Easter Sunday, April 16, 1995
THE MIRACLE OF THE RESURRECTION
Luke 24:1-12

Some of you can remember back to Monday, July 21, 1969, when two American astronauts, Neil Armstrong and Ed Aldrin, landed on the moon. President Richard Nixon was quoted as saying, “This is the greatest day since the creation of the world.” It certainly was a dramatic incident, witnessed on television by millions of people. But to call it “the greatest day since the creation of the world” was overstating the case.

The fact is that often in human history, the most significant events, when they happen, are not noticed by many and may not be seen as very important at the time. Their true significance is only understood later.

Such was the case with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. If there had been newspapers in that day and if the crucifixion and resurrection had been reported, it would not have made the headlines, but would’ve appeared on a back page. The story might have read something like this:

Jerusalem, April 16, 33 A.D. — Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified this past Friday along with two other criminals, is reported to have been raised from the dead. Some women who were His followers when He was alive went to the tomb early this morning to better prepare His body for burial.

According to their report, when they arrived, they found the stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, and going inside, they found the tomb empty. When these women went back to report what they had discovered to the other disciples who were in hiding, their words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

A typical citizen of Jerusalem would’ve read the story and probably not thought much more about it. A few might have wondered, “So what? What difference does it make anyway?”

Even the closest followers of Jesus did not grasp the significance or implications of the resurrection until many days later, as they began to experience the living Christ in their lives. In fact, it wasn’t until 50 days later, on the day of Pentecost, that they began to do anything about it, and only then did the full implications of the resurrection even begin to dawn on them.

To put it another way, the early followers of Jesus sort of backed into Easter. Take the Apostle Paul as an example. When Paul talks about the power of the Risen Christ and what it means to him and to all of creation, he does not start with the story of the empty tomb. He begins with his own experience and works backward in a deductive fashion to a general notion of resurrection.

In fact, the early church as a whole showed virtually no interest in the grave of Jesus or in His tomb. That came only later, in the medieval period, when people became fascinated with the tomb. But the early church was not interested in tombs.

That’s amazing when you think of their Jewish background and the larger Middle Eastern culture of that period because there was, at that time, a strong interest in burial places and

tombs. One of the most precious sites for ancient Israel and for modern Israel is Mount Zion because that's where David is buried.

Or take Egypt as an example. Several years ago, when my wife and I and a number of others from this church visited Egypt, it almost seemed like one massive graveyard. We visited ancient temples used as burial sites everywhere.

As far as the tomb of Jesus is concerned, there is still a big disagreement over the location. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is one site. The so-called Garden Tomb is the other site. I've visited both places and heard people argue about which is the authentic one.

But the early church said, "Why do you have to know where He was buried? We're not interested in empty tombs." Or, as the messengers asked the women who came to the tomb early on Easter Sunday morning, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen."

Easter is not about an empty tomb but about the experience of the Risen Christ then and now. It's about the power of the Risen Christ in your life and mine.

Today, let's talk about some of the things that testify to our personal experiences of the Risen Christ and therefore to the miracle of the resurrection.

Have you ever had the experience of being loved unconditionally? Has someone ever loved you, not because of what you did or didn't do, not because of what you owned or influenced, but simply because you exist? If so, then you have experienced the Risen Christ, the perfect living example of such unconditional love. Jesus loved unconditionally everyone He met, and death could not squelch that love. It could not be locked in a tomb. It is as powerfully alive today as when Jesus walked and talked among us. If you have known this kind of love, then you have experienced the miracle of the resurrection.

Have you experienced undeserved forgiveness? Have you ever hurt, disappointed, denied, or rejected someone else, only to have that person turn around and forgive you? Or have you forgiven another who had no good reason to be forgiven? If so, then you have met the risen Jesus, the embodiment of God's unconditional forgiveness. The power of that forgiveness is alive today. It couldn't be killed with the crucifixion of Jesus. It couldn't be sealed in a tomb. It's part of the miracle of the resurrection.

