Easter Sunday, March 26, 1989
THE CROSS OF JESUS: THE ANSWER TO DEATH (No. 7 in a Series)
John 20:1-18

In the last 500 years, the work of art which has exerted the greatest symbolic power on the greatest number of people is the Isenheim Altarpiece, completed in 1515. One art historian has called it “a work of such tremendous and dismal grandeur of expression that nothing on earth seems to equal it.”

This awesome masterpiece, measuring ten feet long when closed, twenty-one feet long when opened, and eight feet high, is now housed in a museum in Colmar, France.

The Order of St. Anthony commissioned the Altarpiece for their monastery at Isenheim. They asked Matthias Grunewald, who was considered to be one of the greatest artists of his time, to present their chapel with something that would bring healing and cleansing to the poor and diseased. Something especially for those afflicted with one of the most horrible diseases ever recorded in human history, a disease that wreaked more devastation on the human body than even AIDS — the gangrenous, putrefying disease called St. Anthony’s Fire.

How did these monks expect the sick and dying to find healing and cleansing in front of this Altarpiece? What kind of therapy was in this painting? The answer was in the successive revelations unveiled by the opening and closing of the Altarpiece.

When the wings of the Altarpiece were closed, the sick and poor gazed at the crucifixion panel, the most gruesome, tortured, agonized, tormented, almost unbearable crucifixion scene ever painted. There, under a monstrous crown of thorns, was a dangling pitiful body with twisted limbs, covered with countless lacerations and rivulets of blood. The scene was one of unbearable agony. It was this crucifixion panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece that hung over Karl Barth’s desk — above and before him all the time he worked and wrote.

When the wings of the Altarpiece were opened, however, the dark, deserted landscape and blue-black sky was driven away by a blaze of light. Suddenly, the poor, sick pilgrims stood in awe before three spectacular panels. The first panel contained the most unusual annunciation scene in the world of art, the angel of God revealing to Mary that she has been chosen to be the mother of the Savior of the world; the second panel depicted the Angel Choir with seraphs and cherubim celebrating Mary and the newborn child; and the third revealed the most glorious resurrection scene ever portrayed, with Jesus exploding from the grave.

Where is the healing in this? When the panels of the Isenheim Altarpiece are opened, when a crucified body is entered, health and life are found. Pain, suffering, and death open to birth and resurrection.

That’s the story of the cross of Jesus, which is followed by the resurrection — suffering and death are turned into life. Resurrection answers crucifixion; life answers death. If Jesus reveals the nature of God in His life and crucifixion, He most surely also reveals God through resurrection. God is always bringing new life into being. Nothing can overpower the love of God.

The cross of Jesus, which is always followed by Easter, tells us that we live in a world in which God cannot be eliminated. Just when we think we have God in a box, or in a tomb, or on a

cross, when it seems that death has the upper hand, then God breaks out in a resurrection in a new and unpredictable way.

Every time people kill that which is of God, it comes back and lives on. And even more strangely, after we've killed it and it comes to new life, it is stronger than before.

Following the crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples saw Jesus in a new way. Instead of not seeing Him anywhere, they began to see Him everywhere. Instead of His absolute absence, they began to experience His total presence, no matter where they were or what they were doing... in the breaking of bread, on the road, at their work. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus was set free to be the authentic, universal, cosmic, eternal Christ. His truth became irrepressible. It cannot be buried. The resurrection tells us that our past failures need not be the final story of our lives and that the future offers always a new beginning.

Too often in the past, we Christians have talked about the cross of Jesus and Easter which follows as the answer to death in terms of life after our own death — immortality. That's certainly a part of the meaning of the resurrection; it's part of the answer which the cross of Jesus has for death. But the resurrection also speaks of new life for people here and now, before we die our physical death. Our new life begins when we begin following Jesus and giving our life away.

We can meet the risen Christ in some unpredictable places. The risen Christ, which is the eternal love of God, is now everywhere and available to everyone, and it is seen in such things as the restlessness that compels the most impoverished, oppressed human beings to know that they have the right to demand freedom and dignity, and they are willing to die for that right, and when they do, there is always a resurrection.

One person put it this way: "I did not see the risen Christ at the tomb, and I never touched His side, but I have seen Him in many other ways and know that He is alive. I saw Him last week, and Easter had not yet arrived. I saw Him on the subway. There were these children whose hands kept moving as I looked up from my book past the sea of faces. They were deaf, but they were joyously talking to each other with their hands.

I saw the risen Christ in a smile from a kindly, gentle woman of 93 years in a hospital room. A pin had been inserted in her hip during an operation; she knew she would walk again. I saw the risen Christ late one night in the tender love shown by a wife and husband as they comforted each other after the death of their infant child.

I saw the risen Christ in a widow, after having spent long days lovingly nursing her husband while his life ebbed away, packed away the past and invested herself in the life around her."

You see, too many of us tend to think of Easter in the past tense. We picture it as an event that occurred almost 2000 years ago, and therefore as something we commemorate each year. But Easter is also in the present tense.

To speak of Easter in any kind of tense is to say that Easter is a verb and not a noun. Easter is not a once-for-all happening, but a continuing action that is still going on.

I like to think of it this way: Easter is a verb which describes the continuing creative energy of God flowing through all things, all time, all space. We are a part of that flow.

The Easter message says 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 and energy in the life of every single one of us, if only we would recognize it. Christ's resurrection promises our own resurrection.

Easter has less to do with one person's coming out of a tomb than with the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power. Through the crucifixion and resurrection, we encounter the reality that God's love endures all pain, without being conquered or overwhelmed by it.

You may look at the world around you and say, "But death, sin, evil, and brokenness still thrive, therefore where is Easter at work?" The resurrection did not promise that there would be no more suffering, pain, evil, or death. However, the action of Easter assures us that God's creative loving power will always, in the long run, overcome sin, evil, and death.

Furthermore, as human beings with free will, you and I can decide to let Easter work in and through us, or we can keep it from working in us. But we cannot keep it from working in the world at large.

I believe the miracle of Easter appears over and over again in our world and in the lives of individuals if you let it. Easter says: Come out of your tomb. Do not be afraid of death, and also do not be afraid of infinite possibilities. Easter proclaims above all that there is no limit to what the love of God can do.

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and may have it abundantly." He wanted to show us what life really is. Life to the average person consists of birth, emotions, eating, drinking, education, working, pleasure, hoping, wishing, sleeping, worrying, hating, fighting, hoarding, dominating, disappointment, and death. We often say in the face of some disappointment, "Well, that's life for you." But it is not life at all. It is but a small fragment of life whose full potential has been frustrated. Life is God, and life is boundless. Looking at the empty tomb, the resurrected Jesus, and the infinite possibilities of life that they revealed for all of us, we could say (and we should), "That's life for you!" Through the resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that the life of God is indestructible and eternal, and not just for Jesus, but for you and me. Amen.