Easter Sunday, April 15, 1990
THE EASTER VISION
John 20:1-18

Of all the followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene is to be regarded as the first apostle. She was the first to proclaim the gospel of the risen Christ. Mary Magdalene was not only faithful, but persistent. At the crucifixion, she stayed at the foot of the cross until Jesus was pronounced dead and taken away, and she was the first person, according to the Gospel of John, to go to the tomb early, while it was still dark on Sunday morning.

When she arrived, she found the stone rolled away and assumed that someone had moved the body of Jesus to another location. So Mary Magdalene ran back to tell Peter and John what she thought had happened. They returned with her to the tomb, looked inside, saw that it was empty, and returned home.

Mary Magdalene, persistent and faithful as always, stayed there outside the tomb, weeping. A few minutes later, she heard a voice asking her why she was crying. Believing it to be the gardener, she complained that the body of her Lord had been taken away. Only when Jesus called her by name, “Mary,” did she recognize him. Jesus then told her to go and tell the other disciples, and she did.

Faithfulness like that of Mary Magdalene’s has a way of running into life-changing surprises. When one goes faithfully on with duty, doing in times of darkness, disappointment, and defeat what is often the little that can be done, one meets the unexpected, and sorrow is turned into joy.

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

Easter gave Mary Magdalene and the other followers of Jesus a new vision of reality. And it gives us a new vision too — a vision that is counter to what has been and still is ordinarily believed.

This Easter vision had its beginning earlier when a young carpenter from Galilee began to embody and teach a different view of God and how God works in the world. “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand,” he said. His ministry and teachings stirred people as they had not been stirred before. People who came into contact with Jesus and listened to his words began to believe that they did have worth and could make a difference with their lives as they collaborated with a dynamic and loving God.

What the young carpenter represented was certainly not new. It had been alive in history at least since Abraham and Sarah when they experienced God’s promise to bless all of creation through them and their descendants. Jesus was the fulfillment of this ancient promise.

At the same time, of course, the hope and dynamism of the young carpenter offended those who wanted things to stay as they were. New visions of reality always offend people who think they are in control. They turned against Jesus in a swift succession of events one Thursday

night and had him arrested, put on trial, and before the sun went down on Friday afternoon, he was dead and put in a tomb.

But then the absolutely unexpected occurred. The new vision of reality that Jesus taught and lived was vindicated in the resurrection.

The Easter vision presents a new way of understanding God and all of creation. God is the One who can make the things that are out of the things that are not, and the One who can make what we experience as dead come to life again.

First of all, here is what the Easter vision tells us about God and the world in which we live. Easter says:

Life is always stronger than death.

Love is stronger than hate.

Non-violence is stronger than violence.

God is stronger than evil.

God forgives the worst that we can do over and over again and makes all things new.

But even after the resurrection, the Easter vision of God and the creation was not easily accepted. As the Apostles began to tell the story of what had happened, they got into trouble because of it. In the book of Acts in the New Testament, we are told that the religious authorities and others in power were angry because the Apostles were proclaiming to people that God had raised Jesus from the dead. The Apostles were arrested and put into jail.

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 authorities were worried because the Easter vision proclaims that death is not the ultimate power. That goes against the world's view of death. Don't we believe that to threaten someone with death is the final 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. That will take care of that. Are the criminals who were crucified along 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. By and large, we still worship the power of death. Every assassination is a statement of faith in the power of death.

Contrast this with the Easter vision of how the world works and how God works. Easter says the love of God is stronger than death. Easter says evil cannot be used to cast out evil. Selfish people cannot destroy the selfless love of God no matter how much they torture it, spit on it, make fun of it, imprison it, or crucify it. Easter says we live in a world where God's forgiving love cannot be eliminated. Easter tells us that every time we try to kill that which is of God, it comes back and with more power than before.

But if people begin to believe this and to live accordingly — it upsets everything. If this is true, then all of our weapons for killing are in the long run useless. The Easter vision goes counter to much that we like to believe and which is a part of our culture.

Someone recently said of modern physicists that most of them go home from the laboratory and live their ordinary lives as if Newton, not Einstein, were right. Many times we Christians are like that — we celebrate Easter and know the Easter vision is true, but we then go home and continue to live our lives as if Easter never happened and as if Good Friday were the final fact.

Secondly, here is what the Easter vision tells us about ourselves, about human beings as God's creatures.
The Easter vision proclaims that we human beings have an eternal destiny. At the same time that we are in this world, we are also in an eternal commonwealth. The Kingdom of God, Jesus called it. Jesus revealed the human future as leading through the forbidding doorway of death to limitless life. And this door is open to any and all people. In God's eyes, we all have equal value.

This dignity and infinite value of a human being, according to the Easter vision, arises from the destiny bestowed by God in creation and restored and reformed in Christ.

This, of course, is not the way the world operates. The life of every society is often a harsh process of pushing other people down and pulling ourselves up. People are ceaselessly judged and ranked, and in turn, they ceaselessly judge and rank others. It is part of our struggle for self-esteem. We like to rank others below us in an attempt to make us feel higher.

But in God's realm, most of our usual human judgments are not valid. In fact, they are many times reversed. Jesus said, "The first shall be last, and the last first."

But even more than that, the Easter vision proclaims that we human beings have an eternal glory that God has defined as our ultimate possibility and mission. Therefore, social and natural determinations — rank and nationality, sex and color, intelligence, beauty, charm, wealth, fame, all of the qualities by which we judge others and ourselves and which in judging we accentuate and confirm — fall away. Now that's good news!

Dr. Fred Craddock, one of my favorite preachers, tells of going back to his home state of Tennessee and sitting in a restaurant. The owner, an old man, stopped at his table and in their conversation discovered that his guest was a minister. He said, "Since you are a minister, I want to tell you a story." He told Dr. Craddock that he had grown up here and that he was born to a mother who wasn't married at the time.

The town where he was born was filled with the kind of people who say that they forgive, but won't forget. So there was a label that followed him wherever he went in that town.

One Sunday after worship, as he was leaving the church quickly as he always did to prevent any glances or caustic remarks, the minister caught him by the arm and held on tight. "Who are you, son?" the preacher asked. "Whose boy are you?" The lad froze, fearing that he was about to be handed his biggest rejection.

Before he could open his mouth to answer, the preacher said, with a warm smile on his face, "Wait a minute, I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a child of God."

And with that, he patted him on the shoulder and said, “Son, you’ve got a great inheritance; go and claim it now.”

The man told Dr. Craddock how that one statement had literally changed his life. From then on, he had more respect for himself and demanded more from himself. From that moment on, he traveled a different road, and his life took on a new dimension.

“What’s your name?” Dr. Craddock asked the man. “Ben Hooper,” he said. As he walked away, Craddock remembered that twice the people of Tennessee had elected a man born as an illegitimate child to be the governor. His name was Ben Hooper.

The Easter vision reminds us that we are all children of God, and there is no limit to what the love of God can do. So on this Easter Sunday, let’s not limp back to business as usual. Let the Easter vision of God and the creation become your vision. Then you can face any problems that come your way. Amen.