



Sermon of April 11, 1999



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"WHAT'S THE USE?"

I Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

We get a lot of visitors Sunday morning, especially on Easter Sunday, and they are always welcome. Most of them, however, don't make their presence known to us. Which I understand and sympathize with. When I visit another church I try to stay invisible, too. Which works, until we are asked to stand for the first hymn.

In some churches they make the visitors stand and introduce themselves. Which I believe must have been a practice started in Puritan New England as an act of public humiliation. So I refuse to participate in that ritual. I believe if a church wants to make visitors feel welcome, hospitality and good manners dictate that the members stand up and introduce themselves to the visitors.

All of this is to say that one Easter, some years ago, we had a visitor here who filled out an "I

am Here" card, and wrote a note on it. He wrote that he was a member of the United Humanist-Atheist Church in Newton, Massachusetts. His message to me was that the worship of this church was "repulsive." Then he added a Karl Marx criticism that "religion is the opiate of the people" can be seen in this church.

He obviously had difficulty with religious faith, and the Resurrection, since he was here on Easter Sunday. But he's not the only one. You don't have to be a member of the United Humanist-Atheist Church in Newton, Massachusetts, to raise questions about the Resurrection.

Thoughtful Christians have raised questions about the Resurrection from the very beginning. You can see that in the lesson that was read to us this morning from the Gospel of John. It is the famous scene of Thomas, who was called "Thomas the Doubter," seeing with his own eyes the evidence of Jesus' Resurrection.

Thomas was not present the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room. And because he hadn't been there, when they told him about it, he doubted it. He said, "I won't believe until I can see the print of the nails in his hands, and put my hand on them."

In our lesson for this morning, that happens. Jesus appears a second time to the disciples. Thomas is there this time. Jesus singles out Thomas, says, "Put your fingers here. See for yourself. Don't be faithless, but be believing." Thomas replied, "My Lord and my God!"

Then comes the punch line. Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." That is addressed to you and me. For we will not see the bodily presence of Jesus. But Jesus says, there is a special blessing for those who do not see, and yet believe.

According to the other gospels the doubting was not limited to Thomas. It was a problem right from the beginning. Matthew says that when Mary Magdalene tells the disciples, "He is risen," Matthew says, "some doubted." And Luke, when Jesus appeared to the disciples, said, some "disbelieved for joy," whatever that means. I think it means, they said it is too good to be true.

Because if Jesus is resurrected, then love is stronger than hate. If Jesus is resurrected, good is stronger than evil. If Jesus is resurrected, life is much greater than we had ever imagined. If Jesus is resurrected, then God is really in charge after all. That is what the disciples had trouble believing.

We have trouble believing it, too. Especially if we are called upon to live our lives based on that faith. They had just seen the most precious, the most wonderful thing this world has ever known, crucified, eliminated, as a nuisance. They believed that he was the one who was going to redeem the world. They believed that he was the Messiah. That is what "Messiah" means, that he's the one who is going to restore the world to the way God intended it to be. He talked about a world of love, a world of peace and justice.

I don't care who you are. I don't care if you are a Methodist, or Baptist, or Hindu, or Muslim, or Jew, or Humanist-Atheist, we all share a common humanity. And all of us who share this common humanity, have the same dream, the dream of a world where things come out right,

where everyone gets what they deserve, and the innocent no longer have to bear the consequences of somebody else's sin, and where good people don't have to suffer.

We dream also of a world of equality, where everyone is treated as a child of God with dignity and respect. We dream of that. All of us do. All humanity does. We long for a world where love rules the relationships between people, where there will be forgiveness and reconciliation and peace, and no more war, and no more violence. That is what we dream of.

That is what Jesus taught, what he embodied in his own life. When he was here the world was different. When he was here the Kingdom of God was here. When he was here the dreams and visions of a new world became believable.

In fact, the disciples saw it. They saw the Kingdom manifested where Jesus was. They saw Jesus bring justice into the world. He made things come out right. He healed the sick. He raised people from the dead. With Jesus there were happy endings. Tragedy was eliminated. They witnessed him treat everybody as important. No matter who they were, Jesus treated them as if they were the most important person in the world.

And he forgave people. He forgave everybody, and thus freed everybody. Freed them from the oppression of guilt, from the condemnation that other people had placed upon them. And he empowered them. That is what grace does. Grace empowers you to become the person you are supposed to be, the person God created you to be. Through the grace of forgiveness we can get rid of the past, and move out into the future that is waiting for us. We are free when we are forgiven. He forgave everybody. He gave everybody a whole new start in this world.

And most important and amazing of all, he said, this is what God is about. God is about freeing. God is about redeeming, recreating the world. God is like Jesus. That is what they believed. Jesus himself said in the Gospel of John, "If you have seen me, then you have seen the Father." Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians, said, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." And that, especially, is what made it so hard. They believed all that. They believed that the Kingdom had finally come, and God was finally with us, and the world at last was redeemed.

And then it happened. The powers of this world were challenged and threatened by his preaching, because his preaching meant that they had to change. And if we are going to live according to his preaching, then the world is going to have to change, it is going to have to change drastically if the Kingdom is here. So they arrested him, humiliated him, and crucified him, and he died. And that was the end of it. So the disciples, despondent, in despair, as only those who have hoped for so much can be in despair.

Madeleine L'Engel captured something of that when she wrote about what happened to her one summer. She and her husband live in New York City, in Manhattan, where violence is a part of everyday life, and where one must live defensively. They have a retreat in upstate New York, in the Catskills. They go up there on the weekends, and spend time there in the summer.

