the inner imp, who sometimes likes to highlight the real truth when I start to forget. It reminds me of how silly all life would seem if this brief physical veneer was all there was. Seeing that we are in training for the long haul, I am even more grateful for the way you put up with me. And you: Do you think I would preach or teach the way I do – or put up with you the way I do – if I thought we were only here for a few more years and then poof? Even those of you who get furious with me: Would I care one way or the other, if I believed this church was only a meaningless little neighborhood social club and did not have a destiny beyond all that we see – and each of us a rendezvous with our Lord in a higher realm?

So my point is not new or brilliant, but it is important: If you want to talk about the bunnies and the flowers and the birds and the bees, that’s good, that’s nice, but that’s not the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. A lot of folk today get sidetracked by fluff and feathers and fur and petals, but the temporary delights of Spring are nowhere near the power of the Resurrection. We use the symbols of things we can touch and see to point toward higher things. That is, themes of freedom, release, and new birth connect in lovely ways with Spring itself, and break forth in our hearts like Spring itself. And that *is* lovely. But frequently I have had the experience of talking to somebody in June or October, when the fluff and feathers have blown away, and they need the Resurrection, only nobody ever told it straight enough for them to be able to claim it, or hang on to it. But as you all know by now, I will tell it as straight as I understand it. That doesn’t make me right, but I have always been as straight and honest with you about our faith as I know how to be. The Rites of Spring are lovely, but we still have reason to stay aware, and to not get so focused on the symbols that we forget what they point toward – and that they point *far beyond* themselves.

And so ... it’s Easter! And so, I will make a proclamation: I do proclaim to you, in the name of Jesus the Christ, that you are loved by the God Of All Creation. And that the Christ, who put His life on the line for you, has shown you how much and how deep that love is. Especially I proclaim to you, in the name of Jesus the Christ, that if you do not yet believe in Him, yet He believes in you. If you do not yet know God, yet God knows and loves you. If you come here with whatever level or dimension of doubt, still you are welcome here. And though you may not believe it yet, God wants you in eternal life, and it is the power and love of God that will keep offering it to you – no matter what you think, and no matter how much or how little you deserve it.

I know that you have and will run into many teachers and preachers who tell you differently, who put all kinds of threats and restrictions on this Gospel. And yes, they tell me that I’m going to Hell too, because they say I don’t believe it properly either. But that’s okay, I don’t believe them. I believe in Jesus, who came to those who did not believe it properly, and made a WAY for us too. So don’t trust anyone who tries to lock the message back up into their tiny frames of whom God loves, and on which conditions of behavior or belief. What we believe does free us to participate and cooperate more consciously. But what we believe does *not* change the heart of God. Jesus’ coming here – His teaching and healing and life here – proclaims God’s love for us. The Cross and the Resurrection are about *how much* God loves us. That does not go away because of anything we do or don’t do, or anything we believe or don’t believe.

So we try to trust God’s love. If we get confused or perplexed by the words or the systems, or even by the way

somebody uses the Bible, we keep remembering that Jesus came; how He died; that witnesses for two thousand years claim they know His living presence. If words get confusing, we watch the actions of God – especially with Jesus – and we include what we ourselves experience in our own lives.

The Cross, by the way – imperative and essential to our awakening, our repentance, our becoming aware of our true condition and peril – the Cross *by itself* cannot reconcile us to God. The Cross *by itself* would leave us broken, hopeless, despairing. It is the Cross *followed by the Resurrection* that lights our lives, transforms us, calls us onto the Path and WAY of our Lord. After the Cross and Resurrection, the old life – as we perceived it and tried to live it – is ludicrous, and meaningless. After the Cross and Resurrection, we feel an urgent desire to bring everybody we care about across the chasm from the old life into the New Life – the LIFE so full of promise and joy and challenge and hope.

And do I even need to mention it among you? I hope not, but I will anyway: Some people want to go straight to the Resurrection and skip the Cross. They go for the “good stuff” – never mind where it comes from or how you get there; never mind character, repentance, growth, genuine conversion; never mind what we are really like, or what we are called to become. Just skip straight to Heaven, and be the same old people there that we are here. But for those of you who have not come to Easter from Good Friday: you cannot get to the Resurrection except by way of the Cross. (Lots of New Age groups try to pretend you can, and certainly you are welcome to try them if you like. But so-called “New Age” religion is really a tired old gnosticism that went bankrupt in the second century A.D. and that people keep trying to bring back because the Way of the Cross is so hard. Well, at least we can all have sympathy for that ...)

But today, like every Sunday, we are here to celebrate the Resurrection. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the core truth of all hope and light and love in this life. And it also connects us to the hope and light and love of the LIFE to come. A second sidetrack from the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (far more serious than flowers and bunnies) comes from what seems at first to be a mere problem of semantics. There is no one alive on earth today who believes in the Resurrection of Jesus more than I do. But I am offended by the term “physical resurrection” because it doesn’t match the Scriptures, and it reduces the most dramatic event in the history of the world to something so small, and so locked-back in time, that people can believe it without letting it make any difference in their lives whatsoever. There are people across the land, thousands of them, who firmly believe that Jesus rose from the dead, yet they live with no theme of resurrection playing in their own lives. Their hope is in Heaven. Well, so is mine, but if we are as dead to the transforming power of Christ *after believing in the Resurrection* as we were before we believed it, *something* has to be missing. The Gospel of God’s love has somehow been changed over the years into the weakened message that “Jesus came to save us ... later.” Well, then, let’s gather together to become the

church later. And we can repent later, and give our lives to Christ later, and find the true joy of new relationships, redeemed labor, and Godly families LATER. Meanwhile, on with the same old life, in the same old way. And that is exactly what has happened to the Christian church far too much of the time, in far too many places. Only a handful of the church’s people are actually being redeemed by the Redeemer, because we won’t pay attention to what Jesus Christ is about *in the here and now*. We’re too busy with other important things *now*, because we think Jesus is about *later*.

