



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - April 12, 2009 !!

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Isaiah 65:17-25

The Glorious New Creation

- ¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
- ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
- ¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.
- ²⁰No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered
accursed.
- ²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
- ²²They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
- ²³They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;^e
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—
and their descendants as well.
- ²⁴Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
- ²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD.

John 20:1-18

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Matthew 28.1—10; Mark 16.1—8; Luke 24.1—12)

²⁰Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^a into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^b "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸Mary Magdalene

e Or sudden terror

a Gk lacks to look

b That is, Aramai

went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

A mother took her young son to the beach where they came upon the remains of a seagull. "What happened to the bird?" the little boy asked. "He died and went to heaven," Mom replied. As they walked on, the young boy kept thinking about the seagull and his mom's answer, until finally he asked, "Does God like birds?" Mom said, "God loves birds." "And this bird went to heaven?" Mom replied, "That's right." "Then why did God throw it back down?"

The mystery of living, dying and living again drives us quite beyond the reach of human words and comprehension. And yet this mystery is at the center of hearts and minds all around the globe this morning. As the darkness retreated before the dawning sun, over 2.3 billion Christians gathered in over three million churches to raise new exclamations of the ancient cry: Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Living, dying, living again.

And if Christians are gathering in over three million churches, then that must mean that there have been three million preachers laboring away in our studies, climbing into our Easter Pulpits, brandishing our meager metaphors and illustrations in what T.S. Eliot called our "raids on the inarticulate."¹ And for all our labored rhetoric, theologian Karl Barth once wrote that the only thing Christians really want to know on Easter morning is: is it true?² Did God raise Christ from the dead? Did Christ conquer death? Does Christ live?

That is what we're thinking about this morning, isn't it? I mean when we're not thinking about the grand music, or the beautiful flowers, or whether Tiger will mount a comeback at the Masters today. This business of living. Dying. Living again. Is it true?

And just because we ask the question that way, and just because we have these good, modern, western-educated minds, we tend to make two mistakes when we think about the resurrection. First, we think the resurrection is mostly about death, or mostly about what happens after death, and so we presume we may safely put the question off until we approach our end. Second, we think it's principally an intellectual decision about facts and proof, and since the facts are so elusive and the proof is so uncertain, we put the

question off until we get a better handle on the one or the other.

Folks, let me tell you why I think both these responses are mistakes. Here is an executive summary of this morning's sermon. First, the resurrection is about life. It's about the gift of flourishing life right now. It's about standing tall in the bright light of God's eternal love now, instead of hunkering down in the shadow of death. Second, accepting this gift, embracing this gift, making this gift a part of your life right now turns not on facts you gather nor on how you analyze them but rather on what you experience. Not on what you think with your mind but on what you feel, taste, hear and see with your senses and with your heart.

Let's begin with the first proposition. The resurrection is about life. It's about flourishing life now. We all know that the shadow of death will fall across our last breath, but, when we reflect upon it, we also realize that how we understand the prospect of our death in the future has an enormous impact on how we experience our life now. How we understand our ultimate destination affects every second of our journey until we get there.

The young school teacher had taken a job in a major city hospital helping young patients keep up with their school work. One day a call came in asking her to help a little boy with his homework. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in our class this week," his regular teacher explained, "I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The hospital teacher dutifully noted the boy's name and room number, and gathered up her books. It wasn't until she got to the assigned floor that she realized the room was in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain.

There didn't seem much point in barging into the room, but then the teacher didn't feel she could just turn around and walk away either. And so she stammered awkwardly, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your school teacher asked me to help you with nouns and adverbs." The boy was in so much pain that he barely responded. The young teacher stumbled through the English lesson, ashamed at putting the boy through such a senseless exercise.

The next morning the burn unit nurse asked her, "What in the world did you do to that boy?" Before the

teacher could blurt out her apologies, the nurse interrupted her: “No, you don’t understand. We’ve been so worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He’s fighting back; he’s responding to treatment. It’s as if he has decided to live.”

As the boy later reported, he had completely given up hope until he saw the teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With joyful tears, the boy explained: “They wouldn’t send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a boy who was dying, would they?”³

We all know the dynamic. Facing the shadow of death, the little boy had despaired. As he despaired, his life began to leak away until renewed hope restored his will to live.

You and I are all better off this morning than that boy in a burn ward, but none of us is sheltered from the shadow of death, either. Somehow, we’ve been put together so that the prospect of death throws its shadow back over the entirety of our lives, however subconsciously. Somehow, our anxiety that death will erase the significance, the meaning, the validation of our lives propels endeavors to shore up our lives with bulkheads against extinction. The energy we might have put into relationships, love, family and community - the gifts life offers us freely and abundantly - gets diverted into a competitive scramble for acquisition, accomplishment and attention - the transient baubles life doles out sparingly.

