

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

“GOD’S-FUTURE-ARRIVED-IN-THE-PRESENT”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

I am an optimist. The bad economy, war, disease, conflict, church politics, even blatant heresy, are annoying, like so many gnats on a summer evening, but not a reason for despair. Don't get me wrong, I am not a pie-in-the-sky viewer of things through rose-colored glasses. As most of you know I am a realist. I have even been accused of being a bit of a cynic. But, in spite of that, I am an optimist.

Mine is not a fuzzy optimism of little bunnies and baby chicks or a Technicolor dream of decorated eggs and blooming flowers. The optimism I am talking about is one that sees sweat, toil and pain as momentary and necessary afflictions to be passed through on the way to the guaranteed prize. It is an optimism that sees the cross, not as an instrument of death but an invitation to life. This optimism is an Easter optimism.

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

These are difficult days in which we live. For all of us there is economic uncertainty. For some of us savings, retirement funds, jobs and even houses have been lost. As a country we are faced with two wars that many in our leadership have declared unwinnable, as well as the ever present threat of terrorist attack, hijacking and kidnapping. Even within our denomination we have name-calling, acrimonious departures and multiplying law suits. These are truly difficult days. But like today, the event of Jesus' death and resurrection occurred during a time of confusion and chaos on the religious, political and social scenes.

The Gospels witness to the political abuse perpetrated by the religious authorities. From the story of Barabbas we know of insurrection and perhaps even terrorism. The people of Jerusalem were taxed by both the Romans and the Temple authorities, while bribes were just a fact of life for her citizens. The betrayal of Jesus by Judas serves to remind us that even one's closest friends and disciples could not be trusted. In addition, all these powers conspired to eliminate the one bright light of hope for Jesus' followers through the absolute miscarriage of justice that caused Jesus' execution. As St. John would say, it was a very dark time.

Friday was dark indeed. But the sun rose on Sunday and the tomb was empty. In the midst of the chaos and confusion, the blood and death, the abuse and oppression, Jesus' bodily resurrection is tangible evidence of the truth of God's promise of the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. According to the Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright, through the resurrection, Jesus becomes “God's-future-arrived-in-the-present.” According to St.

Paul, Jesus becomes the “first fruit” and the “first born” of the new creation through his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20; Colossians 1:18).

Jesus, through his death, burial, empty tomb and resurrection life, demonstrated that the material from the old and imperfect will be used to create the new and the perfect. The tomb was empty, the body was gone because it was used up in the new creation. Jesus appeared in a new body – one not confined by space and time, yet still physical and still recognizable as a human body. A body, that through the Ascension, is also eternally in the perfect presence of God. From this we learn that God’s recreation restores and perfects the ordered circumstances described in the first two chapters of Genesis. Because of the resurrection, Jesus is living proof of God’s promise to us of an eternity of perfectly fulfilling and fruitful work according to our God-given gifts and according to God’s perfect plan.

In addition, the recreation and resurrection of Jesus in this world, with a body bearing the marks of the nails and the wound from the lance, means that we have the opportunity to live into the promise in this world (although imperfectly). What we do here and now matters, both to God and to the manner in which we experience this life.

How can that be?

As we align our lives with God’s will we begin to experience what God created us to be. In the words of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus was perfected through obedience to the Father (Hebrews 5:8-9) and likewise, so are we. In this life we can begin to experience the resurrection life because what we learn to do in accordance with God’s will now, will be what we will be doing perfectly after the resurrection.

In following Jesus we are called to die to those things – attitudes, actions and addictions – that are according to our own self-centered wills. In contrast, we are exhorted to be reborn as new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) centering our lives on obedience to God. When we focus on God in this life, those things that threaten our cherished, self-centered treasures fade into secondary significance. As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

Keep your heart in the indestructible heart of God. With your heart firmly anchored in God you can know the eternal security that becomes the backdrop for evaluating all that happens to you in this life. Because of empty tomb of Easter morning and the resurrection of Jesus Christ you can be assured of the truth of God’s love and promise.

Through the resurrection we are offered ultimate purpose and meaning in this life through a reconciled relationship with God. Therefore, the Easter message is a message of hope; the hope that is in this world, but has its roots beyond this world; in the very heart of God. It is a hope that will stand when all else fails, because it is based on the eternal promise of the ever-living, ever-loving God.

I am an Easter person. I am an optimist. Won't you join me?

Let us pray.

O Lord God, our Father. You are the light that can never be put out; and now you give us a light that shall drive away all darkness. You are love without coldness, and you have given us such warmth in our hearts that we can love all we meet. You are the life that defies death, and you have opened for us the way that leads to eternal life.

None of us is a great Christian; we are all humble and ordinary. But your grace is enough for us. Arouse in us that small degree of joy and thankfulness of which we are capable, to the timid faith which we can muster, to the cautious obedience which we cannot refuse, and thus to the wholeness of life which you have prepared for all of us through the death and resurrection of your Son. Do not allow any of us to remain apathetic or indifferent to the wondrous glory of Easter, but let the light of our risen Lord reach every corner of our dull hearts. (Karl Barth, 1886-1968)

Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, on Easter Day, April 12, 2009.