Well, since I’m not in charge (thank God), I know that the Holy Spirit has sent some of you here today because you are finally and truly tired of the old life, and are eager for a new one. You will be able to track it with me if you try – track it through to the real thing. We are going on past the physical resurrection – the one so many people claim happened so long ago, the one that is always about *later* – on to the real power of the Resurrected One, the ONE who comes into this world to take us from here to eternity. First, let’s turn to the Scriptures, just so you know I’m not messing up or reducing or reinventing the message.

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual.... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brothers and sisters: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (I Corinthians 15:42-50)

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. (II Corinthians 5:6-8)

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by

the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Philippians 3:21)

I remind you that these Scripture passages were all written by Paul *at least twenty years before* any of the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection were written. “*What is raised is imperishable.*” “*Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.*” Does that sound like a physical resurrection to you? I know what a physical body is. I have one. It used to be a lot better than it is today. But regardless, if this is the kind of thing that Jesus came back in – end of story, not worth telling! The Gospel accounts also make this clear, by the way: Jesus appears and disappears at will; He walks through walls; He is unrecognizable to His closest friends until He allows them to recognize Him. Jesus does not come back from the dead in a “physical body,” not unless you change every definition we have ever known or used for the word “physical.”

I think the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus is overwhelming. Most of you tend to think so too, or you wouldn't be here. I think you cannot explain the history of our world with any fairness or honesty without conceding that Jesus appears to His disciples. Some of them see Him. Some of them touch Him. Some of them talk with Him, and eat with Him. Some of them know it is a vision, only more real than any reality they have ever experienced before. Others know it is real, only more like a vision than anything they have ever experienced before. *And they make no effort to distinguish between these two.* They tell their stories with awe and with conviction, and the common denominator is not how the appearance happens, but the effect it has on people. Again: The Bible attempts no distinction between inward and outward experiences of the Resurrection. *You* may want to draw that line, but you should remember that they couldn't, and didn't try. The Apostle Paul is witness of the Resurrection just as much as Mary Magdalene, or Peter. The Damascus Road qualifies as an appearance of the Risen Lord just as much as Thomas feeling His Master's wounds, or Mary discovering who the gardener really is. And if you *really* want to look at the results, the Damascus Road outranks them all.

Jesus “appeared” (whatever that means) to His disciples in a spiritual body (whatever that means). Are you uncomfortable with mystery? Me too. That's why I am religious. If I could explain everything, I wouldn't have to be religious. Then I could go for the Christian Fact, instead of the Christian Faith. I could be objective instead of subjective – an object instead of a living being. In any case, Jesus appears in a spiritual body, unlike any physical body we have ever known. We don't know how a spiritual body works – what it is capable of, what its limitations are, or even if there are any limitations. We have never had one – yet. We have no experience to draw on. And that leaves us with the mystery of dimensions beyond our understanding – the intersection of the Kingdom of Heaven with our own earthly domain. And especially with the realization that Jesus is alive: That death could not hold Him. That all He tried to teach us, and came to reveal to us, is true – especially the message of God's profound,

incredible love for us, and of the future that awaits us. Which instantly translates into a huge “OOPS” inside us. With that flash of awakening, like a lighting bolt that illuminates all the landscape we have ever known, most of the ways and reasons surrounding our lives are changed to dross, and are seen in an entirely different light: He was right ... His authority is real ... and He lives!

To be fair, those who emphasize the physical resurrection of Jesus don't mean to reduce it down to minuscule nonsense, like sometimes their words do. They mean to claim the parts about Jesus being Messiah and the Son of God, and that His Resurrection proves it – and along with that, proves the authenticity of the salvation He brings, and the everlasting LIFE He promises. So we have some common ground, but it's much too small – as in narrow, picayune, minuscule – because then the implication, often stated outright, is that this Resurrection event happened once, two thousand years ago, and that the whole world is supposed to believe it based on that one event: It is now over and past, and the rest of us are supposed to trust those who told of it because they were eyewitnesses. And nothing new or current can ever come of it, except that those who believe the ancient records are supposed to convince others to believe the ancient records.

No wonder it's so important for fundamentalists to insist that the Scriptures can contain no errors, despite all evidence to the contrary. Since their faith depends on the absolute accuracy of the record that tells about Jesus' appearances, any hint that the record might have flaws of any kind is terribly threatening. Easter is *because* the Bible says it is, *and the way* the Bible says it is. Therefore, fundamentalists try to make it sound like it has precision, that the technicalities are all in place, and that no “good” person can doubt that it happened just as it is portrayed. Except that Matthew is sure the disciples see the Risen Lord for the first time in Galilee, while Luke thinks it happens in Jerusalem. They can't even tell the difference between one end of the nation and the other, but I'm forbidden to wonder if they got all the other details right?

