Easter Sunday, April 11, 1982
THE EASTER VIEW
Mark 16:1-8

Faithfulness has a way of running into pleasant surprises. When one goes faithfully on with duty, doing in times of darkness, disappointment, or defeat what is often the little that can be done, one meets the unexpected and sorrow is turned into joy.

The women had gone faithfully to the tomb on Sunday morning to complete the preparation of the body of JESUS for burial. Expecting death, they met life!

There is nothing in all of history or in all of human experience that is more contrasting than the Good Friday — Easter morning events. In one weekend, the experience of the women moved from the hilltop scene of a cross and death against a dark sky to a nearby tomb ablaze with light from the early morning sun and the resurrection.

The scene runs counter to commonsense human experience. Death is turned into life! Thus, Mark's Gospel reports, "and they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

They had good reason to be afraid. Because of the Easter event their view of death, of the world, and of God had to change. And it's not easy to change one's point of view. Up to this point in their lives, these women and the disciples of Jesus and everyone around them, Romans and Jews, pretty much regarded reality as fixed and static. Thus, the appropriate human stance was one of accepting and adjusting and coming to terms with "things-as-they-are."

But Easter represents the polar opposite of this view and this way of reacting to life. The Easter view had its beginning some time before the event of Easter when a young carpenter from Galilee began to embody and articulate a different view of reality. "The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God is at hand." His ministry and teachings stirred people as they had not been stirred before. Even simple folk like fishermen and farmers began to believe that they did have worth and could make a difference with their lives as they collaborated with a dynamic God. What the carpenter represented was certainly not totally new. It had been alive in history since Abraham and that encounter he had with God who wanted to bless and fulfill all humankind. Jesus simply brought the faith of Abraham to its fullest flower.

At the same time, of course, the hope and dynamism of the young carpenter offended all the people who had no hope and did not want to hope, the people who believed in death rather than life. They turned against him in a swift succession of events one Thursday night and had him arrested and tried, and before the sun went down on Friday afternoon, he was dead and buried.

If reality ever seemed to be static and human effort futile, it was that first "holy week." But then the absolutely unexpected occurred. Some women went to the tomb on early Sunday morning to finish preparing the body of Jesus for burial and when they got to the tomb, they found the door rolled back and the body gone. So deep was their despair that it did not at first occur to them that God had anything to do with all this. They assumed grave robbers had added insult to injury and had taken the corpse. But then they encountered a shining presence who said, "He is not here! He is risen! God has done something and there is something you can do."

Here is a new view of all of creation. Reality is dynamic and not static. God is the ONE who can make the things that are out of the things that are not, and the one who 1ean make dead things come to life again.

Think of it! If absolutely nothing and the condition of death are not beyond God's power to do something, how can we look at our problems and say despairingly, "There is no hope. There is nothing that can be done." The Christian sets no limits on what might or might not happen, given this sort of ultimate reality.

But even after the resurrection, the Easter view was not easily accepted. As the Apostles began to tell the story of what had happened, they got into trouble because of it. According to the book of Acts, "As the Apostles were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody."

Now why should the Apostles be arrested for preaching the Easter message? What does the resurrection from the dead mean if proclaiming it is cause for arrest?

The "powers that be" were worried because the Easter view overcomes the power of death. And that goes against the world's view of death. We believe to threaten someone with death is the ultimate power. Good Friday shows that we human beings worship death. We believe that the way to solve problems ultimately is through death. Is Jesus a problem? Kill him! Are the thieves who were crucified with Jesus a problem? Kill them!

Even today we think we can get rid of what we see as the worst and as evil by shooting it down, putting it in a gas chamber or electric chair, or bombing it to death. We still worship the power of death.

Look at the year 1981 just past. The near assassinations of a Pope and an American president, followed by the murder of Anwar Sadat, underline once again that death is worshipped. Down through the years, there have been thousands of martyrs, good decent people that we have gotten rid of because we couldn't take their goodness. They challenged our normal view of reality.

Even more shocking today is the ready availability of the weapons of holocaust and worldwide disaster. And perhaps the greatest danger of all is represented by the widespread notion that the sheer accumulation of such weapons has anything to do with national security. At the end of 1981, the United States owned approximately 2,400 more nuclear explosives than it did at the beginning of that year, at a cost of billions of dollars. And the same is true of the Russians.

What kind of security is that for the world? My son came home from school the other day with this analogy for our present situation. "In our current nuclear arms build-up — imagine two young boys standing waist high in gasoline. One boy has ten matches and the other has five. Does the boy with ten matches have any reason to feel more secure?"

