

Colossians 3: 1-4, 12-17
Matthew 28: 1-10
April 20, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday

Two weeks ago we heard the story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. We heard Jesus, deeply moved by his friend's death, call to him from the mouth of the tomb, "Lazarus, Come out!" And then we heard the shuffling from inside the tomb as a man wrapped in burial cloths stumbled out into the light. We heard Jesus tell those who were nearby to free Lazarus from these death garments and let him go.

The next day I received a reflection from a friend by a seminary professor advising us that the story of Lazarus is not the same as the story we celebrate today. Lazarus, she rightly observes is returning to *this* life. He is still mortal. He will die again. She quotes a poet who imagines Lazarus reacting to his return to life with frustration and disappointment, "O drat, this part again!"

I begin this way because the reflection makes an important point. This life is not all there is. There is a life that sings above and beyond and through this life which is uncorrupted and incorruptible. It is in the words of Peter in his first letter, "imperishable, undefiled and unfading." In the words of Paul, this dimension of life is not to be compared with the life of suffering and struggle which we experience in this life. Indeed, Paul says, we limit our hope only to this life we are of all people most to be pitied.

If all Lazarus receives is the right to return to a life of suffering then, it can be argued, Jesus has done him no favors.

Yet, while I am grateful for the provocative thought proposed by the professor, it doesn't work for me. And here's the reason:

In Jesus' teaching heaven and earth are not two places separated by death. There is not this mortal life on one side and the heavenly life on the other. We are not condemned to live lives of meaningless suffering or numbing ordinary existence in *this* life and ecstatic liberated life when we die. This kind of thinking leads to all kinds of distortions and, frankly, oppressive and life killing messages.

It has led to the idea that the poor and the oppressed should just put up with their brutal and anguished lives for they will be rewarded in heaven. It has led people to put up with empty jobs and empty relationships because they believe they deserve or cannot hope to attain anything better in this world. It leads to a resignation to the power of outside circumstances to control our lives; or, it leads to a futile attempt to control our lives and the lives of others. It has led people to hide behind rigid doctrines and morality as a replacement for authentic living. These are just a few of the consequences of believing that life in heaven and on earth are two different realities which have nothing to do with one another. In the words of Henry David Thoreau, it leads to a life of quiet (or in some case not so quiet) desperation.

But Jesus teaches over and over again that heaven is alive on earth and in daily human life. He teaches that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us and in our midst. He teaches to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven.*" In every word and every act Jesus points to the transforming power of the unseen reality of God's kingdom which we receive *by faith*. Faith is the trust that the kingdom of heaven is real. Indeed it is *more* real than the so-called real world of the senses and pure logic. Faith is both the source and outcome of

our decision to live in the unseen world of the kingdom of heaven and to let go of all the stress and fear that comes from living as if this world is all there is. The result of this life of faith is that we receive not the peace of worldly security but *Jesus' peace*, a peace the world cannot give.

Jesus did more than speak about and live the life of faith while he walked the earth. Jesus allowed himself to be killed by the religious and political powers. By this he shows that there are very real risks and consequences for living God's life on earth. And he really did suffer. He suffered physically; but perhaps more than the anguish of torture and humiliation, was the betrayal and abandonment by his closest friends.

And we dare not forget the suffering of his friends: of Judas who was so filled with guilt and remorse that he ended his life; of Peter, who denied Jesus three times and heard the cock crow, felt the disappointed eyes of Jesus upon him and wept; of the rest of the disciples who were so devastated that they could not believe the good news that Jesus was alive when the women disciples carried the message.

And yet Jesus was not a martyr. As the author of the book of Hebrews puts it, Jesus understood himself to be the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith." "For *the joy* that was before him" Jesus endured the cross. What is this joy if not the possibility of every human being to experience the freedom of heaven right here on earth?

To trust that Jesus is raised from the dead is more than some belief that we hope will be our passport to a better life in the great by and by. It is the opening of a door right here right now to the realization that the very things that restrain us in fear, like Lazarus' burial cloths, have no power. Indeed the very things we rely on to protect us are the things that bind us to the life which will perish.

It takes faith to believe that death has been overcome. Faith gives us the willingness to let go of the things that we rely on to provide meaning and security in this world. It takes faith that in a way that we cannot explain or prove, *Jesus really did rise from the dead*. It takes faith to recognize that from the heavenly realm Jesus reaches out a hand to you and me to connect us with his resurrection life. It is this gift of faith in what we cannot see, touch or taste or even logically prove that leads us to lead a life which, as Paul writes to the Colossians which seeks “the things above where Christ is.”

Let me conclude with one more observation. I have been preaching Easter sermons for over 30 years and only this year did I recognize an interesting statement in Matthew’s account. On their way from the tomb Jesus appears to the women disciples and tells them to tell the men disciples to go to Galilee, “where they will see me.” The disciples are in Jerusalem. Galilee is a good two days’ journey north. Why this added journey?

Galilee is home. It is where it all began. It is where the disciples live. It is where they first met Jesus and began to follow him. They must go home to meet him. They must go home, the setting of their ordinary everyday lives to find him. It is at home that the living Christ will be found and it is at home in the familiar setting of ordinary life that the life of heaven will become real on earth.

Friends, do not leave Jesus here in this space. He has gone before you to your homes; to your ordinary everyday lives. You will find him there! Amen.