Easter Sunday, March 26, 1978
COME OUT OF YOUR TOMB!
John ll:38-44; Matthew 28:1-10

Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said, ‘Unbind him and let him go!’

The raising of Lazarus from the dead is one of the most unusual stories in the Bible. This morning we are going to see how this story relates to the Easter story and then more importantly what they both say to us.

To begin with, the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, like the recent story in the newspapers about an evangelist in Reed Springs, Mo., trying to raise his mother from the dead, tells us what Easter is not about. Easter is not primarily about miracles like the temporary revival of Lazarus, or the rather bizarre attempt of Daniel Rogers to revive his mother from a freezer where she has been stored for some time following her death on Groundhog’s Day in Arkansas.

If this is what Easter is about, we would spend our whole life in a frenzy, asking the Lord to postpone just one more time the hardships and losses which are a part of our lives as human beings.

Rather, the story of Easter has something to do with the transformation of our losses, not the avoidance of them. Christ on the cross is not simply denying the power of evil, he is positively asserting the power of God. The crucifixion and Easter which follows, reveal that in the worst possible circumstances there is a healing power at work.

Furthermore, the story of Easter is not primarily about the resurrection bf the body on the last day, nor is it primarily about life in some other form after our physical death on this search. That is not its main emphasis!

What then is the Easter story about? Easter is about the reality of resurrection, of new life, here and now. It is about the power of God in our lives which is able to free us from the tombs and slaveries in which we find ourselves. And here is where the story of Lazarus and Easter come together.

Let me say it another way. The raising of Lazarus and the story of Easter tells us that God is forever calling us out of our tombs just as Jesus called Lazarus. God calls us to be liberated — to freedom. Lazarus, come out! Unbind him and let him go!

This is all part of the main theme of the ministry of Jesus Christ. He is a liberator. He brings freedom. He calls us out of our tombs. When Jesus began his public ministry, he took a passage from the Old Testament for his announcement:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach. good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.”

When we read the gospel stories, we find that Jesus'ministry was spent in freeing people, in unbinding them. Jesus comes with the truth that sets us free. "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Through his suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection, Jesus Christ continues to free people.

Jesus himself lived the freedom that comes only from God. But freedom is also a threat. It presents a threat to anyone who wants to control us and it's a threat to those of us who want to be controlled by someone or something. True freedom always has its opposition. That's why Jesus was executed.

All the gospels depict Jesus in controversy throughout his ministry. It wasn't that he liked controversy or sought it. But anyone who lives and teaches that under God we are free, is a danger to those who want to control us and society for their own purposes. The Easter story, however, says that even the threat of death; and more than that, even death itself cannot stop the kind of freedom which Jesus Christ brings to us.

Easter happens over and over again! Jesus Christ continues to free people. And today when people seek their freedom and proclaim it and are not afraid of suffering and death, that still becomes a threat to others. Some try to stop it!

On December 1, 1955, a black woman named Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama, began to claim the freedom that was hers in Jesus Christ. She left her work at the men's alteration shop, a tailor shop in the Montgomery Fair Department store and prepared to take a public bus home. When she got on the bus and found only one vacancy just back of what was considered the white section, that was the seat she took. It was next to the aisle and a black man was sitting next to her and two black women were seated across the aisle in the same row.

There were just a few seats left in the front of the bus, in the white section, and many black people were standing in the back. As the bus continued to pick up more passengers, all the seats were soon taken. At the third stop, there was one white man standing, so the driver asked Rosa Parks, along with the three other black people in that row to give up their seats so as to increase the white section by four so that one white man could have a seat.

At the driver's first request, none of them moved. The man who would've taken the seat hadn't said anything. Then three of the black persons got up and moved into the aisle, but Rosa Parks remained in her seat. When the driver saw that she was still sitting there, he asked if she was going to stand up and she said, "No, she wasn't." And the driver said, "Hell, if you don't stand up, I'm going to have you arrested." And Rosa told him to go ahead and have her arrested.

The driver got off the bus and came back with two policemen. They inquired if the driver had asked her to stand up and she said, Yes; and they wanted to know why she hadn't. Rosa told them she didn't think she should have to stand up. She had paid her fare and occupied a seat. Why should four black persons give up their seats so that one white man could sit down? Rosa Parks was arrested and put in jail.

Four days later, black people all over the city of Montgomery began to boycott the busses. They worked out carpools and many simply walked back and forth to work, even though for many it was a very long walk.

At one point in one of the many meetings and rallies which were held to support the boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr. said to an old woman, “Now listen, you have been with us all along, so now you go on and start back to riding the bus cause you are too old to keep walking. And this old woman replied,” Oh no, oh no, I’m going to walk just as long as everybody else walks. I’m going to walk until it’s over. So, Dr. King asked, “But aren’t your feet tired?” And she answered, “Yes, my feet are tired, but my soul is rested.”

