

Easter Vigil/Sunday

March 27, 2016

Isaiah 65:17-25; 1 Cor: 15:19-26; John 20:1-18

The various approaches and attitudes towards Easter fall across a spectrum. It ranges from chocolate bunnies on the one end to the kind of resurrected life we are challenged to live on the other. I'd like to use our sermon time to look at the various stops on the spectrum. Moving, I suppose we could say from the mundane to the sublime. Chocolate may be the starting point, but along the way, there's spring and the new life it brings, and comfort, and then hope, then getting beyond fear, then the Resurrection of Christ and, finally, our lives in light of that Resurrection.

Chocolate isn't a bad place to start. Have you ever seen the poster that says that beer is a sign that God loves us and wants us to be happy? Well, I think you can say the same thing about chocolate. It's a good and innocent pleasure – not sure how it got mixed up with Easter, though.

Then there are the ubiquitous bunnies – again, I'm not sure how they ended up in Easter, except as signs of fertility. There's an awful pun here: what do you call an anaesthetized rabbit? An "ether" bunny. Sorry about that!

And then there's all the stuff about new life – and Easter and spring mostly go together (not necessarily in the northern climates, however!) And the new life of spring really is a symbol of hope and recurring life. They sort of "bump in to" the resurrection narrative. Along the same line, I was recently in Wausau where they still have one of those wonderful independent bookstores. While I was browsing, I was talking with the owner who wanted to know why I was visiting Wausau, etc., and when she asked me what I did and I told her, she recommended a book that she said was sort of about the resurrection, but designed for everyone, no matter what their belief. So, of course, I bought it. An interesting book – sweet, comforting, all about how peaceful and happy I'll be in *The Next Place*, but pallid and saccharine when held up against the real Easter message. Like, it'll be peaceful and my spirit will glow and the light will shine forever... Reminded me a bit of my 6-yr old self who imagined that heaven would be about angels, harps and endless hot fudge sundaes (we somehow got back to chocolate!)

But the next step, though, is to a much more profound level. It's the level of hope. Hope, not as some kind of blind optimism but as confidence and assurance in God's promises. We hear those promises in the readings about God's rescue of the Israelites from Egypt and about God breathing new life into the dead bones of the people, filling them with new life. In the Easter morning reading from Isaiah, we hear those promises again: I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. Isaiah sets out the vision of the new, redeemed creation, the creation finally made the way God always intended it. Jerusalem will be a joy, its people a delight, there will be no weeping or cries of distress, no life that is cut short before its time. It will be marked by stability and tranquility – the houses that are built will be lived in; the vineyards that are planted will be harvested by those who planted them. Those who call upon the Lord will be heard. All nature will be reconciled in that wonderful picture of peace in which the wolf and lamb lie down together. It will be a world without hurt or destruction. Powerful words of hope. Frederick

Buechner says this about those words: “Anxiety and fear are what we know best in this fantastic century of ours. Wars and rumors of wars. From civilization itself to what seemed the most unalterable values of the past, everything is threatened or already in ruins. We have heard so much tragic news that when the news is good, we cannot hear it. But the proclamation of Easter is that all is well. And, as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well, but as one who has faced the cross, who has known one way or another what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him, in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream.” So, yes, words of hope- hope anchored in the character of God. God is the one who makes and fulfills covenant promises; God is the one who can be trusted; God is the one who, in creating us, promises to love and never abandon us.

And perhaps the next step is freedom, primarily, I think, freedom from fear. When I was in Dallas, I had a colleague and friend who taught at a highly respected prep school. I knew her and trusted her, so when we had a conversation in which she told me that she had had a near death experience I listened. She had technically “died” during a surgery and related the story that we often hear with these experiences – that she was above the operating room, watching and hearing everything, and that she then began a journey down a tunnel into incredible light. She said at that point, she was “told” that her work on earth wasn’t finished and that she would have to return. She did so with reluctance. The end result, though, which she carried with her into that subsequent life was, she said, that she was never afraid of dying again. Easter is sometimes called the “feast of freedom” because it’s meant to do just what it did for her: to give us that eternal perspective, that confidence in God’s future and in God, that means we can lay down all those burdens of need and fear that keep us enslaved. The Resurrection perspective helps us discern what really matters, what life is ultimately all about and who God is – always the creator God, always making things new, always loving us into more life.

And then, on my spectrum, comes the knowledge of the Resurrection itself. Theologians speak of Easter as the beginning of the new creation, when every force that opposes God’s good will is being conquered. Paul exults when he says, O death, where is your sting? O, grave, where is your victory? Death and the grave have already been defeated and what God has accomplished in Jesus, he will accomplish in us. When I was preparing this sermon, I read an article about a website called SMITH on which people are invited to write a 6-word memoir – to write what’s most important to them, or most distinguished or interesting about them – the only trick is that you have to do it in 6 words. As you might imagine, some of them made you want to talk to the writer. For instance, one said “Autopsy revealed toxic amount of self-satisfaction.” Another, more relevant to our topic, was “It all changed in an instant.” The article suggested that, for all the words we use about Easter and about faith, we could distill it all to 6 words: Christ is Risen from the Dead. Without those words, we have nothing to say to a broken, suffering world. But because we CAN say them, we can offer comfort, hope and joy. We can speak those words that bring new and unending life. **Christ is Risen from the Dead.** There’s a story that, when the Russian Revolution was new, one of the spokesmen for the Communists gave a long and carefully prepared lecture in which he was satisfied that he had demolished the nonsense of religion as well as the need for it. When he was finished, he asked if there was any

response from the audience. One man rose and went up on the stage. Once there, he threw open his arms and said, ALLELUIA, THE LORD IS RISEN and the entire audience rose and responded, THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED, ALLELUIA.

But there's one more stop on the spectrum and that's the question of OUR lives, of how we're going to live once we have this Resurrection faith. We are meant to be redeemed people, with new understanding and without fear, living in new ways, as agents of God's love in the world. The question, in light of the resurrection, is not simply "what will happen to me when I die?" It's certainly that question, but that one rests within one that's much broader: WHAT IS GOD'S PURPOSE IN THIS RECREATION OF THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE – AND WHAT IS MY ROLE IN THAT RECREATION? HOW CAN I LIVE NOW IN LIGHT OF THE FACT THAT DEATH IS CONQUERED? We have a choice. We can worship the creator God and in so doing move into the full and glorious humanity intended for us, reflecting God's powerful, healing and transforming life in the world, OR we can worship the world as it is, gaining power and pleasure by contributing to our own dehumanization and the further corruption of the world itself.

We're here because we've seen that resurrection hope and light and, therefore, perhaps our choice has already been made. Let me close with some words from Phillips Brooks:

"The great Easter truth is not that we are to live newly after death – that is not the great thing – but that we are to be here and now by the power of the resurrection; not so much that we are to live forever as that we are to, and may, live nobly now because we are to live forever."

Alleluia, Christ is risen!