The difference between “a set of beliefs” and real faith is the awareness that comes from *our own* encounters with the Risen Lord. Nobody can live off of somebody else's faith. “Back then,” some people had experience with the Living Christ that convinced them that He was alive. But nobody – NOBODY – ever believed because SOMEBODY ELSE saw Him. Track it with me:

(1) Mary Magdalene is the first to see Jesus. She tells the disciples, but “*they would not believe it.*” (Mark 16:9-11)

(2) Two disciples encounter Jesus on a country road. They go back and tell the others, “*but again, no one believed them.*” (Mark 16:12-13)

(3) The women from Galilee return from the tomb and tell the eleven disciples, “*but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*” (Luke 24:1-12)

(4) The whole Gospel of John is about people not believing, including the story of Thomas, whom we have nicknamed “Doubting Thomas.” The other disciples tell

him, “*We have seen the Lord,*” but Thomas refuses to believe until he sees and touches for himself. (John 20:24-28)

It isn’t just Thomas, you see. They were all like that. They had walked and worked with Jesus, and Jesus had told them what to expect, told them that He would rise from the dead, told them to be ready for it. And still they would not believe each other when it happened. **NOBODY BELIEVED BECAUSE SOMEBODY ELSE SAW HIM.**

But *you* are supposed to believe because somebody else saw Him? His own disciples would not believe until they themselves saw Him – would not even believe each other – but you are supposed to believe because I or they or somebody else tells you? *That* is His plan? *That* is what Jesus was counting on? He would appear physically to a few folks for a few weeks, they would tell everybody else, and it would work? All over the world, all through the ages? Until now, when *your* faith is supposed to depend on somebody telling somebody down through the generations for two thousand years? You believe on the basis of an eyewitness two thousand years in the past?! No wonder we have a society in which thousands can believe in the Resurrection but it doesn’t make any difference in their lives. They are just as depressed, afraid, and self-centered as before. We can believe in the Resurrection but it doesn’t cut our greed or interfere with our adultery or idolatry? It doesn’t bring the joy that transforms, or put us into living churches that demonstrate the WAY of Life that knows Christ’s Kingdom is real?

Have you ever wondered why Jesus didn’t appear to Pilate? What about to the Chief Priest, or to the Sanhedrin? That would have been appropriate, don’t you think? “Hey, fellas, remember me?” (I would have liked that scene, which is just about my style, and is one of the big differences between me and Jesus.) What about Jesus appearing to Caesar? Why not settle it once and for all, if that really is the purpose – if we are going to do this Resurrection thing in some overt way that nobody can ever doubt, ever again? Why doesn’t Jesus just walk in on Caesar and make it *really* clear, to the whole world? “Hey bud, move over, I’m back.”

But that’s not like Jesus, is it? It’s not like our God to do it that way. That’s how we keep wanting them to be, how we keep wanting to make it sound, but that’s not how they operate. They offer ... make it possible ... invite ... encourage ... come to share and to influence – just as much as we are comfortable with, just as much as we will allow. But no shoving, no coercion, no breaking the Prime Directive (God’s decision to never do anything that would destroy our free will). A book with no errors would be like the Resurrected Jesus walking in on Caesar: it closes down the options, takes away the learning and growing on our part, turns from faith to fact – and in the process, cuts out love and life and meaning. That’s how to get automatons, not living, growing souls. Jesus comes to us, and for us, because each one of us matters – because the real issue is our awakening, our growth, our conversion; our coming alive in faithfulness and obedience; our participating in the LIFE He reveals and calls us into. These methods and techniques (including all the pathos of the Passion Story) *always* draw me back to the conclusion that Jesus is not

after puppets, He’s after real people; that Jesus doesn’t want little cookie-cutter Christians, He wants pilgrims, disciples, and apostles, alive and aflame with the love of the God He has revealed. He wants followers fearless to be and become their true selves in His presence – because He has freed us from sin and death and the devil, and all the fear and loneliness and false securities they represent. Why do we try so hard to make the Resurrection fact and certainty, when God and Jesus work so hard to keep it faith and prayer?

Easter is about a LIVING LORD! And you don’t have to be petrified for fear that some ancient record isn’t perfect, not if you believe in a *Living* Lord. If Luke got confused, so what? For all we know, he had never been to Israel, and didn’t know the difference between Galilee and Judah. Or perhaps Matthew failed to read Mark carefully. Do you think that actually matters, if our Risen Lord is really RISEN?! If Jesus is alive, the Bible is precious for whatever information we can get from it, but Easter doesn’t stand or fall because somebody saw Him two thousand years ago. The truth is, we believe just like they did. That is, we believe when we *encounter the Risen Christ ourselves. Just like them,* we do not believe it until WE encounter the Risen Christ. We may long to – we may be very eager as we hear the witnesses and feel the soul stirring within us. But it takes true encounter before we truly believe – the kind of belief that changes our lives, our values, our goals, how we try to reach those goals, why we are alive, what we live for, what we care about, where our hopes lie. We are talking about a Risen Christ who is really here with us – who is at work among us, and who keeps on coming to us, encountering us, changing us, sending us. The Resurrection is about *our* encountering Him too, and about our *living* LIFE with Him.

The Resurrection of Jesus “back then” started the awareness and expectation of the truth and the possibility, but it isn’t real to you until He appears to you also. Nobody believes because somebody else saw Him. From other people’s faith and experience, we get the message of the *possibility*: if they had this experience, if it happened to them, maybe something similar could happen to us ... maybe we should look into it ... maybe we should get more alert and aware, or even invite Jesus into our lives and find out what really happens.

And then it’s no longer just ancient history. Then it’s a whole new ball game: your life ... your identity ... your vocatio ... your reason for being here ... your gifts, influence, and resources enlisted and dedicated to His service ... your life empowered and given eternal meaning and significance by His presence, His partnership, His guidance, His comfort, and yes – YES – by His LOVE.

We cannot have the Resurrection without the Cross. And we cannot have Pentecost without the Resurrection. And if there is no Pentecost – Jesus appearing to you personally – then the Resurrection is only and ever some ancient story that somebody else tries to tell you is really important. Jesus has revealed your importance and preciousness in the eyes of the Omnipotent God, and He invites you to come *with Him* into adventure and purpose, through trials and struggles, to fulfill His promises and to

trust His light and life in this lifetime, and in all LIFE to come – and to do so in faith (uncertainty), making mistakes, getting forgiven, and feeling the mercy, grace, guidance, and presence of the Risen Christ yourself, in your own life. He is risen! (He is risen, indeed!) And He didn't go back up

to Heaven in some way that leaves us waiting for Him. He is risen *and here!* (He is risen, indeed!) And Easter IS the Second Coming! *So He is really risen!!!* (He is risen, indeed!) And we have LIFE with Him here, and now ... and forever.

