

The Beginning of the End

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren

Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010, John 20:1-18, 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

How good it is to be together with God's people on this great day, in this beautiful place, celebrating together the most momentous event in the Christian year. Christ is risen! Yes, Christ is risen indeed!

We have heard the story, drawn this year from John's gospel, of how the followers of Jesus made their way to the tomb, only to find it empty, and how they later encountered Jesus, alive again. And we can only try to imagine their shock, surprise and awe. It was something incredible, something entirely unexpected.

But the reason we are here this morning, and millions more are around the world in worship this day, is not simply because we are amazed. It is because we understand the resurrection as something more than incredible. Let me explain what I mean.

Many of you may recognize the name of David Blaine. David Blaine is a modern illusionist and endurance artist, in the mold of Harry Houdini. He is famous for his illusions and feats of endurance. He's been called the hottest name in magic right now. He has allowed himself to be buried alive for seven days, enclosed in a block of ice for over 60 hours, and was hung upside down for two and a half days. He does remarkable tricks with coins, cards, and other objects, and even appears to levitate in his stage and street acts. All of this is incredible, amazing, unexpected, seemingly impossible.

But does anyone here seriously think that there will be millions of people two thousand years from now gathering once a year in special celebration of anything David Blaine does? For that matter, could any of his feats of endurance or his illusions profoundly change your life? Of course not! It is just entertainment. If we ask what it means, the answer is simply that it means David Blaine is a very talented guy, that's all.

The resurrection, on the other hand, is more than just amazing. And the way to begin to understand how it is more is to ask the same question; What does it mean? Does it mean God is powerful? Well, yes, but there are plenty of other stories in the Bible to tell us that. Does it mean that God has the power to raise the dead? Again yes, but again there are lots of other stories in the Bible that demonstrate that as well. Lazarus was raised from the dead. Elisha raised the son of the widow from Nain. You get the point.

So what exactly is it about the resurrection of Jesus that sets it apart? What is it about the resurrection of Jesus that makes it more than amazing, more than proof of God's power, and more than evidence that God is able to restore life? What was it about the resurrection of Jesus that not only shocked the disciples but radically changed them, so that they devoted the rest of their lives to proclaiming the gospel (and even *gave* their lives in some cases)?

We find the answers to these questions in our reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The Apostle Paul is explaining what the resurrection means and why it matters. What the Apostle Paul and the other early followers of Jesus saw in the resurrection of Jesus was the beginning of the end: Christ raised as the first fruits, or first installment, a sign of things to come. Ultimately, the dead in Christ will also be raised and, as the scripture says,

Then comes the end, when Jesus hands over the kingdom to God the Father . . . so that God may be all in all.

You see, the first Christians had experienced life before the resurrection as a tragic story. In a classic tragedy, death, suffering and sorrow always prevail, despite our best efforts. People mean well, they try hard, and still it all goes bad in the end. And this view of the world certainly seemed confirmed for them when their beloved Lord and Master, who they thought was going to conquer and reign, instead ended up dying a humiliating and painful death on the cross.

It was a crushing loss. Remember, these were people who believed in tragedy. But for a little while they had let themselves hope for more. They had allowed themselves to start believing that evil doesn't always win in the end. Maybe, just maybe, a hero will come along and the story will have a happy ending after all. That is what made it so crushing to watch Jesus die. You feel terrible because Jesus is someone you love, but you feel worse because you let yourself hope, because you set yourself up for this disappointment.

Then came the resurrection. The resurrection meant that they hadn't been wrong to hope. They may have hoped for the wrong things, but they hadn't been wrong to hope. History as a tragic story was over. History as a story of life and love and peace and justice had just started. The cross was the end of the beginning. The resurrection was the beginning of the end.

The resurrection was a turning point in time. Turning points don't mean all your troubles are over, but they fundamentally change how we think about life and even about suffering. Once we are convinced we are headed in the right direction, the journey takes on a whole new meaning. Every step brings us closer to where we want to be.

Kathy and I have a nephew named Jayden, who is in kindergarten. He is the son of our niece. This past fall, for his birthday, we sent him a present and he called to thank us. When I got on the phone, I decided to ask him how he liked school. He said it was okay. Then I asked him if he knew how many more days he had to go before Christmas. He didn't. But because they do year-long countdown, he actually knew how many days he had to go until the end of the year. He said, "We have 126 more days . . . and I don't know how I'm going to make it!"

Of course, we grown-ups had a good laugh. However, his remark and attitude is something with which we can all identify. So often, we don't know how we are going to make it through everything that we must endure. And it is all that much more difficult when the destination is unknown, or when it is known to be tragic. But if we should be given an unmistakable sign that we are headed toward a destination of blessing and life, we are filled with life and hope even now.

The resurrection had that effect on the disciples, and on the earliest Christians. And it is still having that effect on people today. That's why we're here. That's what this is all about. We are here celebrating the beginning of the end, the beginning of the end of a world in rebellion against God, the beginning of the end of injustice and cruelty, the beginning of the end of death's dominion, of death diminishing every joy and pleasure in this life.

In a book called *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, author Andy Lester talks about future stories. "We are a narrative people," he says. "We think of our lives as stories in process with a past, present and future. Many people mistakenly think that what matters most is the past, and so counseling often dwells on what has happened to us, how our parents treated us, whether we have had sibling rivalries, or traumatic experiences. But Lester says that our future stories are even more important than our past stories. As he says, 'If you have a dysfunctional future story, your future is not likely to turn out well. If it is negative, you are bound for

difficulty. And if you have no hope, no healthy sense of the future being better than the present, you get stuck, you even get sick

Easter is God's gift to us all of a positive future story. It is the gift of a promise that history is headed in the direction of the kingdom of God, when peace will prevail and justice abide. It is the promise that life is not ultimately tragic. It is the reassurance that life is going somewhere somewhere good.

And that is why it is good that we are here together on this great day, in this beautiful place, celebrating together the most momentous event in the Christian year. Christ is risen! Yes, Christ is risen indeed!

Amen.