

I'm Not Dead Yet
Mark 16:1-8, Romans 6:1-14
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
April 8, 2007 (Easter Sunrise)
Pastor Dave Carver

As we begin our exploration of the text this morning, I should tell you that this worship service is one of my favorites for the whole year. The "Sunrise" service is one where, a few weeks ahead of time, people will start to ask, "So, Pastor, have you given thought to what we're going to be doing at the Sunrise Service?"

Most weeks, you know, nobody asks me that. Our worship – particularly our Presbyterian worship – particularly our Pittsburgh Presbyterian worship – is, well, generally pretty predictable. That's not bad, but it is accurate to say that most weeks, if you get here ten minutes late, you know what we'll be doing then. You walk in at twenty-five minutes till the hour, and you expect me to be on about point one of the sermon.

But Easter Sunrise, and to a lesser extent Maundy Thursday – they are the wild cards. You don't exactly know what's coming. I like that – it makes it seem to me like worship is more of an adventure and less of a "checklist", if you know what I mean.

But even as I say that, there is a bit of a disconnect at work. I mean, look at this past week. We've had special worship on Palm Sunday. Meetings on Tuesday. Choir rehearsal on Wednesday. Special Worship on Thursday. Sanctuary preparation on Friday. Breakfast shopping on Saturday. Men showing up here at 5:30 this morning to prepare for our breakfast today. And all of that is just at church – to say nothing of what you've done in your own homes. All to get ready for Easter. And it's here. Happy Easter!

And having said all of that, I want you to be honest with yourselves at this point right now. Given what you've been through in the past 48 or 72 hours, and what this community has done...what is the dominant thought that people will have when they go to bed tonight or get up in the morning.

Will it be, "Thank GOD that's over with for another year"? Will you start tomorrow, refreshed in the knowledge of your faith, filled with joy at the prospect of resurrection, or simply glad that the ham is cooked and the relatives have gone and you don't have to worry about any more Lenten dinners or Communicants classes?

Here's the deal, it seems to me: we make a big hoopla over the resurrection today, but by and large our lives tomorrow will look about the same. Today we will say and sing and proclaim in a dozen different ways, "Christ is Risen! Alleluia!" We will say that there has been a fundamental re-orientation of the universe. In big, powerful, vivid language, we will declare that sin and death

are destroyed.

So what's the difference? I mean, if all of that is true, will tomorrow be any different for you or for me?

Maybe my job this morning is to convince you of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Maybe the problem is that you don't really believe that a dead man could be raised, and if that's the case, then of course it can't matter to you. Maybe I just need to be more compelling.

I'm not sure that that will fly at the Sunrise Service. You can bet that the 11:00 worship will have its share of skeptics, but you folks tend to be the hard core. I'm not sure that I have to prove anything in the bible to you. And that's a good thing, frankly, because the Bible itself never tries to prove that Jesus was raised from the dead. It reports the news and talks about the incredible impact that event had.

So maybe my job is a little simpler than trying to convince you of a historical occurrence 2000 years ago. Maybe I'm not – maybe you're not – maybe we're not in a place where the resurrection of Jesus *can* matter to us in life-changing ways. After all, in order to have a resurrection, what do you need? A death, right? Resurrection only makes sense in light of death. And if there's anything we don't want to think about, it's death. I don't want to think about my death, my mother's death, or even Jesus' death. I want to skip it. So do you. None of us is all that crazy about death.

And then the preacher beats us up because he says that the resurrection seems ineffectual. Well, how exactly can the resurrection have any impact if I'm pretending that there is no death? Civil Rights leader John Perkins always used to say that the good news can only make sense to people who were in a bad news situation. Somebody who just won the Irish Sweepstakes for five million dollars is not going to be excited about chicken breasts on sale at the Giant Eagle two pounds for a dollar. But someone who is down to their last four dollars on the food stamps, well, that looks like good news. Good news makes sense to people who know bad news.

So with that in mind, I want to invite you to think about death for a few moments. Not necessarily your own death, the big D that stares you in the face now or at some point in the future. I'd like to invite you to think about death as the means by which you are joined to Jesus Christ. Specifically, I'd like to ask you to reflect on your baptism as it connects with the death of Jesus.