PRAYER

Time speeds quickly on, O Lord our God, and that which was, ceases to be ... and that which was not, comes into being. Yet You are the center of all things: the truth we seek, the beauty we hunger for, the purpose we crave, the love that nourishes our souls into LIFE. We praise Your name, for You are holy. We offer You our lives, for apart from You they are nothing. We thank You for being known to us in the life and Spirit of Jesus Christ, wherein Your love is sure, and present with us, and stronger than sin or death. Heal us, we pray, of all malice. Heal us also of cowardice in the face of opposition. Heal us of tiny, petty concerns that hide the presence of Your Kingdom from us. Heal us also of visions so grand that they have no room for our own time and labor.

You who are the source of all LIFE, take from us all our living that does not flow toward You. In the name of the One who showed us that LIFE in You is unspeakably blessed, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Resurrected Lord, we pray. Amen.



ARE YOU PITIFUL?

*If only for this life we have hope in Christ,
we are to be pitied more than all men.*

I CORINTHIANS 15:19 NIV

*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,
we are of all people most to be pitied.*

I CORINTHIANS 15:19 NRSV

*If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope,
we of all people are most to be pitied.*

I CORINTHIANS 15:19 REB

Are you pitiful? I'm not talking to the tourists. If you are a guest or visitor, you are very welcome here, but you haven't necessarily bought it yet, have you? It isn't a commitment or anything. Some of you even like to prove, at least fifty weeks a year, that you can take it or leave it alone. That's fine. It's a free country. We have a deal: you won't make any promises, and I won't expect anything from you. So my question is not relevant to you, and no insult is intended toward you.

But those of you who are part of this place, who come here out of conviction and claim the Christian Life as your Path and WAY – for you this is a serious question. Are you pitiful? Do you believe in the Resurrection with all your heart and soul, or are you trying to limp along in the life of faith, and in the life of the church, by taking what you think is valuable from around the edges and fringes of Christianity, but leaving out its core and power?

This has been happening, especially in the so-called mainline churches. Oh, not with everybody by a very long shot. But some people think they are too intelligent now, or too well-educated or too realistic, to take the faith part of the Christian Faith. So they shield themselves from the gooey parts, or they doze off or ignore it when the Scriptures get onto any of the touchy subjects: Sin, Salvation, Satan, Miracles, Heaven, Hell, Conversion, Crucifixion, Resurrection. "Can't we focus on some other verses? Or maybe change the meanings around? The Resurrection is okay maybe symbolically – ancient Christianity's version of Positive Thinking, perhaps. But mostly we'll just duck until the big fanfare stuff goes by, and then get back to a more sane and realistic business: help the poor and love our neighbor." That's *really* pitiful. Oh, I don't mean you shouldn't help the poor or love your neighbor. But every religion in the world knows that – they always have, since long before Jesus.

If you really are intelligent, can you imagine yourself being part of anything Christian apart from the Resurrection? Without the Resurrection, the disciples would all have gone home and never left Galilee again. That is as close to fact as you will get with anything in the New Testament: no Resurrection, no Christendom.

Lots of church people are playing the reduction game in our time. Never mind the Good News, or prayer, or trying to figure out what a Living God may want from us or may

be trying to tell us; we can help the poor, save the whales, and make it a better world if we all just *try* hard enough. And since God isn't really real, or at least not personal, and since Jesus isn't really the Christ, and the Resurrection didn't really happen, and there is no actual spiritual power except for maybe developing a good attitude – well, we better focus on our own good deeds and concentrate on our programs (maybe use modern advertising techniques, and bring more rock music into the worship services), then we can still attract enough people so we can go on with our wonderful programs. That's *really* pitiful. It's also pathetic.

But maybe I'm being too general. What about you? What happens if your child dies, or if your business folds and you lose everything at age fifty-seven? What happens if your grandfather or father turns out to be a child-molester? Or the doctor calls and the tests have come back positive? Oh, I know the lilies are pretty, and we all look absolutely beautiful on this glorious Spring morning – as much as any group of humans ever could. I'm really glad to be here. I'm really glad that you are here also. But that doesn't repeal real life. Could we be *real* as well as pretty? If this is all a charade, if we don't really believe in the Resurrection, then all of this – the building, the church, our hymns and anthems, our being here – is really pitiful. All of it! Pitiful and pathetic.

Paul was dead-on, you know. If we are pretending about the Resurrection, the rest will all melt away on us. If we don't know that Jesus' Resurrection is promise and surety for our own resurrections, then it still all melts away from us. We are the Resurrection People. Every opinion we hold on any subject in life is affected by that belief. Every decision we ever make is influenced by that reality. Every person we ever care about is changed in our eyes because we know their life is neither defined nor limited to what happens here.

Let us be very clear: Easter is not unmixed good news. The Good News is not that we live forever; that might be the very worst news possible. The Good News is that God loves us – that's the Gospel. Thoughtless people like to pretend that humans have made up the notion of eternal life so they can console themselves with it in the face of death. Death has never been our problem; dying sometimes is, but not death. Eternal life is our problem. Eternal life has never been our idea – it is God who keeps insisting on bringing it to our attention. Humans who think about it for more than five minutes are not sure they like this truth at all. Have you never read Hamlet? What if you commit suicide and find out it still isn't over? "*Ay, there's the rub!*"

Humans much prefer to imagine that there will never be any true accounting. We are not troubled very much by the thought that we will die and that will be the end of it. This matches our assessment of our true worth anyway. Karl Marx had it wrong: Religion is not the opiate of the people; thinking there is no God is the opiate of the people. Thinking we can die and that will be the end of it – and we will never be troubled again by purpose or love or destiny,

or what we were supposed to be and become – that is our wishful thinking! We like to imagine that we live in an immoral, accidental universe because then we can do anything we damn well please and never be called to account for it. Look around. Do you really think the vast majority of people in the Los Angeles Basin live each day in conscious awareness that God cares what they do, and that they are shaping and forming the lives they will carry with them forever?

