

I Am the Resurrection and the Life

John 11:17-27, 38-44

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

Easter, April 4, 2010

Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, et in unum Dominum, Jesum Christum, crucifixus pro nobis, passus et sepultus est et resurrexit tertia die.

That was Latin. For centuries, when people came to worship that was what they heard. There was a time, of course, when people spoke Latin so they understood what was being said. However, as the gospel was taken around the world to lands and peoples where other languages were spoken, many of the worshippers understood about as much of what was being said as we just did—which is to say not very much. Yet still they came. The priest stood with his back to the people addressing his words to God, speaking a language that the people did not understand. For many people, it was all an incomprehensible mystery. But still they came. So why did they keep coming? They came because they believed that what they were hearing was the truth. Even though they didn't understand the words or comprehend the mystery, still they believed that the truth was being spoken.

We have come here today to celebrate something that is true: God's power and victory. If we are honest about it, there are things about it that we do not understand. But even though we do not fully understand the greatness of God's power or God's unlimited love, it is still true. The truth of Easter is not dependent upon our understanding it. It's true whether we understand it or not, whether we believe it or not.

The Latin words I spoke mean this: "I believe in one God, the Father almighty, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, who was crucified for us; he suffered and was buried and on the third day he was raised." On the third day he was raised. That is the truth that brings us here today. It is the message of Easter—that Jesus who died has been raised to life.

That is true even if Mary and Peter and John had never gone to the grave and seen the stone rolled away and looked into the empty tomb. It's true even if Jesus had never appeared to the disciples in the upper room and showed them the wounds in his hands and feet. It's true even if Jesus had never joined up with those two travelers as they walked along the road to Emmaus. Even if no one had ever experienced the risen Christ, and the disciples had gone back to fishing and the church had never been started and we were not here—even if none of that had ever happened, it would still be true. The truth and the meaning of Easter are in no way dependent upon us; it is God's doing, an affirmation of God's miraculous, saving, redemptive power.

In the scripture that we read, we heard Jesus say, "I am the resurrection and the life." When Jesus spoke those words, there were many who did not understand what he was meaning. Jesus had gone to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany. Their brother Lazarus had died, and they had wanted Jesus to come sooner because they hoped that Jesus could have made their brother well. But Jesus had not come, and Lazarus had died. When Jesus finally did get there, Martha said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said, "I know that he will rise again in resurrection on the last day." Martha was saying that she

believed that there would come a day—sometime in the distant future—that all who had died would be raised. She believed that, but frankly, that doctrine didn't hold much comfort for her in her time of grief. Her words to Jesus said, in effect, "I know he's going to be raised some day, but what I want is life now, not some day." Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus was not talking about life some day; he was talking about life now.

There were those who thought that when Jesus used the word "life", he was talking about this kind of life as we know it—when you're heart's beating and your brain's working and you are inhaling and exhaling. But Jesus was talking a totally different kind of life, the kind of life that is real on both sides of the grave. For Jesus life had nothing to do with breathing and hearts beating; it is a whole new quality. And he said as much: "I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me will live even though they die,"—that is, you can be physically dead and still experience the kind of life that Jesus is talking about—"and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Even though we physically die, we may experience the life that Jesus gives.

Actually, it works both ways. You can also be physically alive, but still be dead. And to demonstrate that, Jesus goes to the tomb where Lazarus had been buried and calls Lazarus to come out. And the Bible says, "The dead man came out." Lazarus walked out of the tomb, but he was still dead; he was still bound by the grave clothes that are signs of death, not life. Just because someone is walking around doesn't mean he or she is alive—at least not in the sense that Jesus is using that word. Life—the kind of life Jesus is describing here—is bigger than that. So Jesus says to the people, "Unbind him and set him free." That's the kind of life that Jesus is talking about: where we are unbound, set free from the bonds that limit our ability to live life fully.

I began this sermon saying that the message of Easter is true even if we never understand it. I believe that, but I also believe that as we begin to understand bits and pieces of this Easter message, it starts to shape the way we live even now. A long time ago, I clipped a little piece out of the society section of the newspaper. It was from a column by the socialite and gossip, Suzy Knickerbocker. She was telling about an Easter party that she attended, and she described her hostess, Paige Rense, like this: "Paige looked very Easter in an outfit from Geoffrey Beane." For I don't know how many years, I've been holding on to that clipping and wondering what it means. What does it mean to "look very Easter"? How do you look "Easter"? In this story of the raising of Lazarus, I now know what it means, and I can assure you it has nothing to do with an outfit from Geoffrey Beane. "To look Easter" is to be unbound, set free, to be fully alive.

As we go through our lives, we carry around with us so many burdens that weigh us down, that bind us up, that keep us from being fully alive. One of those burdens that many of us carry is the fear of death. For so many of us, that ominous specter on the horizon stops us from living life to the fullest. But Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and Jesus has been raised, so we no longer need to fear death.

I once read about the filming of the movie "Quo Vadis?", starring Deborah Kerr and Robert Taylor. At one point in the movie, there was a scene in which Deborah Kerr is tied to a stake in the Roman Coliseum; angry lions are released and rush at her. A reporter asked her about filming that scene, "Weren't you afraid when those lions were loosed and came plunging at you?" She replied, "No, I am one of those actresses who reads all the script. I had read to the end, and I knew that I would be saved." (This story is

told by Maxie Dunham in his book, *Jesus' Claims—Our Promises*, p. 93.) Now if we can lift that to an infinitely higher level, we can begin to understand the message of Easter and can begin to experience the kind of life Jesus brings—that our lives are lived under the grace and power of God, and nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God. We can live life fully and with freedom because we know how this story is going to end. Jesus has come to save us. So we are no longer bound by the life-choking fear of death, but have been set free to celebrate God's miraculous, life-giving power.

Huber Matos was a teacher and journalist who was imprisoned by Castro in 1959 when Castro sought to drive the church out of Cuba. Many Christian leaders and those who courageously stood for freedom were imprisoned. In a letter smuggled out of a Havana prison, a letter to his wife and children, Matos said, "I know that I will die in prison. I am sad not to see you again, but I am at peace. They have swords, but we have songs" (*Dunham*, p. 97). Huber Matos had heard the message of Easter and knew that—in life and in death—he was in God's hands. So he could sing.

The songs of Easter proclaim an eternal, timeless truth; they sing of God's miraculous life-giving power; they declare God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ. They sing, "Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigns, and he shall reign forever and ever." Thanks be to God. †