Easter Sunday, March 31, 1991
THE EASTER PARADIGM
Mark 16:1-8

Faithfulness has a way of running into surprises. When we faithfully continue with our duties, doing what little can be done in times of darkness, disappointment, or defeat, we often encounter the unexpected and are surprised by joy. However, the unexpected can also cause us to be afraid.

According to the Easter story in Mark's gospel, three women, all close followers of Jesus, went to the tomb on Sunday morning to complete the preparation of Jesus' body for burial. Expecting death, they met life!

There is nothing in all of history or human experience that is more contrasting than the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning. 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 glory of God.

The scene runs counter to common-sense human experience. Death is turned into life! Thus, Mark's gospel reports, "They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Later, when some of the other disciples got the news, they had the same reaction. They were plain scared, terrified!

They had good reason to be afraid. Because of the Easter event, their view of life and death, their understanding of God and how God works in the world, no longer made sense. It's not easy to quickly change one's point of view or one's understanding of God. It's not easy to change the paradigm through which we try to understand life and death.

I've used the word "paradigm" in sermons several times in the past, but I want to refresh your memory of what the word means. A paradigm is a model or pattern. It is a shared set of assumptions, like a filter or lens through which we try to understand the world. Each one of us sees people, events, and the world around us through some kind of paradigm. The paradigm helps explain the world to us and aids us in predicting its behavior and our own behavior. It's been that way since the beginning of time.

A few examples: A famous historical paradigm was the view at one time held by nearly everyone that the earth is the center of the universe. All else revolves around it, for as any fool can plainly see, the sun comes up in the east, moves overhead, and sets in the west, and the stars move around the earth in predictable courses. That paradigm, in its day, explained the world better than any other one.

By the 16th century, however, some advanced astronomers were saying that this paradigm, this theory of how the universe is organized, had too many discrepancies. They saw things happening that did not fit the pattern. So people like Copernicus began to look for a better way to explain the universe — a new paradigm. The earth and the other planets, said Copernicus, move around the sun.

But paradigms do not change easily. We get used to them. We have a lot invested in them. We forget they are paradigms and come to believe they are the absolute and all-time truth. In fact, those who propose new ones are often persecuted and killed. They are considered very dangerous. Jesus is an example. He said God loved the whole world, all people everywhere and in every time, not only people of one religion, or one race, or one nation. He said, “Love your enemies,” whereas the old paradigm said, “Hate your enemies.”

But it’s only when we are open to examining new paradigms that we can begin to discover new truths. I’m not saying that many or all of our old paradigms are wrong, but we need not be afraid of comparing our new knowledge and beliefs with the old ones. Often such comparisons involve contradictions, but these, in turn, generate new creative insights about the order of reality. The capacity to tolerate complexity and welcome contradiction, not the need for simplicity and certainty, is the attribute of an explorer and is also the foundation for faith. Doubt is not the enemy of faith, or the opposite of faith. Honest doubt is the seed of faith.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless, yet be determined to make them otherwise.”

So now we can understand why the three women fled from the tomb in fear and why some of the other disciples, when they heard the news that the tomb was empty and that Jesus had risen, were equally afraid. Because of the Easter event, their view of life and death, of the world, and of God needed to change. And it’s not easy to change one’s paradigms or patterns of thinking.

Up to this point in their lives, the people in Jesus’ time, including his closest followers, pretty much regarded reality as fixed and static. Things were predictable. Thus, the appropriate human stance was one of accepting, 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 paradigm had its beginning some time before the Easter event when a young carpenter from Galilee began to embody and articulate a different view of reality. He said, “The time is fulfilled, and the realm of God is at hand. God is in the midst of you, and God is within you. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” His ministry and teachings stirred people as they had not been stirred before. People who had been excluded from society and who had been put down as having little worth now began to believe that they did have worth and could make a difference with their lives as they collaborated with a dynamic, loving God.

What the young 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. It had continued through Moses and the law and the prophets in the Old Testament. Jesus simply brought this faith to its fullest flower.

At the same time, of course, the hope and dynamism of the young carpenter offended people who wanted to hold on to the old paradigms, those who were in authority and those who had no hope, the people who believed in the power of death rather than the power of life. They turned against him in a swift succession of events one Thursday night, had him arrested, and put on trial. Before the sun went down on Friday afternoon, he was dead and buried.

