Book 32

Sunday April 7, 1996

EASTER IS A VERB Matthew 28:1-10

Do you mind if I begin this Easter sermon with several 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 concluded 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 have given 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 that I had the opportunity to personally ask each one of you these questions and get your honest answers to them. Since that's not possible I hope each one of you will try 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 one of the worship services, ask yourself, "Why did I decide to attend church on Easter Sunday and why did I decide not to go today?"

All these questions and more 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. Therefore I want to have something to say to you that will make a difference in your life. I also want to have something to say that will so move you that you will be back next week and the following week.

Here are some of my tentative answers to some of the questions with which I began this sermon. I believe that we human beings are so created by God that we have a need for faith and for continued nourishment from faith. We need spiritual food as much as we need food for our physical

bodies. A new book by Dr. Herbert Benson with the title, TIMELESS HEALING, presents some solid evidence and arguments for this hypothesis. Dr. Benson is a Harvard physician who has conducted scientific research in this field for more than 30 years and he has come to the conclusion based on his research that our human bodies are "wired" to benefit from exercising not only our muscles but our rich inner, human core--our beliefs, values, thoughts and feelings. Even though we benefit tremendously from "spiritual exercise" in the same way as we do from physical exercise we often neglect one or the other or both.

But there's something about Easter that brings us to remember our need for spiritual exercise. We sense that there's something about the Easter

story which speaks to our deepest human needs, spiritual and physical. It's related to the search within each one of us for something lasting, something eternal which every human being tries to satisfy in one way or another.

To put it another way, we human beings know instinctively that worshipping a higher power, worshipping God is good for us. But like many other things we know are good for us, we don't always practice them.

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

First of all, you cannot truly understand the message of Easter until you have 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 have God in a box, or in a tomb, or on a cross, when it seems that death has the upper hand, then the power of God breaks out in a new and unpredictable way.

Every time people kill that which is of God, it comes back and lives on. And even more strangely, after we've killed it and it 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 his absolute absence they began to experience his total 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 offers always a new beginning.

Too often in the past we Christians have talked about the cross of Jesus and Easter which fol-

lows as the answer to death in terms of life after our own death--immortality. That's 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 the term "born again" is used.

Easter means that we can meet the power of the Risen Christ every day and it can help us find new life. It's not something that happened only in the past and we can meet him in some unusual and unpredictable places.

There's a statement in the Easter story as reported in the gospels which illustrates this especially. When the women arrived at the tomb in old 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 right here in church. Maybe some of you have been looking for the power of God's Spirit in the living Christ and you 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 many other places. Worship is an important beginning 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 there to get

directions. And that's part of the role of the church today and especially worship, to give directions as to where the power of God is at work. Maybe that's why no men came to the tomb early in the morning, we men like to believe that we don't need anyone giving us directions. Maybe that's why men don't attend worship as regularly as women.

There's an important principle at work here. If you want to discover the power of God in the Risen Christ, it's helpful to come here in the same way as the women came to the tomb, but you must also then go out to all the "Galilee's" of our time where Jesus lives in spirit and in truth. You come here so that you can learn to recognize the risen Christ in the many places 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 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 kindly gentle woman of 93 years in a hospital room. A pin had been inserted in 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 see the risen Christ in hundreds and hundreds

of people as they volunteer their time in organizations like Habitat for Humanity so that homes can be built and owned by people who would otherwise not find it possible to do so.

Too many of us tend to think of Easter in the past tense. We picture it as an event that occurred almost 2000 years ago and therefore as 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 and not a noun. Easter is not a once-for-all happening, but a continuing action that is still going on.

In general terms I like to think of it this way: Easter is a verb which describes the continuing cre-

ative energy of God flowing through all things, all time, all space.

Easter is not only about one person's coming out of a tomb, it is also 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, therefore where is Easter at work?" The resurrection did not promise that there would be no more suffering, pain, evil or death. However the action of Easter assures us that God's creative loving power will always overcome sin, evil and death.

As human beings with free will, you can decide to let Easter work in and through you or you can keep it out of you, but you cannot keep it from working in the world at large.So I'm glad you're here this morning. I wouldn't have missed it for anything. For here together we discover an empty tomb. Here we are inspired and instructed. The music alone has been worth our coming. I hope you will meet the risen Christ somewhere tomorrow or next week, and I hope you'll return here again to nourish your faith and exercise your spiritual muscles and get spiritual food for your life's journey and to hear a message that will remind you where the risen Christ is at work today. Amen.