I know a man whose daughter had a mental breakdown at age 21 and was institutionalized for probably the rest of her life. When I asked him what it meant, he said, "I don't know. But never again will I ever say an unkind word about anybody." And he has been keeping that vow for many years. Here is kindness arising out of tragedy. Life out of death. That person is living the miracle of the resurrection.

A friend of mine had a severe heart attack. After a long period of convalescence, he recovered and, in the process, died to his old way of life and was resurrected to a new way. His life and habits changed. He learned to pace himself. He quit smoking. He watched his diet. He got the right amount of exercise. He learned to spend more time at home with his family in a relaxing manner. He rearranged his priorities. He said to me one day, "I know now at least part of the meaning of the resurrection. I never knew so much good could come out of that illness."

The miracle of the resurrection means that frequently the new is being born in us and in creation when we least believe it or expect it. For you and me as persons, the resurrection makes a difference because it says that people can and do change. New life appears in them. It can happen to you.

It's kind of paradoxical to encounter the Risen Christ because it means that much of our conventional wisdom is not so wise.

Resurrection laughs at the notion that there is nothing new under the sun. It mocks the idea that the more things change, the more they stay the same. It ridicules the dictum, "might makes right."

Herod and Pilate and the other enemies of Jesus were sure that if Jesus were killed and buried, that would be the end of that. But God's love and God's truth cannot be killed by killing one person or a thousand. God's love and truth cannot be sealed in a tomb, nor can it be kept from spreading by guards or even armies.

In addition to the miracle of the resurrection being a part of our personal lives, the miracle of the resurrection also has to do with the saving possibilities present in the world at large, within creation itself. It says that the future is larger and more astounding than we can imagine. It says that the unexpected and the unpredictable can and do happen.

Who in their right mind would've predicted that a convicted itinerant preacher, crucified as a common criminal, and that because of the Easter event, His small bewildered band of followers would carry on His work, and it would become a worldwide movement? Easter and the church, which came into existence because of it, defies the extrapolations, overturns the projections, bursts all the models, and is unlike anything ever seen by human beings.

Sure, it's all right to make plans and projections, and we should. But the miracle of the resurrection tells us that we also need to be open to the surprises, the exceptions, the unpredictable, the Easters that are continually taking place in us personally and in this world. It's what the Bible calls the work of the Holy Spirit.

The miracle of the resurrection proclaims that the new continues to be born in us and in creation when we least believe or expect it.

One more point about the miracle of the resurrection — it calls into question our ordinary, everyday way of looking at things and people.

The events leading up to the crucifixion and Easter go against what we commonly believe to be true. Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with humility and vulnerability. Those are not high values in our culture. We tend to worship power. Our common sense tells us that Jesus should've entered on a white horse, not a donkey, leading His followers who should've been armed with the weapons of the day.

But as the Bible says over and over again, "God's ways are not our ways." The crucifixion and the resurrection say that suffering love is stronger than the power of hate.

But it's so hard for us to believe. Some time ago, I saw again on television the films of the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama. Thousands of people were walking unarmed and singing, "We shall overcome." The purpose of the walk was to secure voting rights for Black citizens.

And those in power still believed, like Herod and Pilate and many of us, that a movement for human rights and freedom could be stopped with nightsticks and guns and by locking people in jail.

The miracle of Easter is still at work. It means that the Holy Spirit of God is still very much alive and moving in our world. We raise up crosses and brandish guns. God opens up tombs and gives new life. We believe death is our ultimate power over others, but God reigns over death. In the cross, we see how violent we can be, but in the crucifixion and resurrection, we see the all-powerful unconditional love of God at work.

The miracle of the resurrection tells us that our past failures need not be the final story of our lives and that the future always offers a new choice.

The miracle of the resurrection is above all a message about the power and faithfulness of God. God is always ready to give us back the life we thought we had lost. Easter contains the good news that a saving possibility is given even amidst the crucifixion of our fondest hopes and our deepest expectations. Thanks be to God. Amen.