We still worship the power of death — believing that if nothing else works, nuclear weapons will solve the problem. Nothing in human history is more obscene and insane than the cool discussion of competing nuclear strategies by apocalyptic game players.

Contrast this with the Easter message, with the Apostles saying that death is not the ultimate power. But if people begin to believe this and to live accordingly — it would upset everything. We human beings and nations enjoy playing God. Death, we believe, is our ultimate weapon over others. Threaten a person with death and we think we have power over him.

Easter says — death has no power over love or over God. Death is not the ultimate power. God is the ultimate power. Easter is filled with good news! Easter says evil cannot be used to cast out evil. Selfish people cannot destroy the selfless love of God no matter how they torture it, spit upon it, make fun of it, imprison it, or crucify it. The Easter view of death is totally different from our normal view of death.

2. Easter gives us a new view of the world. It tells us that the world is not just some kind of large machine which runs in the same old ways and ruts. The world, creation, is not fixed or static or unchanging. Rather, all of creation is to be seen as open, expanding, evolving and it is only partly predictable. The unexpected can and does occur. Just when we think all things are going one way, something completely new, the resurrection, new life breaks in.

Easter appears again and again in strange and surprising places. There is the new life of Easter in the present-day peace movement as more as more and more ordinary people are becoming openly concerned about the insanity of nuclear weapons.

The present day “powers that be” think that common everyday citizens don’t know what they are doing in the same way that the early Apostles and Christians were thought of as nobodies by the people in power. What were they against the military might of Rome? But God’s way has more power than any military might or nuclear weapons. Easter often appears where it is least expected. The Easter view of the world says that just as there are always possibilities of evil and destruction inherent in our world, so there are also indeterminate possibilities for a greater good beyond the existing situation. There is something eternal and significant about life, about your life and mine and all of creation. We do not live in a senseless universe. A saving possibility is always present and there is hope.

3. Easter gives us a new view of God. Just as people have oftentimes seen the world and themselves as fixed, static, limited and determined, so people have also seen God in the same way. Easter gives us a new view of God. We live in a world where God cannot be eliminated. Just when we think we have God in a box or in a tomb, or on a cross, God’s power breaks out in a new way.

Easter tells us that every time people try to kill that which is of God, it comes back and lives on. And even more mysteriously, God’s power is more powerful than before. That’s the miracle of the Resurrection.

The Easter view also tells us that we meet God in some surprising places. God is within each one of us as well as surrounding us and filling all of creation. God is in the power of love that conquers hate. God is in the restlessness that compels the most impoverished, oppressed, enslaved human being to know that he has the right to freedom and dignity.

God is in the holiness which we experience when we have given love and have received it in return. God continually breaks out in new ways.

A young man returned from the war without his legs. When the healing of the body had completed itself; he was still far from returning to civilian life. Something had died in him when

he found he would never walk again. He lay in his hospital bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. He refused to talk to anyone who tried to help him. He refused to cooperate with doctors or nurses who wanted to help him to make the great adjustment.

One day another inmate of the hospital strolled in and sat down on a chair near the bed. He drew a harmonica from his pocket and began to play softly. The patient looked at him for a second, then back to the ceiling. That was all for that day. Next day the player came again. For several days he continued to come and to play quietly. One day he asked, “Does my playing annoy you?” The patient said, “No, I guess I like it.” He talked a little more each day.

One day the harmonica player was in a jovial mood. He played a tune and began to do a tap dance for his friend. The other looked on but was apparently unimpressed by the exhibition. “Hey, why don’t you smile once and let a guy know you’re alive!” The dancer was smiling as he gave the gentle rebuke. But the amputee said, “I might as well be dead as in the fix I’m in.” “Okay,” answered the happy one, “so you’re dead. But you’re not as dead as a fellow who was crucified 2000 years ago, and He came out of it all right.” “Oh, it’s easy for you to preach,” replied the patient, “But if you were in my fix, you’d sing a different tune.” With this the dancer stood up, saying, “I know a 2000-year resurrection is pretty far in the dim past. So maybe an up-to-date example will help you to believe it can be done.” With that he pulled up his trouser legs and the young man in the bed looked and saw two artificial limbs. Needless to say, his own resurrection began that moment. Today he is living a normal life and helping other people to find the Easter in their lives.

The Easter view tells us that death has no power and gives us a new view of the world and a new view of God. The Easter view is one of ultimate hope. Amen.