They call it Crosswicks. When they retreat to Crosswicks, she wrote, they enter into a different kind of world. It is a world of peace, a world of safety, away from the violence of this world. It

is a world of natural beauty, serenity, and peace, away from all of the ugliness and dissonance of this world.

Their daughter had given them an icon for Christmas. The icon was a picture of Mary and the baby Jesus. L'Engel loved it. She said that it was perfect for Crosswicks. She took it to Crosswicks, nailed it to a tree by the stream, where she would sit and meditate and pray.

The summer ended. They closed up the cabin and returned to the city. The next spring they opened up the cabin. As soon as possible Madeleine L'Engel went down to that special sanctuary by the stream. As she approached it, she saw this terrible sight. Someone, at close range, had shot that icon. It was shattered into pieces, the pieces lying on the ground. She picked up one of the pieces, it had the face of the baby Jesus on it. The bullet went right into the head of the baby Jesus. Whoever did this, aimed the gun at Jesus.

There are greater crimes than acts of vandalism. But, she wrote, for her it was the very embodiment of what evil does. It invades our lives. It destroys that which is precious to us. And it is anonymous, silent, and invisible. It just strikes out, and makes us all feel hopeless and helpless, like there is nothing we can do to protect ourselves, and especially nothing we can do to protect those who are precious to us.

The crucifixion of our Lord was such a moment for the disciples. It affected them the same way that the violence to this sacred place affected Madeleine L'Engel. It meant to them now there was no escape, no area, no place in this world unaffected by evil. Evil had appeared to be victorious, omnipotent. Any effort against it will be futile. In the end it is going to win.

So what's the use? What's the use of hoping? What's the use of trying? What's the use of working so hard for things that matter, for peace and justice and righteousness, and the things that make life human and worthwhile, things that are so fragile, so vulnerable, that they can just be eliminated?

Then came the Resurrection. And Thomas doubted, because he hadn't seen. Matthew says, "some doubted." Luke says some saw, "and they disbelieved for joy," because it was too good to be true. The Resurrection meant, evil is not in control of this life, God is in control of this life. The Resurrection meant that good will eventually triumph in this world. It meant that love was more powerful than hate. It meant that God's purpose to redeem the creation, including all of us, is going to happen. Not even death can stop God's will for us now.

That is what the belief in the Resurrection really meant. It was not just an open tomb. The Resurrection was the recreation of the world. It was possible now to hope, and to dream, and to work for good in this world, for equality and for peace. It meant those things that Jesus is about are the things that God is about. So the things that Jesus stood for are the things that are going to win in this world. That is what you are asked to believe when you believe in the Resurrection of our Lord.

Madeleine L'Engel describes it again. She said that it was a while before she could return to that quiet spot where the icon was destroyed. But when she did, she discovered something quite wonderful. The tree that held the icon had absorbed the wound, and it continued to grow. You

could hardly see now where that gunshot had gone. She wrote this.

I now affirm my faith in the promise of the Resurrection. Not only of Jesus Christ, but of all of us. Not as a panacea or placebo, but as the reality that lights the day. I believe that God...will not create creatures able to ask questions only to be snuffed out before they can answer them. The joyful God of love, who shouted the galaxies into existence, is not going to abandon one iota of His creation.

So the icon tree for me is a symbol of God's concern forever, and always, unto ages of ages, for all of us, every single one of us, no matter what we think or believe or deny.

That is what we are called to believe when we believe in the Resurrection of our Lord. That there isn't anything that can defeat God's purpose for us now, not even death. We are called to believe that the stage on which the drama of our life is played is much grander than we ever imagined. Actually, I don't think that takes very much faith. Who would ever imagine the life we are living now, would be like this? And if it is like this, if there is life now, why not again? Or do you really believe that all there is, is only what you can see? Or even more ludicrous, do you believe that only what you can grasp and understand with your brain, is what is real?

I have always found it curious that some who have trouble believing in life after death, have no trouble believing in life on other planets. As if one required a great leap of faith, and the other does not. It seems to me that if they would spend equal time investigating the scriptures as they do to listening for some beep from outer space, that they would come to the same conclusion that the New Testament writers do, who said, we believe that when this life is over there is another life waiting for us. The God who created life in the first place can create it again.

The New Testament offers some wonderful analogies about what that life is like. Our epistle lesson for this morning, from

I Peter, gave us one. Did you catch it? Listen to it again.

By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...[Then here it comes]...to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

I like that, "an inheritance" waiting for you. I also like Jesus' analogy in the Gospel of John. He says, "In my Father's house there are many rooms." I prefer the King James translation of that passage, which says, "In my Father's house there are many mansions," because I have never lived in one, and I would like to do that someday. So imagine this, when you get up there, there is going to be a mansion. You'll walk inside, and there is an inheritance waiting for you.

The analogies are wonderful. They differ in the New Testament, but they all agree that God cares for each individual. God intends that each individual will know the fullness of life. If there is some reason why that has not been possible in this life, either because of our own doing, or because of circumstances that prevent us from the fullness of life, then we will have a chance in another life. There is an inheritance waiting for you.

Those who leave us inheritances do that because they care for us, they love us. So you have an inheritance "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" waiting for you. Which is not unlike what L'Engel said, that "God is not going to abandon one iota of His creation."

The Resurrection means that God is concerned for us "forever and always, unto ages and ages, for all of us, every single one of us, no matter what we think or believe or deny."

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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