Fear of death became inevitable the moment human consciousness first flickered on and we became the only creature that could foresee our own deaths. And it remained inevitable for all the generations that rose up and passed away until . . . until Jesus called out, “Mary!” and Mary Magdalene called back, “Rabbouni!” And ever since that first Easter morning when God raised Christ from the dead, the shadow of death has become an unnecessary, an optional, an elective encumbrance on human flourish.

That’s my first proposition this morning. The resurrection is about life. It’s about flourishing life now. As Phillips Brooks wrote, “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 new 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.”

This first proposition – this offer of flourishing, eternal life now – drives us right into the arms of my second proposition. For if the shadow of death has become an optional encumbrance on human flourish, who among us would not opt out? Who among us wouldn’t choose the new life, the new hope and the new victory offered by Christ’s resurrection?

But it’s not that easy, is it? For the offer comes with a catch. We can’t accept this gift, unless and until we can truly accept, embrace and make Christ’s resurrection a part of our life, and that’s not so easy for modern minds.

We’ve all been raised to be rationalists, to test propositions on the basis of historical facts, scientific principles and logic. But the resurrection is beyond the reach of history, shrouded from the view of scientific instruments, too grand for mere logic. And so my second proposition this morning is that embracing this gift as part of your life turns not on facts you gather, nor on how you analyze them, but rather on what you experience. Not on what you think with your minds but on what you feel, taste, hear and see with your senses and with your heart.

Look: I spent an entire law career chasing down facts and testing proofs. So when I went off to seminary, I naturally went off to chase down the facts of the resurrection and see whether the proofs could withstand unsparing intellectual scrutiny. Let me summarize what I learned in two sentences. The intellect can erect obstacles to faith, and the intellect can clear obstacles to faith, but the intellect can never establish or defeat faith on its own. Ultimately, all faith gets resolved in the heart, not in the head.

Let me give you a quick example of how our intellect can erect an obstacle to faith. Perhaps you’ve heard someone say, or perhaps you’ve thought to yourself, “I do believe in a God or at least a higher power. But I’m more spiritual than religious. I’m just not sure I can believe that God could raise a dead man to eternal life. I’ve never seen a dead man raised to life, and I just can’t get my mind around how that would work scientifically.”

Now let me give you a quick example of how our intellect can clear an obstacle to faith. I mean, if we believe at all in God or a higher power or a spiritual

dimension of existence, don't we grant at the very minimum that God is the reason there is something instead of nothing? If we have even the tiniest mustard seed of faith, don't we look out the window and say, "yes, I guess God caused that to come into existence."

But if we do grant only this, if we do grant only that God created a hundred thousand million galaxies each containing a hundred thousand million stars, dark matter, black holes, not to mention the infinite diversity and elegance of life on earth, wouldn't raising one human being back to spiritual existence be little more than a parlor trick?

Do we believe God could create the Crab nebulae? Sure. Hummingbird wings? Sure. Space time continuum? Sure. Mother's love? Sure. Raising one spiritual life out of one death? Wow, now that's a stumper. And if God has so designed creation that God could raise Christ, wouldn't that mean God could do the same for you, and for me, and for all whom we love?

The intellect can erect obstacles to faith, and the intellect can clear obstacles to faith. But the intellect can never establish or defeat faith on its own. Ultimately, all faith gets resolved in the heart, not in the head.

Doesn't that explain the curious, flat realism with which John's Gospel tells the Easter story? John just doesn't seem too impressed with all the breathless running back and forth. The tip off is in the punctuation. Open your pew Bibles to John chapter 20, verses 1-18 at page 114. Scan the punctuation looking for exclamation points. Do you see where they are? Do you see where they aren't?

Body removed from the tomb? Sure. Let's put a period there. Empty shroud? Sure. Period. Rolled up head cloth? Period. Let's just go home. Two angels sitting and chatting. Whatever. Period. Mysterious gardener. Period.

John's jaw doesn't drop; John's eyes don't widen; John's life doesn't change until Jesus calls Mary by name, "Mary!" Exclamation point! Until Mary recognizes the risen Lord, "Rabbouni!" Exclamation point!⁴

What is John telling us with those exclamation points? John is telling us the exclamation points of eternal life don't come until there is knowing and being known, until there is love, until there is relationship. John is telling us to lift our modern, rationalist eyes up off the microscope, away from the CSI evidence, out of the dry abstractions of creeds, dogmas and doctrines. John is telling us Jesus isn't looking for detectives, He's looking for brothers and sisters. John is telling us to keep our eyes peeled for the Jesus on the loose in creation just waiting to speak into our hearts when we need Him most.

