

ASTONISHING HOPE

**An Easter Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
April 8, 2007**

Happy Easter to each and every one of you! This is the greatest day in the Christian year. The greatest day by far. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is absolutely central to Christian faith. And I don't mean the resuscitation of a dead body. I mean the overwhelmingly powerful, mind-boggling, take-your-breath away, life-changing experience of the risen, living Christ -- for Mary Magdalene and the other Mary,ⁱ for his male disciples,ⁱⁱ for the more than 500 women and men he appeared to according to the apostle Paul,ⁱⁱⁱ for Paul himself as he was knocked to the ground by a blinding flash of light and then heard Jesus' voice on the road to Damascus,^{iv} and for millions and millions of people right up to this present hour -- who can attest to the powerful role of the risen Christ in their lives. In the Bible, individuals experience the post-Easter Jesus as appearing and vanishing at will.^v He can be heard to speak to one person when others hear nothing at the same place and time.^{vi} Some of his appearances are described as occurring in a "vision,"^{vii} or in a "trance."^{viii}

Author Annie Dillard has written: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash

us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”^{ix}

How we have domesticated Easter! How many sermons have I heard, and preached, concentrating on springtime themes of it feeling good for the earth to come alive again all across America and the rest of the northern hemisphere? How many times have I heard gentle stories about this season of fertility – of Easter eggs and Easter bunnies, of chicks and ducklings and lambs? But today’s gospel reading^x shouts at us with phrases like “terrified,” “bowed their faces to the ground” and “amazed by what had happened.” For these followers of Jesus had just gone through an unimaginably traumatic experience. Their beloved leader, who had been called the Messiah of Israel^{xi} and the King of the Jews^{xii}, had been horribly tortured by Roman soldiers in Jerusalem only three days earlier and then publicly executed by the cruel, gruesome act of nailing him to a cross. These were very demoralized people. They scattered and tried to not to be associated with Jesus at the end. They were nowhere to be found – leaving only a few loyal women like Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross.^{xiii}

Imagine how utterly astonished they must have been by the news of the empty tomb brought by Mary and the other women. Astonished, yes, and hopeful, for the women had been told: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”^{xiv} Could it be true? Was there some hope after all? So although these words seemed only an idle tale to the male disciples, and they didn’t believe the women, Peter’s astonishing hope got the best of him. He jumped up and ran back to the tomb himself, finding the stone rolled away and only the linen cloths in which Jesus’ body had been wrapped. At that point, his astonishing hope must have been

overwhelming. Talk about needing a crash helmet, life preserver and signal flares. He'd joined the women in needing to be lashed to a pew at that point. Little did he know that the waking god would soon draw him out to where he could never return. For Peter had once called Jesus the Son of the living God and the Messiah. Jesus had responded: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."^{xv} Now this might be for real. And it wouldn't be smooth sailing ahead for the man who had denied knowing Jesus three times before the cock crowed on the day of his crucifixion.^{xvi} Ultimately, the church builder ends up being crucified himself in Rome during the emperor Nero's persecution of Christians more than thirty years after Jesus' death.^{xvii}

Luke's gospel then explains how that astonishing hope is rewarded as Jesus appears to two followers in Emmaus, about seven miles outside Jerusalem.^{xviii} Next he appears to all eleven of the disciples back in Jerusalem. As the biblical text explains, "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost."^{xix} Crash helmet needed again. Call it earth-shattering mystical experience, if you will. Call it trance or vision or apparition or revelation or ecstasy. But it utterly transformed this group of people and launched the Christian Church for the next two thousand years. This wasn't a matter of springtime flowers coming up again in Jerusalem or the birth of lambs or chicks. "Jesus Christ is risen today. Alleluia!" Just as we sang in the first hymn. Jesus Christ was real again to his disciples and followers, and they felt called and commanded to spread his message to the world. The last sentence of Luke describes their "great joy...They were continually in the temple blessing God."^{xx} As we sung, "Soar we now where Christ has led...Living out the words he said...Made like him, like him we rise...Ours the cross, the grave, the skies."^{xxi}

So, how joyful do we feel today? Are we lashed to the pews? Where are our life preservers and signal flares, especially on Easter when we really need them? The astonishing

hope of Easter for us is that resurrection and transformation are real...have always been real...are real right now. We can triumph over disillusionment and despair, we can win the battle against alcohol or other drugs,^{xxii} we can succeed magnificently in a course we thought we were failing, we can change jobs and flourish again, we can be reconciled to those with whom we felt forever alienated, we can defend unpopular causes and even die with courage, we can live fully day by day in the face of imminent death from illness.^{xxiii}

It's very much a matter of how we look at things. Annie Dillard tells the story of a girl cured of blindness. As the doctor took off the bandages and led her into a garden, the girl exclaimed that she saw trees with lights in them. Dillard herself then looked for trees with lights – “through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years.” Then, suddenly, without thinking, one day she suddenly saw “the backyard cedar, where the mourning doves roost, charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame...It was less like seeing, than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance.” It was like being one's whole life a bell, and never knowing it until a particular moment when you're lifted and struck.^{xxiv}

But we need to be open to resurrection – looking up, not down; listening, not stopping up our ears; tasting before we swallow; smelling the flowers, not passing them by; feeling deeply rather numbing ourselves with the daily routine. As a fellow minister has written:

A tomb is no place to stay
When each morning announces our reprieve,
And we know we are granted yet another day of living.