Paul, writing to the Romans, says that Baptism is, for us, a going back in time and sharing in the death of Jesus. On a hill outside of Jerusalem on a spring day around 30 AD, Jesus of Nazareth was put to death. And in that death, he took upon himself the sin and the brokenness of the world. And when you and I are baptized – whether we are sprinkled as six week old screechers or dunked as 43 year olds singing “Just As I Am Without One Plea” – we are

saying, “Jesus, I’d like to have a share in that death. I’d like that death that you offered on the cross to make a difference in my life. The truth is, Lord, that this life I’ve got going now isn’t the way that it’s supposed to be. So, Lord, I’m wondering if maybe I can be united with you in your death so that I can also be united with you in your resurrection. I don’t see a way to get through death on my own. I can only see as far as death. But with you, I see a way through death.”

Last week I was doing a little “light reading” and came across a story from St. Macarius of Egypt, who lived in the fourth century. One of the young monks came to Macarius and asked him for some insight on how to grow spiritually. Macarius said to him, “Go down to the cemetery and curse the dead.” So the young man did that – he ran down to the graveyard and filled the air with his venom. “You stinking lot!” he cried. “Your sinfulness is an offense against heaven. I curse you to the depth of my being. May you rot!” And then the young man went to report. Macarius asked, “Did the dead have anything to say to you?” “Nothing,” replied the disciple. “Fine. Now go back and praise them.” The young man was a little bewildered, but he ran back to the cemetery and filled the air with blessings. “You are greater than the disciples! Your deeds of worship and service are a breath of fresh air in a difficult world. You inspire those of us who live to live worthy and great lives!” And as before, he went back to Macarius. “Well,” said the old monk, “How did it go this time? Did the dead have anything to say?” The young man shook his head. And Macarius said simply, “if you want to grow in your faith, then become like the dead. Live beyond cursing and praise, unaffected by the opinions of anyone other than Jesus.”

When I read that story, do you know what my first thought was? “Oh my gosh – I’m not dead yet.” It doesn’t matter how or when or where I was baptized – the simple truth is that I keep wanting to grab at the controls of my own life, to hold onto the power, to make myself look good, to claim success and credit.

And I know that I’m risking a lot by bringing this analogy in at 8 on a Sunday morning, but you might be familiar with the 1975 film “Monty Python and the Holy Grail”. In that farce, there is a comical scene that depicts the impact of the black death on Europe. A man is pushing a cart through the village yelling, “Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!” The first time you see that, you are disgusted as the cart fills with bodies. One man carried out a skeletal figure and begins to place it on the cart. All of a sudden, there’s a voice that says, “I’m not dead yet”. The next scene is a surrealistic interchange wherein the body collector refuses to take the corpse on the grounds that, well, it’s not a corpse. The villager is concerned that the sick man will die in an hour or so and just lay around the place until the next pickup. If you’ve seen the movie, you know exactly what I’m talking about. If you haven’t seen the movie, it’s best for you to forget it all right now. My point is simply this – that for much of my life, I’m like that pathetic creature refusing to go on the cart, clinging on to the shreds of my old life, croaking out, “But I’m not dead yet!” And when I do so, I’m rejecting my baptism. I’m rejecting Christ’s death, thinking that maybe I have a few more

tricks up my sleeve, a few other options that I want to try out, a few other hopes that I'll check out before I pin all my hopes on Jesus.

Look – don't think of the great message of Easter and resurrection as a Monty Python sketch...but think about your own situation. Are you that much different from me? Is your life so filled with power and hope and joy that you are just gliding on the clouds, strengthened by the power of the Spirit? Or do you struggle with the desire to keep control and call the shots?

My Easter invitation is for you to explore and re-claim your baptism. For centuries, the early church baptized new believers during “the great vigil of Easter” – an all-night service that went from Saturday night into sunrise. The church looked at these new brothers and sisters and said, “It's time to empty yourself and to look to Christ Jesus for your re-creation. Die to yourself, and live towards the Lord.”

Now, when we say that we are to “die” to ourselves, it's not as if we stop being us. You are still you. When Jesus was raised from the dead, he had a body. He was recognizable. He ate and drank. But the risen Christ was whole and powerful and present in ways that the dead Jesus could not be.

As you surrender yourself to God, your *you* will be honored. If you are artistic, or like to laugh, or enjoy questions, and hate singing, chances are that these things will be true of you tomorrow, too. But the promise of baptism and the hope of Easter is that God will empower you – will raise you in the days to come so that instead of going home tonight glad for the relief of no more special church for a while, you are filled with the power and promise of new life in Jesus.

Today, with the church through all the ages, we look back to Christ's death, and say, “Thank You.” We look back to our own baptisms, and we say, “Yes” all over again. We look back at Christ's resurrection from the dead and say, “Alleluia! Amen!”. And we look ahead to our own resurrection and say, “Come, Lord Jesus – Come with Power.” Amen.