

# More Than A Memory

## Easter Sunday

### April 8, 2007

I once took a class on death and dying, and my professor was a close colleague of Elizabeth Kubler Ross, who was the earliest pioneer in the study of death and dying. They were both coming from a medical, scientific background, and mostly connected with one another on those kinds of matters. However, my professor told us, one evening he and his wife and she and her husband got together for dinner. They had an enjoyable evening, but as it progressed, they began to share some of the experiences they had had with those who were dying and with those loved ones who remained behind in this life.

I'll never forget one story that he told us. A husband and father had died, and his wife and son were grieving his death, and at the same time beginning to try to pull their lives together in a new way. One night, the mother was going up the stairs to tuck her son into bed, and she was sure she passed her husband on the stairs. She paused, and then continued to her son's room. When she opened the door, the child said to her, "Mommy, did you see Daddy? He was just here!"

Now I didn't know the mother and son personally, but I heard it from a pretty direct source, and frankly, I have to admit that even as I tell it again, I get "goose bumps." How can that be?

I can only tell you that, over the years, I've heard many similar stories from those whose loved ones have died. Even though the person was dead and buried, they had been experienced at times as very present and very near. Their presence had been definitely been felt.

What is all that? Yearning? Hallucinations? A dream? Real? I would like to suggest to you that that could be the kind of experience that's going on in our Bible passage for this morning. The Easter story in every one of the four gospels begins with some accounting of the sense that Jesus, who had died an excruciating death on the cross, was somehow very present and very alive with them still. All the gospels but one tell us of instances in which Jesus appeared to his followers, and the story of Mary that we have is the story of one of those appearances.

This passage comes right after the part that tells of the women going to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, but they discover that the tomb is empty. There is no body to anoint. Our story begins with Mary crying, and being asked why by what are

described as two angels. She tells them about Jesus, and then the scene switches. She sees someone else and thinks it's the gardener. He asks her why she's crying, and again, she tells him and asks if he knows where the body of Jesus is. It is only when the gardener calls her by name—Mary—that the realization dawns on her that it's Jesus. She answers him with the word "rabbi," which means teacher. What was that all about?

I'm not here to debate the facts of the resurrection. Frankly, I wasn't there, and I don't know the historical facts, nor can any of us know any historical details. Remember that we have talked all through Lent about the fact that much of what was written in the gospels was written ½ century or more after the death of Jesus, and while some of it is memory, much of it is more reflective of later experiences and what was said about Jesus throughout the decades. How could they express their experience clearly in a way that could be understood?

I wonder if it isn't more along the lines of a metaphor that is trying to express a far deeper truth. I fear if we get stuck at the idea of a bodily resurrection, we'll miss the full meaning of what Easter is all about and what it is meant to be. For me, most of the stories are a way to express an experience that simply couldn't be understood. They reflect the almost unbelievable reality that, somehow the one they had seen die on a cross was experienced as alive. That's the truth of Easter, plain and simple.

The importance of Easter, however, has to do with what that all means for you and for me. I'm confident that it is telling us that life all this earth is not all there is, that there is more—even though we can't comprehend or see what that's like from our vantage point on this earth. The resurrection of Jesus tells us God wins out.

William Sloane Coffin, in his book *Letters to a Young Doubter*, puts it this way: "**First it's necessary to emphasize that Easter has less to do with one person's escape from the grave than with the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power.**" The imperial power of Rome, the earthly powers that so often seem to be in control don't have the final word. That's a piece of what's being told at Easter.

But there's another important understanding, too, and that has to do with you and me, and how we live today. You see, Easter is not just for the life to come; Easter is for right here, right now. The translator of the version of the Bible we often use here called *The Message*, a person named Eugene Peterson, has also written a book entitled *Living the Resurrection*. In it, he expresses the other key point of the resurrection story. I agree when he says that

it's all about getting on with life, and living life the way God intends for us to live.

That, for me, is the real message of Easter. It's not just a bunch of words that we talk about one day a year, and then go back to life; it's a new way of living that embraces all of life. It's living what Peterson calls the "resurrected life." I want us to think about what that means for us today and every day.

If you want a more sophisticated way to say what I just tried to say, the words that the philosopher Horace Kallen wrote on the occasion of his 73<sup>rd</sup> birthday might do it. He said, "**There are persons who shape their lives by the fear of death, and persons who shape their lives by the joy and satisfaction of life. The former live dying; the latter die living. I know that fate may stop us tomorrow, but death is an irrelevant contingency. Whenever it comes, I intend to die living.**" That's what Easter's all about for you and me—it means we're to die living, and living fully.

What do you think it means, exactly, to die living? I can't give you specifics—that's something we have to figure out for ourselves, but I can give you what I believe to be some general ideas as to what living a resurrection life, to live as Easter people, to die living, might be like.

Maybe a good way to do that is to say what I think that kind of life isn't, and my guess is that many of us could do that for ourselves, because that's the way a lot of us live. Things in the normal course of life have a way of chipping away at us, and we may find ourselves tired, worn out, losing our vitality. We become dull, just going through the motions, but not really engaged, not really caring much about anything.

Or maybe we're caring too much about the wrong things. We may be at the point where we look as though we've got it all, and we've got it all together, but in the process of "getting there," we're losing our souls. We become disconnected from God and from any sense of our mission in life; we lose heart. When we're like that, we become those that the philosopher referred to as those who "live dying."

But Easter is telling us that doesn't have to be the case. Deadened relationships, broken dreams, haunting failures, destructive habits, darkened spirits, death-life existences do have to win out. They're not the final answer. Easter replaces all the despair, hopelessness, and fear by saying that we have the possibility to live, really live every moment of this life on earth!

Peterson calls that a life filled with immediacy, spontaneity, and exuberance. That's what an Easter life is like. It seems to me that those words are the

kinds of words we could well associate with small children. For a child, everything is lived in the moment; there's no concern about the past, and no fear of the future. The moment is now, and now is all that exists. How differently we might live if we focused on staying in the moment, and not fretting over what is said and done, and not worrying about what might happen tomorrow. We could truly discover the meaning of the Latin phrase, "**Carpe diem,**" "**Seize the day!**" We'd be able to smell the roses, walk barefoot in the park, breathe in the fresh air of springtime, sit and watch the clouds—we'd be filled with a sense of wonder and amazement.

Spontaneity is another of the words that could well describe an Easter life. To be spontaneous requires courage. It means we have to be prepared to take a risk, not knowing all the answers, not being able to foresee every repercussion, not knowing what will happen. It means we dare to live in the moment, and roll with life—not trying to control it, not succumbing to it, but living in it and relishing it, every single day.

And exuberance—joy—pure unadulterated joy! Can you imagine the joy Mary experienced when she realized, however it happened, that Jesus was still with her and would always be with her? Can you imagine the joy you and I can have when we know that that same spirit lives with us today? That God is with us wherever we are and whatever we're doing? That we needn't fear whatever comes, because whatever it is, God will always win out? As someone has said, "**Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God,**" and how true that is! Joy, true exuberance and elation—the kind that lasts more than a moment—are ours because of Easter.

That's the message of Easter. It's about getting on with life—real life, resurrection life, Easter every day! So, I say to you, "Go out, and live it up! Really live as Easter people!"

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that, Easter is more than just an old memory, or a day that happens once a year. Whether we choose a country road or a super highway, Easter means we can live life in a new way—a fully alive way, moving toward a bright horizon.