Easter Sunday, April 7, 1996
EASTER IS A VERB
Matthew 28:1-10

Do you mind if I begin this Easter sermon with a few personal questions? When you came to the Easter worship service this morning, what were some of your expectations? What were you looking for? What makes Easter Sunday different from all other Sundays? Why is it that people who are not regular church attenders feel a need to be in worship on Easter Sunday?

Once the worship service is over and you leave this place, what do you hope will have happened to you as a result of being here? Will it make any difference in your life next week or next month? Will it give you new direction in your spiritual journey? Will you return to worship here next Saturday evening or Sunday morning? Or, if not next week, the following week? If not, why not?

I wish I had the opportunity to personally ask each one of you these questions and get your honest answers. Since that's not possible, I hope you'll take a moment to answer these questions in your own mind. Here's one way to do it: next Sunday, or three Sundays later, when you're puttering around the house or doing something else instead of being in worship, ask yourself, "Why did I decide to attend church on Easter Sunday, and why did I decide not to go today?"

All these questions were on my mind this past week as I was preparing this Easter sermon. Each year, I struggle with the Easter sermon more than any other one. Easter Sunday places a heavy responsibility on the preacher because more people attend on this day than on any other Sunday during the year. I want to have something to say that will make a difference in your life. I also hope to offer something that will move you to come back next week and the following week.

Here are some of my thoughts on the questions I began with. I believe we humans are created by God with a need for faith and for ongoing nourishment from faith. We need spiritual food just as much as we need food for our physical bodies. In his book Timeless Healing, Dr. Herbert Benson, a Harvard physician, presents solid evidence supporting this idea. Based on more than 30 years of research, Dr. Benson concludes that our bodies are "wired" to benefit from exercising both our muscles and our rich inner core — our beliefs, values, thoughts, and feelings. Though we benefit tremendously from spiritual exercise in the same way we do from physical exercise, we often neglect one or both.

But something about Easter calls us back to this need for spiritual exercise. We sense that the Easter story speaks to our deepest human needs, both spiritual and physical. It's related to our search for something lasting, something eternal — a search every human being tries to satisfy in one way or another.

We know, instinctively, that worshiping God is good for us. But, like many things we know are good for us, we don't always practice them.

So, what is this message of Easter that is so good for us, and that we so much need to hear and put into practice in our daily lives?

First of all, you cannot truly understand the message of Easter until you've lived through Good Friday. Good Friday followed by Easter tells us that God is always bringing new life into being. Nothing can overpower the love of God. Nothing.

The death of Jesus on the cross, followed by the resurrection on Easter Sunday, tells us that we live in a world where God cannot be eliminated. Just when we think we've put God in a box, or in a tomb, or on a cross, when it seems that death has the upper hand, God's power breaks out in a new and unpredictable way.

Every time people try to kill what is of God, it comes back and lives on. Even more strangely, after it has been killed and comes to new life, it is stronger than before.

Easter is the prime example. 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 experiencing his absence, they began to feel his presence no matter where they were or what they were doing.

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 always offers a new beginning.

Too often in the past, we Christians have spoken of the cross and Easter as answers to death in terms of life after our own death — immortality. That is certainly part of the meaning of the resurrection. But the resurrection also speaks of new life for people here and now, before we die our physical death. That's why we speak of being "born again."

Easter means that we can meet the power of the Risen Christ every day, and that power can help us find new life. It's not just something that happened in the past — it happens now. We can meet him in unusual and unexpected places.

There's a statement in the Easter story reported in the gospels that illustrates this. When the women arrived at the tomb in Jerusalem early on the first day of the week, they were greeted by an angel who said, referring to Jesus, "He is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee." This gives us a hint about where the risen Christ can be discovered today.

Perhaps you came to worship this morning thinking that you would experience the power of the risen Christ here in church. Maybe some of you have been searching for the power of God's Spirit in the living Christ and thought, "Maybe I'll find it in church today." The power of God as revealed in the risen Christ is certainly here — but he's also in many other places. Worship is an important starting point, but it's only a beginning.

When you come to worship, you are like the women who came early to the tomb. What they found there was a messenger who told them where to find the Risen Christ. They had to go elsewhere to encounter him. That's part of the role of the church today and especially in worship — to give directions as to where the power of God is at work.

There's an important principle here. If you want to discover the power of God in the Risen Christ, it's helpful to come to church, just as the women came to the tomb. But you must also go out into the "Galilees" of our time, where Jesus lives in spirit and in truth. You come here to learn how to recognize the risen Christ in the many places where he is at work.

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 children, whose hands were 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 and gentle woman, 93 years old, in a hospital room. A pin had been inserted in her hip during an operation, and 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 see the risen Christ in hundreds of people as they volunteer their time with organizations like Habitat for Humanity, helping build homes for people who otherwise would not be able to afford them.”

Too many of us tend to think of Easter in the past tense. We picture it as an event that happened almost 2,000 years ago, something we commemorate each year. But Easter is also in the present tense.

To speak of Easter in any tense is to remember that Easter is a verb, not a noun. Easter is not a once-for-all event, but a continuing action that is still unfolding.

In general terms, I like to think of it this way: Easter is a verb that describes the ongoing creative energy of God flowing through all things, across all time and space.

Easter is not just about one person coming out of a tomb; it’s a message about 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, even death, without being overwhelmed or conquered by it.

You may look at the world around you and say, “But death, sin, evil, and brokenness still thrive, so where is Easter at work?” The resurrection didn’t promise the end of suffering, pain, evil, or death. What Easter assures us of is that God’s creative, loving power will always overcome sin, evil, and death.

As human beings with free will, you can choose to let Easter work in and through you, or you can keep it out of your life. But you cannot stop it from working in the world at large.

I’m glad you’re here this morning. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything. Here, together, we discover an empty tomb. Here, we are inspired and guided. The music alone has been worth our coming. I hope you meet the risen Christ somewhere tomorrow or next week, and I hope you return here again to nourish your faith, exercise your spiritual muscles, and receive the spiritual food you need for your journey. May you continue to hear the message that will remind you of where the risen Christ is at work today. Amen.