Not a single figure in the Bible came to faith in the resurrection by logic; every single one came to faith by an experience. Every single one learned that grace is not an object to be known, but a gift to be received.

Look for Him when, like Mary, you are bereft. Look for Him when you feel the life leaking out of you. Listen for Him calling your name. See if you don't recognize Him as your heart warms within you.

Certainly, that was the way it was for Mary. Certainly, that was the way it was for me. Just at the moment I needed Him the most, I heard the risen Christ say to me, "Skip, do not be anxious, I will take care of everything."

So look for Him where you need Him most. Look for Him at Hoyt's when your heart is breaking for a loved one who has died. Look for Him at the kitchen table as you fight back tears because your accounts are tapped out. Look for Him in the doctor's office, when the doctor returns with a test result biting his lip and averting his eyes.

Look for Him, listen for Him, for He promises He will come, calling not the names of the apostles, calling not the names of saints, but calling your name. And when you hear your name you'll recognize Jesus, not just as a wise teacher, not just as the Son of God, not even as the man raised 2000 years ago. You'll recognize Him as your Rabbouni, as your Lord, as your Savior, as the one who conquered death for you. All because the ancient exclamation is true. Alleluia, Alleluia. Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! **Amen.**

¹ Eliot, "Ease Coker," *The Four Quartets*, 1943, New York.

² Barth, "Jesus is Victor," *A Chorus of Witnesses*, ed. Thomas G. Long, Cornelius Plantinga, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994.

³ Story from Joyce Hollyday, "Wayfare," *Sojourners* 15, no.3 (1986): 19.

⁴ The New Testament was originally written in Greek. Greek is a declined language in which word endings (called suffixes) communicate the tone of a sentence instead of punctuation. In Latin, for instance, a "ne" ending on a particular word in a sentence is used in lieu of a question mark to indicate that a question is being asked. Certain endings in both Greek and Latin communicate the sort of excitability and emotion we convey in English with the exclamation point.

When rendering the New Testament into a non-declined language such as English, translators routinely have to make decisions about what punctuation to use in order to convey the tone of the original text. Over the centuries, consensus has developed among translators over what punctuation to use in which passage. It is telling that modern translations typically include exclamation points after "Mary!" and "Rabbouni!" in today's Gospel passage. What is more, these are the only exclamation points that translators use in the entire resurrection account. This indicates that, in the estimation of the translators, the author of John regarded this as a crucial moment in the text—a moment that deserved special attention. Why do these two particular words warrant these exclamation points, whereas no other moment in the resurrection narrative does?

The most obvious answer is that the author of John chose to render these terms in Aramaic (a language closely related to Hebrew) in a text otherwise written in Greek. This change of language indicates the author's intention to set these terms apart in a way that signals to the reader that these terms mark a pivotal point in the narrative. Translators have decided that the exclamation point comes closest to replicating for a modern, English-speaking audience the effect that the change to Aramaic would have had on the book of John's original audience.

Additionally, this is a moment of direct and intimate address. That Mary recognizes Jesus instantly suggests that there must have been something distinctive about the way that He said her name—an inflection, a tone, an underlying sense of warmth and intimacy—that distinguished the way that Jesus said it from the way that anybody else would say it. The exclamation points highlight both the unique and intimate manner of Jesus' address and Mary's immediate, exuberant recognition of Jesus. They also point to this moment as a model of the intimate, familiar, joyful interaction that all of us are capable of having with the Resurrected Christ who knows us each by name.

Finally, this marks a pivotal point in the narrative structure of the book of John. The book of John devotes far more of his narrative to depicting the intimate, personal, relational dimensions of Jesus's ministry than any other of the Gospels. See, for instance, Jesus' extended conversation with Nicodemus (3:1-20), or the High Priestly Prayer (17:1-26). In

particular, John gives special attention to Jesus' relationships with women (Jesus' mother convincing Him to change the water into wine (2:1-11), Jesus' convention-defying conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (4:1-26), comforting Lazarus' sisters (11:17-37), Mary Magdalene anointing of Jesus' feet (12:1-10). By setting apart this moment of personal recognition, John underscores the thematic importance of these previous relational moments. In John's narrative the significance of Jesus' miracles pale in comparison with the significance of his profound interest in entering into direct and intimate relationship with others. As utterly astounding as the event of the resurrection itself must have been, the full power of the resurrection is not unleashed until we hear Jesus call us by name and we respond in exuberant recognition.