Humans did not invent eternal life. God keeps interrupting our senseless fairytales with the truth about eternal life: insisting that we matter, that we are his children, that we have to keep learning and growing and changing and working. And like all children, we get sick of it. We want to retire. We want to go play. We want to pretend that all those other children we've never liked will never bother us again. We'll never have to make amends, never need to repent, never have to heal all the broken relationships we've left in our wake. We want to pretend that we are independent – that we can live any way we decide to – and then it will all just end, be over and done with. That is our wishful thinking. And God keeps saying, "Guess again. Happy Easter."

Not very good news to be told that it doesn't just end. All those people we have not yet learned to love – well, they are not out of our lives; they are going to be around for the next several billion years. That's Easter too! And some of us have problems: we eat too much, or drink too much, or have temper tantrums, or don't control our passions as if other people were truly important. What do you think happens to all the stuff we don't figure out and take care of here? It just blows away? That's the fairytale part we like to add in. But sorry, you don't suddenly get perfect just because you die. Eternal life means it goes on. You pick up in the next realm where you leave off in this one. What do you think this life is for?! You think this is all by accident? You think there is no rhyme or reason to it? You think the lessons and issues and principles we keep running into every day of our lives here have no significance? Jesus, have mercy!

How would you like to be overweight for the next thirty thousand years? How would you like to come home drunk every night for the next millennium? How long do you plan to stay grouchy, or depressed, or greedy, or cynical? Do you know how long you can blame everybody else and everything else for your problems if you want to? Zillions of years. Eternal life means that if we don't like our lives, we better get busy, get to it. Death is not going to help. We cannot just wait it out. Happy Easter!

He is risen! He is risen indeed! And we rightly rejoice and sing praises to the God who is so much greater than we at first imagined – and to the Christ who keeps insisting and declaring that *we* are also much greater than we have ever imagined. But if we have ever contemplated the Easter Message for more than three mindless moments at one time, then we also tremble and are awestruck – both fascinated and frightened by the sheer magnitude of LIFE. And there is no waiting. That is the terrible aberration we have invented to get out from under the pressure. Jesus always spoke of NOW: The fulfillment is now.

The Kingdom is now. Eternal life is now. You are already living your eternal life. It is not the longevity that makes Easter worth celebrating – it is the quality of LIFE. When we walk with Jesus and begin believing Him, life changes. It is different to be alive in His presence. That's what makes Easter worth celebrating – not the length of life, but the new quality of LIFE in Christ Jesus: the new relationship, the LOVE, God with us. You think Christians have been laughing and singing all these years because we found out that the work and the challenge go on forever? Not likely. We laugh and sing because He is with us! That's what makes the difference.

So, did Jesus really rise from the dead? Yes, but there is a twin question that needs to go with that one: Is Jesus then alive and with us still today? Yes to that also, or the first yes doesn't count for very much. There is a common belief, however, that's killing Christendom: that Jesus rose from the dead and went off to Heaven somewhere, and we are waiting for Him to come back – that everything is on hold until He comes back. ("*Shane, come back!*") That's not Christianity. Christianity is God with us – New LIFE in Christ Jesus – not us sitting around waiting while life trickles through our fingers and souls. That's back to where we started – waiting for the Messiah to come.

Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Of course, but we are not the Christian Fact, we are the Christian Faith. If you want to reduce life down to facts, you can, but then be honest enough to admit that you do not wish to consider anything religious. Admit also that you do not want any meaning or love or loyalty or purpose in your life – and that's a fact, if you want to stick with the facts. But a billion facts never add up to a single truth. Everything that matters in life is a risk, a gamble, a leap of faith. The evidence mounts that she loves me, but if I wait for proof, I will wait forever. Just so with God.

Though the evidence is overwhelming, we can never prove the existence of God. If we ever could prove the existence of God, we would at the same time prove God to be a human contrivance and a fraud. You can never prove the greater by means of the lesser. When humans seek truth, they always end up in mystery that goes beyond the facts – not often counter to the facts, just beyond them. That's why we are the Christian Faith, not the Christian Fact.

We cannot prove the Resurrection of Jesus. And yet the evidence is overwhelming. No other belief has so startlingly changed so many lives, and the course of human history, and over and over again. The problem, for those who want proof, is that there are no objective observers. If you believe Jesus rose from the dead and is alive, then you are a believer. And if you are a believer, then all the skeptics cease to value your opinion. So, automatically all the non-believers assume they are the only ones seeing straight, and to any believer they seem unwilling and unable to see anything at all. That's not going to change, except that nonbelievers will continue to encounter the Risen Christ and turn into believers – and then their word won't count anymore except inside the fellowship. No surprises there; this has been going on for two thousand years also.

The empty tomb, by the way, is a symbol for those who already believe. It's shorthand, an image, sort of an insider's code. Nobody ever believed in the Resurrection *because* of the empty tomb. Mary didn't; for her, it was a gardener who turned out to be more than a gardener. Peter didn't believe Mary, and wasn't impressed by the empty tomb; it wasn't until Peter ran into Jesus on Easter evening that he became a believer. Thomas gets the title "Doubting Thomas" because he was exactly like all the rest of them; he wouldn't believe until he encountered Jesus for himself. And neither did any of the others. Nobody in the New Testament is a secondhand believer. Paul encountered Jesus some time later. So have a lot of other people ever since. Nobody in all church history is a secondhand believer. If you are a secondhand believer, you are pitiful. Yes, we have nominal Christians – people who claim it but don't really mean it; people who say the words but it's only pretense, or tradition, or custom. That will never fly. The church cannot survive for long on such weak broth. It's pitiful!

