Easter Sunday, April 19, 1987
THE VICTORY OF VIOLENCE? (NO. 5 IN A SERIES: LIES WE TELL EACH OTHER)
Mark 16:1-8

On the Friday night before Easter Sunday morning, Pontius Pilate and his advisors went to bed secure in the belief that the man called Jesus would bother them no more. They believed in the victory of violence. The people in the crowd that had shouted, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” also went to sleep that night, believing that violence had once again done its proper work. The troublemaker, Jesus, was out of the way. The man they had hoped would be their hero and who had disappointed them had been killed. The small movement He had started was over. They believed in the victory of violence.

Even Jesus’ closest followers, the twelve disciples, found themselves trusting more in the victory of violence than in the message of Jesus. They thought it was all over, and it wasn’t the first time they had thought that violence, which punishes and kills, is the ultimate solution.

Earlier, when Jesus had made up His mind to go to Jerusalem, He had sent some of His disciples ahead to Samaria to make preparations. They reported back to Him that the Samaritans did not want Jesus and His followers to come through their territory or stay overnight among them. So, the disciples proposed a simple solution to the problem: “Lord, do You want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?” In other words, “Let’s kill them all. That will solve the problem.” But Jesus would have none of it.

Why is it that we continue to believe so much in the power of violence and death? There is still a lot of support for the idea that 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, or at least threatening to bomb it to death. Hitler called his mass murder of the Jews, “The Final Solution.”

The fact is that, by and large, we still worship the power of death. In his book The Pathology of Power, Norman Cousins writes: “With a single official command, more suffering can be let loose on the world than has been recorded so far in all the annals of medicine. Medical researchers work constantly to create new antibiotics and other medications for combating infections. But the United States and Soviet Union, in their own research laboratories, are creating strains of bacteriological organisms for use in warfare far beyond the reach of any known antibiotics.”

“The obsession with total power, the manufacture and stockpiling of cataclysmic weapons far beyond any conceivable need, the relentless quest for superiority, the comparative casualness with which the suicidal nature of such force is viewed, the seeming acquiescence in the drift toward a man-made holocaust — all these are symptoms of a pervasive insanity.”

“Let us suppose that two men who regard each other as enemies are in the same lifeboat. Each possesses a drill. Now let us further suppose that each man feels the best way of protecting himself against the other is to threaten to drill a bigger hole in his end of the boat than the other is capable of drilling at his end. The psychotic nature of such an episode is readily apparent, yet this is the essential nature of the nuclear dilemma in the modern world. The major emphasis seems to be on the ability to drill bigger holes in the common lifeboat.”

But according to Jesus — it's a lie. There is no permanent victory that ever comes from violence and death, or the threat of violence and death. Killing people never brings a final solution. It's a lie to believe that we can conquer evil by destroying it with violence and death.

What then is the truth that Easter proclaims?

Easter says that violence and death are never the ultimate weapons. Death has no power over love or over God. The love of God is the ultimate power. Easter says evil cannot be used to cast out evil or to cast out good. There is no power that can destroy the selfless love of God.

The truth that Easter proclaims is that evil can be defeated by goodness and that goodness can never be defeated by evil. Evil can be conquered only by love. And that's what Good Friday and Easter are all about. Here's how M. Scott Peck describes it using different imagery in his book People of the Lie:

"When one has purified oneself, by the grace of God, to the point at which one can truly love one's enemies, and that's what Jesus was able to do, a beautiful and powerful thing happens. It is as if the boundaries of the soul become so clean as to be transparent, and a unique light then shines forth from the individual, as it did from Jesus."

"The effect of this light varies. Some are encouraged by it and are drawn to it. Others will change the direction of their lives to follow this light, but there are also those who will try to attack the light and do so. They will try to kill it, crucify it. And when they do it, it is as if their evil actions are taken into the light and consumed. The malignant energy is thereby wasted, contained, and neutralized. The process is painful to the bearer of the light and sometimes fatal as in the case of the crucifixion of Jesus. But as we know this does not signify the success of evil. Rather, it backfires." In the case of Jesus, there was Easter. Jesus the victim becomes the victor.

There is always Easter. The power of the risen Christ is present and at work in the world, and people everywhere can experience it, and sometimes this happens in surprising and yet simple ways.

Recently, I was reading about a church a lot like this one. It was a large congregation that prided itself on its ability to appeal to the educated residents of a university city. At a potluck dinner one night, a visitor said to one of the others present: "I'm kind of new in town, what about you?" The other man replied, "I've been in this church for years. In fact, I'm the only non-intellectual left in this congregation." "You're kidding," the visitor said. "No, I'm not," the other man answered. "I haven't understood a sermon that's been preached here in twenty-five years, but I'd never leave this church." "Why not?" the visitor asked. He answered, "For several years now, every Monday night, I and a few others go to a nearby prison for youthful offenders. Sometimes we play ball with the young people, sometimes we do a little Bible study. Most of all we get to know them as human beings. I started doing this because Christians are supposed to do things like that, but now I find that I get a lot from it myself." He paused for a moment, then continued, "I have found that you can't prove the promises of God in advance, but if you live them, you find they're true, everyone."

I continue to meet people like that man; people who live the promises of God, particularly the promise of Easter — people who refuse to believe the lie of the victory of violence. The truth of Easter is lived out in ordinary ways such as by having children in uncertain times, and serving up soup to the homeless, and giving money to the church, and praying for justice for poor

people in this country and in countries whose names they can hardly pronounce, and writing letters to strangers, and in countless ways betting their lives on a future more gracious and redemptive than they or anyone else can possibly create by mere human effort.

Not long ago, I came across a couple who have every reason to let their lives slip safely into some predictable groove. They are politically conservative, socially cautious by nature. They are retired. Their income is fixed, but comfortable. Their children are successfully raised and gone. They have every reason to pat themselves on the back for a job well done, turn on the television, and relax. Through a program in their church, however, they began to write a federal prisoner. It began slowly — a chatty letter every now and then, a card and a box of cookies on his birthday. Then a visit and another. Then the man is paroled, out, free, a human being to be dealt with. Last Christmas, when most retired people with stocks and bonds were carving the turkey and figuring out how to get on the good side of the new tax laws, this couple gave thanks and broke bread in their home with their newly released friend. “I think he was convicted of armed robbery, we’re not sure,” they said. “Anyway, it’s good to have him in our home.” What do you say to these people on Easter Sunday? “Your faith is not in vain.”

I believe the power of the risen Christ can be seen in countless places. That’s the truth of Easter. It’s not violence and death but suffering love which still wins the victory.

The truth of Easter is that all the tenderness and strength which on Good Friday we saw scourged, buffeted, stretched out on a cross — all that beauty and goodness is again alive and with us now, not as a memory that inevitably fades, but as an undying presence in the life of every single one of us if we would only recognize it. And this is the strongest power in creation. Nothing can ever overcome it. Amen.