Like Rosa Parks, this old woman had learned the meaning of true freedom. But it wasn’t just the black people who were finding their freedom under God. They were also helping those white people who were afraid that if blacks gained equality, it would be detrimental to them and to society. The white people were also in slavery. They were being held in tombs of fear and prejudice and needed to be called out of their tombs. They needed people like Rosa Parks and the other woman to unbind them and let them go. A year later, Montgomery’s busses were integrated, and the boycott ended.

Another story from that era also speaks of resurrection and the freedom that comes with it here and now and how we all need to be called out of our tombs.

In 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer, along with numbers of other black citizens began to attempt to register to vote in Mississippi. As part of the registration procedure each person was given a section of the State Constitution and asked to interpret it correctly. They usually failed the test. But they continued to make the long bus ride to the County Seat to try again. The opposition was strong. On one such ride the driver of the bus was arrested and fined 100 dollars for driving a bus with too much yellow paint on it. The same bus had been used year after year for transporting cotton choppers and cotton pickers and the driver had never been arrested. But as soon as the bus began to transport persons who wanted to register to vote, the arrests began.

In the coming months, as Fannie Lou continued to attempt to register to vote, she was driven out of her home and fired from her job. Even though she moved into the next county, the terrorism against her continued. After a few months she returned to her home county and began again to attempt to register to vote. She said, “I didn’t know why I was coming, but I was just sick of running and hadn’t done anything wrong.”

The next time she went to register she told the registrar. “Now you can’t have me fired cause I’m already fired, and I won’t have to move now, because I’m not living in a white man’s house. I’ll be here every 30 days until I become a registered voter.” After many more months she was finally officially registered, but now it was as if she had become a criminal.

One day while traveling to another town, the bus on which she was riding stopped for a rest stop. Some of the passengers got off to get food and others to use the washroom. Fannie Lou made the mistake of going in the wrong door and used the door to the white side of the restaurant. She was one of seven arrested.

They carried her to the County Jail and put her in a cell. Soon she heard screaming like she had never heard before, and she heard the sounds of another woman prisoner being beaten. She also heard someone say to the woman — “Can’t you say yessir, nigger? Can’t you say yessir?” And the woman’s response was, “Yes I can say yessir, but I don’t know you well enough.” And the beating continued.

Finally, Fannie Lou heard the woman start praying. She asked God to have mercy on them because they didn't know what they were doing.

Next it was Fannie Lou's turn. They had discovered she had been persistent in her efforts to become a registered voter and told her they were going to make her wish she was dead. They put her on a bunk and had two other prisoners take turns beating her. She was so badly beaten during the next half hour that she almost died.

However, Fannie Lou Hamer recovered after some months and went back to work helping other citizens register to vote.

Less than four years after she failed that first voter registration test and less than three years after that devastating beating, Mississippi Magazine named her as one of "six women of influence in the State." Within ten years, her hometown had held "Fannie Lou Hamer" Day. The white mayor who had once put her husband in jail for an overdue water bill said she would go down in history as a champion of her people.

Fannie Lou Hamer died of cancer on March 15, 1977. She was 60 years old. A few weeks after her death, the Mississippi Legislature passed unanimously a resolution praising her service to the state.

That's resurrection! New life! Come out of your tomb! Not only did Fannie Lou Hamer find her freedom., but through her persistence and suffering she helped bring a whole lot of people, black and white out of their tombs of fear, hate, prejudice, and helped free them. She was one of those who helped unbind people.

Fannie Lou, like many others before and after her, like Jesus Christ himself, knew the meaning of suffering and of God transforming people through her suffering. She lived the deep meaning of Easter which says that in the worst possible circumstances there is a healing power at work.

It is not by accident that the essence of Christian preaching has been the story of a crucified and resurrected Messiah and how we are saved through his suffering and the suffering of others. Sometimes it takes a lot of suffering of others before we come out of our tombs.

But that's what Easter says — Come out of your tomb! Be free! So today, whether your tomb is the tomb of an emotional deadlock in a marriage where you demand that the other change first or refuse to seek outside help; or whether your tomb is in the relentless drive to do things, to always have an excuse for not responding humanly to the people around you; or whether your tomb is in the fear of the present or the future so that you always want to retreat into the past; or whether your tomb is in the hate you feel for someone or some group or some race--no matter in what ways you are dead, hear the call of Easter, the call of Jesus Christ — Lazarus, come out!

The risen Christ invites us on this Easter morning to be free and to enter eternal life here and now; then nothing can destroy you, not even death. Amen.