People believe that Jesus is risen – that He is alive today – because *they* encounter Him. When that happens,

they usually realize that it has been going on for quite some time but they have been refusing to acknowledge it, to add it up. They say strange things, in total seriousness, like, "At first I didn't believe it, but now I realize He's been after me, trying to help me, for a long time."

Easter is incredible and beyond full comprehension, but we need to stop making it all so complicated. Jesus is risen – He is alive here and now! And almost every one of you here has felt His presence, and you know He has been after you for nearly as far back as you can remember. But a lot of us don't want Him interfering with our lives and our choices very much yet ... not quite yet. That's why we have all the hoopla every year about "Is it really believable?" And "What do the scholars say?" And "Is it just wishful thinking?" And "I don't know, it's so confusing." And all the rest. For many of us, it's a smoke screen. We know very well that He is risen, and that He has been trying to guide, help, change, and direct us for years. But we know that if we ever admit it out in the open, there go all our excuses. "Ah, well, yes then, hello Lord ... is that You again?"

PRAYER

In the stillness, and in the noise ...

In the anger, and in the love ...

When all seems to be going well, and when there is mayhem within and without ...

We remember You, O Lord:

That You created us, and all things ...

That You have provided all that we have known ...

That You have searched for us, tracked us, found us, and taught us;

We remember that You sent the Incarnate One:

To live among us, healing and teaching ...

To die among us – for us – and forgiving us.

And now, as if all of that were not enough ...

As if all of that would not bind us to You in love and devotion forever ...

Now we remember and celebrate:

The Return ...

The Resurrection ...

The coming of the Holy Spirit.



DO WE LOVE GOD?

After Easter, what is our response? Do we love God?

I suspect that a whole lot of people love God a whole lot more than we realize or remember. But it is never provable. And it is always harder to show it in this world than we think it should be. Each generation that comes here is pitted against darkness, meaninglessness, coldness, inertia, and death in a thousand forms. This whole world would fold up and go out of business in a heartbeat if there wasn't a whole lot more love and worship going on than we sometimes realize. And, rightly, we keep thinking about the errors and omissions, and the ways we are still far from God and the LIFE God sets before us and calls us into. But not only is it true that God loves us far more than we have yet believed, it is also true that we love God far more than even those closest to us realize. And that gives us very little desire to rest on any laurels.

Often, we think about the lag time between three o'clock on Good Friday afternoon and the dawn of Easter Sunday morning. What must it have been like for those who loved Jesus and believed Him to be the Messiah? What must it have been like during those thirty-eight (or so) hours, knowing He was gone ... knowing it shouldn't have turned out that way ... knowing they had cared far more than they had shown? You know how we turn things over in our minds after anything important happens, especially if something has gone wrong – especially if someone we love has been hurt. We replay things the way they might have been, and the things we might have done differently.

For those closest to Jesus, many unseen things died when He died: hope, faith, meaning, purpose, confidence, truth, future. If we take time to imagine ourselves in their places, we can perhaps find some of the words, but they knew the *reality*. How do you pick up and start over, in an emptiness like that – in the utter abandonment – from such a frightful death and the perceived absence of God, as they must have felt it on that dark Sabbath so long ago? Do we assume we cannot imagine it? How we *wish* we could not imagine it.

From my perspective, there is another lag time in the great story. In many ways it is a similar lag time, but I rarely hear it mentioned. It is the lag time between Easter and Pentecost – the lag time between the Resurrection and our *hearing* about the Resurrection. Or, far more to the point, the lag time between the Resurrection and our *believing* the Resurrection.

The Resurrection itself – the release from death, the power of God to overcome what we had done – there are no witnesses to this. The witnesses see Him afterwards. The witnesses are witnesses of His appearing after He is resurrected. Jesus is alive, and the critical lag time is between when this happens and when we believe it. In the weird, strange way God has designed life for us, things are not true for us until we believe them. It is the most incredible honoring of free will imaginable. In it, there is so much respect for us: so much regard for our right to

grow and learn and choose for ourselves; so much hope and eagerness for us to be authentic, and to be capable of love or evil or whatever we choose; so much respect for our identity and destiny that some people take it as evidence that there is no God. Surely if there is a God, he would interfere more directly – make us believe, control our behavior, stop all the mayhem. Why doesn't God do something about terrorism? Why doesn't God do something about the chaos in the Middle East? Why doesn't God do something about the lesser-known chaos and misery that never hits the newspapers but that we know about personally? But fervently though we wish it, and even pray for it, such a solution would throw away everything that matters about life – and everything that matters about us.

The fear and pain grow so great that we often wish God would change his mind and come down, take charge directly, and *make* us all be good. As a matter of fact, that is exactly the role we designed for – and expected of – the Messiah. That is the way “The Great Day of the Lord” was described in the age of the famous prophets of Israel. That was precisely the hope of the Apocalyptic Age, and what apocalyptic writings describe and proclaim. That was the dream of the Qumran community, and the Essene movement. That was what John the Baptist expected and lived for, and what he thought he was announcing. For centuries, we hoped and dreamed that finally God would take pity on our rebelliousness and evil and confusion and send a Messiah who would come and make us all be good. The Messianic Age would dawn – “The Great Day of the Lord” would come – and all things would be set right in Heaven and on earth. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Wouldn't that be great? We all can hardly wait ... well, except for me. I thank God every day that there is no justice.

