Easter Sunday, April 11, 1993
EASTER GLORY (No. 4 in a Series: Lord's Prayer)
Matthew 28:1-10

Easter and glory go together, but "glory" is a word we do not use very often in our everyday conversations, except in its adjective form. For example, I might say, "It's been a 'glorious' day," or "I had a glorious time."

Yet Easter and glory go hand in hand. As a noun, "glory" is a word that speaks of honor, exaltation, approval, endorsement, worthiness, triumph, and splendor. All of these words apply to Easter. Thus, when we pray the concluding phrase of the Lord's Prayer, "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever," we are speaking of Easter. We are acknowledging God's worthiness, God's triumph, and God's approval and endorsement of all creation.

In addition to the word "glory" in this concluding phrase of the Lord's Prayer, notice especially the word "thine." The Lord's Prayer does not say, "Ours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." In other words, the kingdom, the power, and the glory ultimately belong to God. God always has the last and final word.

Now let's be more specific. What are some of the things the glory of Easter tells us?

First of all, Easter glory calls into question our usual way of understanding life in this world. It reverses what we usually believe:

It means that life is always stronger than death.
Love is stronger than hate.
What we think of as weakness can be power.
Non-violence is stronger than violence.
Good is stronger than evil.
God forgives the worst that we can do over and over again and makes all things new.
Easter glory 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 on a cross, or in a tomb; when it seems that death has the upper hand, God breaks out in a new way.

But in spite of the glory of Easter, we live in a world that continues to worship the power of death, while Easter glory reminds us that death is not the solution to most of our problems, even though we like to think so. In fact, the first death recorded in the Bible came about because it was thought to be a "solution" to a problem. The sons of Adam and Eve quarreled, and Cain resolved it by killing his brother Abel.

Ever since then, and including today, death is still thought of and used as a final solution in thought and deed. An umpire's decision is not agreed with in a baseball game, and angry yells erupt: "Kill the umpire!" Property or life is threatened, and someone shouts, "Shoot them dead!" One nation feels threatened by another, and we say, "Nuke 'em!" An outrageous crime is committed, and an equally outraged community shouts: "Give him the chair!" or "String him up!"

Every assassination is based on a belief in the power of death. Some people thought that by killing Martin Luther King, Jr., they could stop the civil rights movement for equality. I had a

professor in college who used to say over and over again, “Remember, my friends, you cannot kill an idea with a gun.”

Jesus was a problem. His ideas were seen as a threat to how the world usually functions. Therefore, the people shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Yet his ideas, teachings, and spirit live on in an even more powerful way.

That’s what Easter glory is all about. “Christ is risen.” “Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”

Easter glory says that the power of life, which comes from God, is always stronger than the power of death.

Easter glory says that the new is always being born within us, often when we least expect it. It is the code word that God is always faithful in providing a saving possibility. This saving possibility is found amidst the crucifixion of our fondest hopes and deepest expectations.

Second, Easter glory means that lives are changed because of the presence of the risen and living Lord in people here and now. Easter glory is about the reality of resurrection — new life — here and now. It is about the power of God, which is able to free us from the tombs and slaveries in which we find ourselves.

I believe the Risen Christ is seen today in 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 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 kind, gentle woman of 93 years in a hospital. A pin had been inserted into 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 and loving hours taking care of her husband while his life ebbed away; when he died, she packed away the past and invested herself in the life around her.

I saw the Risen Christ last Tuesday afternoon in Lincoln, in the person of a Chinese woman, Nien Cheng. She delivered the lecture sponsored by the Cooper Foundation. She spoke of her almost seven years in solitary confinement beginning in 1966 in China, as a result of the “cultural revolution,” carried out by the Red Guards. She said she was able to endure the prison, interrogation, and torture because of the power of God that was constantly with her. She spoke of the power of the Christian faith in present-day China, and she spoke of the power of God, which had given her the power to forgive. Today, at 78, she remains a strong and vibrant woman. She also spoke of the power of love, which can overcome any hate.

Too many of us tend to think of Easter in the past tense. We picture it as something that happened almost 2,000 years ago, but Easter is also in the present tense. Easter is a verb, not a noun. It 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 that describes the continuing creative, loving energy of God flowing through all things, all time, all space. We are part of the flow.

Easter glory tells us that all the tenderness and strength which on Good Friday we saw scourged, taunted, made fun of, and finally 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.

Jesus' ministry was spent freeing people. He said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." But freedom is also a threat. It presents a special threat to anyone who wants to control us. Freedom, therefore, always has its opposition. That's why Jesus was executed.

The opposite of Easter glory is Easter fear. Some of you no doubt remember the television series "Twilight Zone." One episode in that series was about a town in the Old West. One day, a stranger rode into that town. He was a snake oil salesman type, only in this story, the salesman was selling something more intriguing. For ten dollars, he would raise someone from the dead. Of course, the stranger became the overnight talk of the town. Though many were skeptical, many others were curious enough to risk the money — a lot of money in those days — to have someone raised from the dead. Then the story took a curious twist. People started coming to the stranger in secrecy at night, offering him twenty dollars if he would not raise certain people from the dead. It does not take much imagination to speculate why so many were willing to pay such hush money.

The death of Jesus is manageable, understandable, and containable, as death usually is. It is the resurrection that throws things off balance because it is not manageable or containable. It removes things from our control and prediction. Christ alive and living in us is totally unpredictable, as the disciples discovered, turning up next, no telling where or when.

Easter glory describes the continuing victory of powerless love over loveless power. Through the crucifixion and resurrection, we encounter the reality that God's love endures all pain and suffering without being conquered and overwhelmed by it. This power is available to all of us. I saw this personally in that remarkable Chinese Christian woman last Tuesday.

Third, Easter glory carries with it a kind of holy laughter. Here is this unknown nobody, Jesus of Nazareth, disclaiming every conventional rule of protocol, defying every earthly power, rewriting his religious tradition, reversing worldly values, saying such ridiculous things as "the first shall be last and the last first," "Love your enemies and bless those who persecute you," "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal, for where your treasure is, there will be your heart also."

Here is this itinerant teacher deliberately choosing the outcasts, the sinners, the lepers, the disinherited, and the heartbroken, proclaiming hope to all who had no hope, forgiving the undeserving, being inclusive and not exclusive by welcoming any and all into God's kingdom,

finally tortured and put to death, sealed in a tomb, but now he is alive and everywhere, and his glory cannot be stopped.

Can we not see in this Easter glory a kind of holy humor? Not a cruel joke, but a joke more in the sense of a surprise gift, something nobody expected.

Some people, it has been said, no matter how hard you try to explain it, simply don't get a joke. Easter glory is like that. There is no point in trying to explain it or make it more plausible. Easter glory is the moment when the laughter of the universe breaks through. May this also happen again and again in your life and mine. Amen.