A tomb is no place to stay
When life laughs a welcome
To hearts which have been away too long.^{xxv}

At the center of Jesus' teaching is this affirmation: radical transformation of our hearts, and our very salvation, comes most often through the stranger: "For I was a stranger, and you welcomed me."^{xxvi} "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you."^{xxvii} It was the socially reviled and persecuted foreigner, the Samaritan, whom Jesus held up as the true neighbor to the beaten and robbed man by the side of the road, whom the pious priest and Levite had passed by.^{xxviii} Two of Jesus' disciples welcomed a stranger on the road to Emmaus after Jesus' death; they walked with him the whole day and insisted that he have dinner with them that night, only then, as he broke the bread, recognizing him as Jesus himself.^{xxix} Jesus taught that what we have done, or not done, for those who are least among us, we have done unto Jesus himself.^{xxx}

So strap on your crash helmet and life preserver, for it's through the stranger that you'll experience the resurrected Christ, not through your friends -- through taking risks to reach out to the reviled and the persecuted, rather than staying in your comfort zone. As my favorite minister during my thirty years in Boston preached years ago: "The stranger may be our enemy -- at work or in the neighborhood or even in the world; within our enemy we find the God who has something to teach us that we didn't want to hear. The stranger may be the beggar or bag lady, the teacher or student... or the person sitting next to us in church."^{xxxi} Then, perhaps most importantly, "The stranger may be *us*. We may be the stranger to ourselves, because we still do not believe in that Christ who lies buried within us... But God is patient and will send to us the stranger again and again, the Christ inviting our Christ to come forth from the tomb, inviting us to go through birth once more."^{xxxii}

Astonishing hope, but only if we're willing to act on it and start running toward it, like Peter. Astonishing hope, but only if we open our eyes and ears and hearts. Astonishing hope,

but only if we're willing to welcome that stranger, from without and from within. Astonishing hope to each of you this Resurrection Day!

NOTES

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- ⁱ Matthew 28: 9-10; see also Mark 16:9 and John 20:11-18.
- ⁱⁱ Mark 16: 12-20; Matthew 28: 16-20; Luke 24: 13-53; John 20: 19-23; Acts 1:3-9 and 10:41; I Corinthians 15: 5, 7.
- ⁱⁱⁱ I Corinthians 15: 6.
- ^{iv} Acts 9: 3-6; Acts 22: 6-11; Acts 26: 12-18.
- ^v Luke 24:31.
- ^{vi} Acts 22:9.
- ^{vii} Acts 26:19.
- ^{viii} Acts 22: 17-18.
- ^{ix} Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.
- ^x Luke 24: 1-12.
- ^{xi} Mark 15:32.
- ^{xii} E.g., Matthew 2:2, 27:11.
- ^{xiii} According to Mark, Matthew and Luke. John adds a male disciple (John 19: 26-27).
- ^{xiv} Luke 24: 5-6.
- ^{xv} Matthew 16:18.
- ^{xvi} Mark 14: 66-72; Matthew 26: 69-75; Luke 22: 54-62; John 18: 15-27.
- ^{xvii} See John 21: 18-19 and the account of early Christian historian Eusebius as reported in Peter Calvocoressi, *Who's Who in the Bible* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 147-148.
- ^{xviii} Luke 24: 30-31.
- ^{xix} Luke 24:37.
- ^{xx} Luke 24: 52-53.
- ^{xxi} Charles Wesley, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #268.
- ^{xxii} Earl Holt, "Resurrection," in Carl Seaburg and Mark Harris (eds.), *Celebrating Easter and Spring* (Cambridge: Anne Miniver Press, 2000), p. 80.
- ^{xxiii} Carl Scovel, "Easter 1984" in *The Unitarian Universalist Christian*, Volume 57 (2002), p. 34.
- ^{xxiv} Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 35.
- ^{xxv} Richard S. Gilbert, "A Tomb is No Place to Stay: An Easter Meditation," in Seaburg and Harris, *Celebrating Easter*, p. 97.
- ^{xxvi} Matthew 25:35.
- ^{xxvii} Matthew 5:11.
- ^{xxviii} Luke 10: 30-37.
- ^{xxix} Luke 24: 13-32.
- ^{xxx} Matthew 25: 40, 45.
- ^{xxxi} Scovel, "Easter, 1984," p. 34.
- ^{xxxii} Scovel, "Easter 1984," p. 35.