In any case, instead of the Messiah we wanted and expected, we got this anemic, soft-hearted, do-nothing, accomplish-nothing Messiah named Jesus. He couldn't seem to get anything right: Instead of taking charge, putting things right, and getting things in order, He told stories, worked a few miracles, talked about forgiveness, and seemed to care mostly about some inward change of heart. And He left the old world just as bad as when He found it – maybe even a little worse. He bungled things so badly that instead of straightening out all the rest of us, He got Himself killed. No wonder most Jews could not imagine that this was the Messiah. He didn't stop any evil; in fact, He revealed it to be even worse than we thought. He didn't bring any peace on earth; in fact, He brought more division and controversy than we had before He came. And certainly there has been no increase in prosperity, justice, or love on the earth since He came. At least not on the outside. And this is what we waited for? This is what we were hoping for? Praying for? This inept, inadequate, failure kind of Messiah? The wonder is *not* that

there were many Jews who refused to believe in Him – the wonder is that *anybody* ever did.

The truth is, only those who “beheld” Him – who encountered the Risen One – believed. They came, through no fault of their own, to a whole new concept of what the Messiah was about, and what He had come to accomplish. And clearly we see them “converting” to a very different layer of hope and expectation, different from what anybody had ever hoped for or expected before. And they went back to life and back to work in this world with a very different light in their eyes – different methods and goals and purposes, and very different expectations. What discouraged most people did not discourage them. What pleased or frightened most people did not please or frighten them. But you know all about that ...

Meanwhile, most of the world went back to the same old ways – with some of us, like naughty children, acting worse and worse, as if we wanted to force some “Daddy” to finally step in and make us behave. And, very sadly (at least from my perspective), a large segment of the Christian church itself has turned away from faith in the Risen Lord and gone back to waiting for the old style of Messiah to “come again” and do it like we always thought He should have done it in the first place: take away free choice, set things right, and *make* everybody behave. It often seems to me that the church is trying to reverse the Pinocchio story. That is, we start out as real children, but the purpose of life is to turn us into puppets: make us believe, make us behave, make us be good ... and then there will be peace on earth. “I love you, but don’t take it personally; I really can’t help it.” Everybody does the right thing, but it doesn’t mean anything; we are robots, and that’s the programming. How often we talk as if that’s what we really want. But God will have none of it. The only alternative is free will (“The Fall,” as it is called) – choice, pilgrimage, and always growing toward what we really want and care about most. That is why idolatry is so devastating. False gods squander time and life, increase the pain and mayhem, and delay or even destroy our chances to be who we really are, or live for what we truly care about.

So the lag time that matters most is the interim period between the Resurrection of Jesus and our coming to believe that He has risen – or, put another way, the lag time between Jesus’ rising from the dead, and our encountering the Risen Lord in a way clear enough and real enough that we believe it enough to let it change our lives. That is essentially what’s going on between what we call Easter and Pentecost. People individually, and sometimes in small groups, are getting encounter experiences. Pentecost confirms for some, and initiates for others, a group experience large enough to move the Easter reality from a private affair to a communal reality. We call it the birthday of the church. It was no longer enough just to cheer the Resurrection. From then on, believers realized that together – that is, in support of each other – they were to pick up the mission of their Messiah and proclaim this New WAY to the ends of the earth (“evangelism” simply means “bringing good news”), to everyone who wanted it: Jew, Greek, outcast, poor, rich, male, female, slave, ruler.

The false boundaries and borders of the old ways no longer mattered. And yet, they were not “inclusive” in the way most people speak of it today. What do you do if you know the Lord has risen? You get baptized – die to your old identity and your former ways – and come out of the water with a new identity, a new purpose, new methods and objectives ... and especially with a new allegiance and devotion to a different King. Everyone IS welcome – *everyone who wants to pay the price*. Today we keep trying to leave off the end of that sentence. Everyone is welcome – *everyone who wants to pay the price*. And what is the price, the price of the great pearl? Everything ... everything you have ... everything you are.

I have seen signs in churches from one end of the country to the other that say, “All are welcome.” And indeed, in Christ’s church, all *are* welcome. But nobody has a right to offer this New LIFE on their own terms. The truth is, this New LIFE is not open to anybody who doesn’t want it enough to turn in the old life for the new. Even then, many people start out thinking that it’s about a behavior change. But behavior is always a by-product of the heart, as Jesus keeps trying to tell us. The real change is in what, and whom, we TRUST. Encounter with the Risen Christ allows us – invites us – to put our TRUST in Him: in His love, His presence, His guidance, His truth, His future. All life is shaped by what we truly trust. That is why it’s called the Christian Faith. The old word for “trust” was “faith”: what you base and bet your life on. And the Christian FAITH means that our TRUST is in Jesus.

I know you get weary of my trying to explain such things. But the reason this church keeps getting more alive and exciting all the time is because more and more of you understand and respond to our faith (trust in Jesus) on genuine levels. And I keep explaining it because I keep running into people who seem vague or confused about it all. There is much in Christianity that goes beyond all our explanations, and even beyond all comprehension, but that is hardly an excuse for us to shut off our brains and coast on mindless hope or superstition. As my father used to say, “If you’re coasting, you know you’re going downhill.” But I digress ...

The interim between Easter and Pentecost is a time when more and more people are getting invited back into a story they thought was over. “*Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast – unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time [Pentecost], most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James [the brother?], then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*” (I Corinthians 15:1-8)

This is the first and earliest real record of the Resurrection in the New Testament. Assumed or alluded to in Paul's earlier letters, here he lines it out. What is the clear or ranking difference between Peter on Easter morning, Pentecost fifty days later, and Paul on the Damascus Road a year or two after that? (Or any of the encounters in between?) There isn't any difference! "*He appeared.*" That is what matters.