If reality ever seemed to be static and death the final power, it seemed so then. But on Sunday morning, the absolutely unexpected occurred. The women who went to the tomb found it empty. They found the stone rolled away from the door and the body gone. So deep was their despair, however, that it did not occur to them at first that God had anything to do with all this. They assumed someone had stolen the body. But then they encountered the glory of God in a shining presence who told them, “He is not here! He is risen!”

Easter presents a new paradigm, a new way of understanding God and God’s creation. Reality is not static; it is dynamic. God’s love is stronger than the power of death. God is continually making all things new. There is more to this life than meets the eye.

That should be good news, and it is. But it can also be perceived as bad news for those who rely so much on the threat and power of death. If the Easter story is true, then death is not the decisive moral power in history. If the Easter story is true, then death, killing people, and the threat of death lose their power. If people begin to believe this and live accordingly, it upsets everything — much of our world is thrown off-balance.

Isn’t it true that most of us still tend to believe that death is the ultimate weapon and power over others? But once an individual or a people, as in the case of the followers of Mahatma Gandhi, believe that the power of death has been broken, then no person or nation has any real power over them anymore. I think that’s what Martin Luther King Jr. meant when he said in his most famous speech, “I have a dream,” that he was “free at last.”

The opposite of the Easter paradigm is to believe in the power of death. That’s why Hitler called his mass murder of the Jews, “The Final Solution.” But it wasn’t the final solution. Easter says, “Killing and death are never the final solution.”

When the early church began to grow and expand following Easter, the Roman Empire also thought it had the final solution for the Christian faith — persecute and kill the Christians. Followers of Jesus were branded as misfits and public enemies, and in many cases were put to death. However, the Roman Empire died long ago, but Jesus and his followers are still very much alive. Easter continues. It is not merely a past event. Easter reveals the power by which God is making all reality into a home in which all of God’s creatures have access to life and life abundant.

Understanding the world through the Easter paradigm not only tells us that death is not the ultimate power, but it also reveals that the only way you can ever save your life is to lose it. Some of you are facing hardships at this very moment, others of you will be facing them, or have faced them. There is the hardship of readjustment in one’s personal life to a new situation; perhaps you have lost someone who has died, and you have to remake the pattern of your life. Others are facing the hardship of undertaking an unpleasant or very difficult task. And there may be those here who are faced with the hardship of breaking and rooting out a habit that is deep-seated, bad, misleading, and corroding.

What most of us do when we face a hardship is to try to get out of it. We withdraw from it, we shrink from it, we try to circumvent it — do anything but go through it. But the Easter paradigm tells us that the only way we will get out of that hardship is to plunge right into the heart of it, take it on, forget yourself, lose yourself in something that God has called upon you to do.

Seeing the world through the Easter paradigm gives us yet another truth about the world in which we live. The visible world all around us is only a small fraction of the real world. This also

means that this brief life, which each one of us has on this earth, is but a fraction of our life eternal with God.

Whenever we hear glorious Easter music like we've heard today, we begin with the visible world — the instruments, the singers, the music score — but that is only the beginning. It is an introduction into an invisible world that keeps us rising and soaring into new heights, which I can only define as experiencing in some small way the glory of God.

If you have a deep relationship with another person, you experience the same thing. It has a foundation that is visible — the other person's body, your body, a smile, the sound of the voice — all physical characteristics — but that is only a fraction of a person. That is only the entrance into an invisible world that is infinitely greater, where the love and the loyalties go deep, the affections abide, and where men and women go through fire and brimstone for each other. That is an invisible world.

The Easter paradigm connects the visible and the invisible. The Easter celebration reminds us of God's ultimate power and love, which is also present here in our visible world, but what we see and experience is only a small fraction of what it is in eternity.

So this Easter, I hope you are a little fearful, even a bit terrified, because if Christ is risen, then your world is not as you usually imagine it to be, and that means some changes need to be made in the way you live. On the other hand, remember that Easter can also remove many of your fears because it proclaims that the power of love, which comes from God, is always stronger than any hardship you face — indeed, it is stronger than the power of death itself.

Thanks be to God. Amen.