Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997
SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH EASTER

On Friday night before Easter Sunday morning, Pontius Pilate and his advisors went to bed secure in the belief that the man called Jesus would bother them no more. They believed in the power of death. The religious leaders in the city also went to sleep that night believing that the power of death had once again done its proper work. The troublemaker Jesus was out of the way, and soon the little movement He started would die.

Even Jesus' closest followers found themselves trusting more in the power of death than the message of Jesus. They thought it was all over. It wasn't the first or the last time that people were sure killing someone would solve the problem.

Earlier, when Jesus had made up His mind to go to Jerusalem for the Passover, He sent some of His disciples ahead to Samaria to make preparations because He wanted to pass through that area. They reported back that the Samaritans did not want Jesus and His followers to come through their territory or stay overnight among them. So the disciples proposed a simple solution to the problem: "Teacher, why don't you call down fire from heaven and destroy them? Kill them all. That will teach them a lesson." But Jesus would have none of it.

Why is it that we are so tempted, especially in times of difficulty, to worship the power of death? It's the exact opposite of seeing the world through Easter. That's why I'm so thankful that so many of you are here on this Easter Sunday. It shows that you want to believe there is a better way than killing people to solve the world's problems. It shows you want to believe that the power of unconditional love, as taught and lived by Jesus, is stronger than the power of a gun or any other weapon of death or violence. Your presence here is an indication that you want to see the world through Easter.

Note first that there is nothing in all of history or in all of human experience that is more contrasting than the Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning events. According to the Easter story in Mark's gospel, three women, all close followers of Jesus, had gone to the tomb on Sunday morning to complete the preparation of the body of Jesus for burial. Expecting death, they met life.

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; 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 seemed to make sense. It's not easy to quickly change one's point of view, one's understanding of God, and how God works in the world and of how we are to relate to each other.

Easter gave the three women who came to the tomb and the other followers of Jesus a new vision of reality, a new way of seeing the world, and it gives us a new vision too — a vision that is counter to what has been and still is ordinarily believed.

This Easter vision had its beginning earlier when a young carpenter from Galilee began to embody and teach a different view of God and how God relates to us. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand,” He said. His ministry and teaching stirred people as they had not been stirred before. “God is in the midst of you and God is within you.” “God is the power of love at work in the world.” “The first shall be last, and the last first.” God’s love is stronger than death or the threat of death.

His ministry and teachings stirred people, especially those who had been excluded from society and put down as having little worth. They 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 not totally new. It had been alive in history since God created the universe and human beings. It continued in the Old Testament story of Abraham and Sarah and their encounter with God, who wanted to bless and bring hope to all humanity through them. It continued through Moses, the law, and the prophets in the Old Testament. Now, in the life and teachings of Jesus, it had been brought to its fullest flower.

At the same time, of course, the hope and dynamism of the young carpenter offended people who wanted to hold onto another way of seeing the world, who wanted things to remain static. New visions of reality always offend people who think they are in control — those who believe in the power of death rather than the power of love.

They turned against Him in a swift succession of events one Thursday night, had Him arrested, put on trial, and before the sun went down on Friday afternoon, He was dead and locked in a tomb.

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 new way of understanding God, God’s creation, and how we are to relate to one another was vindicated in the experience of the risen Christ.

Now the followers of Jesus began to see the world through Easter and have been doing so ever since. That’s why we’re here today, to hear proclaimed again what it means to see the world through Easter.

What does seeing the world through Easter tell us?

When you see the world through Easter, you know that life is always stronger than death.

When you see the world through Easter, you know that love is stronger than hate.

Non-violence is stronger than violence and always wins in the long run.

God is stronger than evil. There is no power strong enough to destroy the selfless love of God.

God forgives the worst that you can do, over and over again, and makes all things new.

Seeing the world through Easter reveals that the only way you can ever find your life is to give it away.

Some of you are facing hardships at this very moment. Others of you will be facing them. There is the hardship of readjustment in one's personal life to a new situation. Perhaps you have lost a loved one in death, and you have to remake the patterns 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 destructive, deep-seated, and corroding.

What most of us do when we face hardship is try to avoid it. We withdraw from it, we shrink from it, we try to circumvent it, doing anything but facing it and going through it. But seeing the world through Easter 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 you to do.

Seeing the world through Easter gives us yet another truth about the world in which we live. The visible world 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 to 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 — but that is only a part of the person. That is only the entrance into an invisible world that is infinitely greater, where love and loyalty go deep, and the affections abide, and where men and women go through fire and brimstone for each other. That is an invisible world.

Seeing the world through Easter 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 fraction of what it is in eternity.

Seeing the world through Easter tells us that we human beings have an eternal destiny. At the same time we are in this world, we are also in an eternal commonwealth—"the kingdom of God," Jesus called it.

Jesus revealed our human future as leading through the forbidding doorway of death to limitless life. And this door is open to any and all people.

This dignity and infinite value of a human being, according to the Easter vision, arises from the destiny bestowed by God in creation and restored and made new in Christ.

This, of course, is not the way the world normally operates. The life of every society is often a harsh process of pushing other people down in order to pull ourselves up. People are ceaselessly judged and ranked and, in turn, they judge and rank others. It is part of our struggle for self-esteem. We like to rank others below us in an attempt to make us feel higher.

But in God’s realm, most of our usual human judgments have no validity. In fact, they are many times reversed—"the first shall be last, and the last first,” said Jesus.

Seeing the world through Easter tells us that we human beings have an eternal glory that God has defined as our ultimate possibility and mission. Therefore, social and natural determinations, rank and nationality, sex and color, intelligence, beauty, charm, wealth, fame — these are meaningless in God’s realm. And that’s good news.

Seeing the world through Easter tells us that all the tenderness and strength we saw on Good Friday, scourged, buffeted, and stretched out on a cross, is alive again — not as a memory that fades, but as an undying presence in each of us, and that presence is the strongest power in creation. Nothing can ultimately overcome it.

So on this Easter Sunday, you need not limp back to business as usual. As you leave this place of worship, where for a short time you have hopefully seen the world through Easter, resolve to make this Easter vision yours today, tomorrow, and every day after. Then you can face any problems that come your way. Amen.