* * *

I cannot keep from a side comment. Have you been rejoicing this past week? Do you take post-Resurrection history as much to heart as you take Lent and Holy Week? And do you notice how playful Jesus is in many of the appearance stories? After a period of terrible stress and danger, how do we usually feel when it's over and everything has turned out fine? Elated, relieved, freed – yes? Jesus is in a new "body," one unlike anything we have ever known. He is playful, teasing, having a grand time appearing to His friends. Perhaps He is also cushioning the shock, and of course there is point and purpose behind it. With playfulness, there always is. Nevertheless, Jesus is having a wonderful time. Mary Magdalene thinks He's the gardener, and He strings her along for a while. Two disciples are on the Emmaus Road, so sad they can hardly endure it, and a stranger joins them, acting dumb. He makes them catch Him up on the news, as if He has no idea what has happened. Then He calls them dullards, and starts explaining things they couldn't figure out. All of this before He lets them know who He is. You don't think He's having fun? He is milking it, teasing them shamelessly.

Thomas has sworn he will never believe. He won't be gullible like his friends. Why does the Risen Lord, who can appear and disappear at will, leave him in this state of lonely despair for a whole week, while all his friends are rejoicing around him? (The story of Thomas is a great one to ponder whenever we think the Lord is slow getting back to us.) Suddenly Jesus appears right in front of him. Of course, this is a serious moment; whatever you do, don't smile ... as Thomas tries to recuperate from the greatest shock of his life. And just because Thomas loves being so incredibly wrong – the more so because he had every earthly reason for being so sure he was right – don't let that allow you to enjoy the encounter. Nearly always when I've heard this passage read, Thomas' line is read in funereal tones: "*My Lord and my God?*" Do you think Thomas would be making a somber, formal speech at such a moment? Or would he be crying and laughing with joy and rejoicing? Is Jesus scolding him for not believing sooner? I can't imagine it. Jesus is carrying a truth and a power no one ever carried before, and I think He is enjoying it immensely.

My favorite scene is the Last Breakfast (John 21), with the disciples back up in Galilee, having returned to their old trade – fishing. They know Jesus is alive, but they still think they blew it so badly that they are out of the story. So they have gone back to work. Then they see this guy cooking some fish on the shore. And there follows the most delightful and humorous scene in the whole New Testament. There's no time to really get into it, but do you

not burst out laughing to watch Peter? When he finally realizes that it's Jesus on the shore, he's very embarrassed to be caught back at his old task (like maybe some of us should be, if we have been called to something different). Peter is stripped to the waist for work, so he quickly grabs his tunic and puts it on – as if he can pretend he wasn't working. Realizing this is futile, Peter jumps overboard, now so eager to see Jesus that he cannot wait for the boat to reach land. Maybe he was hoping for a second chance to walk on water? Anyway, Peter is so nervous it's almost painful – until Jesus settles him down, decommissions him ... and changes his life forever. *Of course* we do not want to miss the magnitude of the moment. But have we not learned to laugh and cry at the same time?

* * *

After Easter, what is our response? Are we still waiting for the encounter so we too can believe? The story cannot continue – at least not for us – until we, too, believe.

As we all do from time to time, I was thinking of the first and greatest commandment: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and with all of your strength – and him only shall you serve.*" (Mark 12:29-30) How different it sounds in the light of the Resurrection.

It was clear before Jesus came that this was the key – the thing we needed, and the thing we lacked. If the whole world would love God with this undiluted, excuseless devotion, there would be real hope for us. And even if the world never caught on, those who moved toward the reality of this love for God – individually or in groups – would indeed find a better and more meaningful life than most of the world would ever know.

But how different it looks after the Resurrection. It is no longer a commandment – no longer about "ought" or "should." It is no longer a theoretical axiom we can muse about or write pretty speeches about. That is what Jesus does to all truth, to all the precepts of religion, to all the good theories and the commandments. He makes it personal, dreadfully and wonderfully personal.

Presuming we have in some way lived through and participated in the drama of His Coming – the events from Palm Sunday to Pentecost – is there any possible way for us to refrain from loving God? Is there *any* way to convince us that we really "ought" to respond to something that has already completely overwhelmed us – that has already become the deepest truth, and the greatest reality, of our lives?

There is a story in Genesis about Adam and Eve, and how they disobeyed God and fell from the grace of the Garden of Eden. In shorthand, it is called "The Fall," or sometimes "The Fall of Man" (Mankind). And the result of The Fall is the great alienation of all things on this planet, called "the curses." Alienation is the opposite of love. After The Fall, humans are alienated from God – and in that state of sin and separation, humans are also alienated from nature; men are alienated from women; brother goes against brother; there is meaningless work and pain in childbirth. In short, nothing in this world is

untouched by the curses. If you doubt it, watch the news or read the newspaper.

Jesus came to reverse the curses – to heal the separation, to reconcile us to God. His is also a story about The Fall. But it is not about commandments, superhuman efforts, pulling one’s self up by the bootstraps, earning God’s favor, or deserving life or success or eternal life. It is about

what happened to Jesus, what that revealed to us about God, and what that *did* to us. This is about a different kind of “fall” – falling in love with God. If we eat from the Tree of the Resurrection – the Tree of the Knowledge of Love and Mercy – we cannot help it. We fall in love with God.

PRAYER

Thank You, Lord, for sending Jesus Christ to free us from bondage ... to confirm the truth that the longings of our souls have always sensed and known ... to show us the unimaginable depths of Your love for us. Thank You for taking such dramatic and costly action to let us know that the distance between us is not Your will or Your desire. We can still hardly believe it. But help us to believe it more every day, until all the separation is ended and we have true and total peace with YOU, and with each other, at last. These things we do pray for, and hope for, and work for, and live for, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.



