Easter Sunday, April 20, 2003
HE IS NOT HERE!
Mark 16:1-8

I'm sure you are not surprised to learn that preachers love Easter for many reasons, and I am no exception. One reason I love this day so much is because the church is filled for all three worship services. Maybe the only people happier than preachers on Easter are the florists. This, as they say, is one of the "big ones." For the Christian Church, the Easter story is the most important story of all. It is the "big one."

But you might be surprised to know that this is not the easiest day on which to preach a sermon, especially when, as in my case, it's my 32nd Easter sermon in this same pulpit. After only three years, I found that I was repeating myself. Furthermore, you already know the basic Easter story as well as I do. And even though I struggle to find a new angle each year, many of you come here believing you already know what you're going to hear before you hear it. That's a big impediment to listening. This is the preacher's worst nightmare — if you're sure you know what the speaker is going to say before they say it, why listen at all?

One of my professors in seminary used to remind his students that on Easter Sunday, contrary to what they might prefer to think, all those people are not necessarily there to hear the sermon. This preaching professor went on to say that because many of the people in the pews on Easter haven't been to church since last Easter, they're expecting to be scolded, and they might be a little disappointed if you don't scold them a bit. He said to us, "It's helpful to remind them that your church is open every Sunday."

But I'm not about to scold you. I'm delighted you are here today. If you only come to church on Easter, I'm glad you're here — unless you're allergic to Easter lilies! The flowers are beautiful. The music is inspiring. Everybody looks wonderful. And I do hope you will return whenever you can. You are always welcome.

There are four Easter narratives in the New Testament — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — each with its own version, different characters, and different sequences of events. There's an unusual amount of coming and going, running back and forth, and a lot of confusion. But the one theme that is the same in all four Easter stories is the element of surprise. No one expected it. Coupled with this theme of surprise is the sense of fear and doubt.

In Mark's story, early on Sunday morning, the first day of the week, three women — Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome — came to the tomb early to properly complete the process of preparing the body of Jesus for burial. When they arrived, they found that the large stone had been moved aside. Going inside the small cave, they were surprised to find a young man sitting there. He told them, "Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here ... He is going ahead of you to Galilee." That's our theme for this Easter Sunday.

I heard of one preacher who decided in his Easter sermon to prove once and for all the physical fact of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In his sermon, he came up with a list of 13 incontrovertible proofs that Jesus rose from the dead — proofs which he believed would wrestle unbelievers to the ground. Unfortunately, it took him an hour and a half to do it, by which time nobody much cared anymore.

Rather than “proofs,” the importance of Easter is its inner meaning, its metaphorical message. Easter is not about bunnies, chickens, eggs, or candy, as lovely as they are. It’s about the reality of death and then a greater reality — the power of the love of God that brings life out of death. It’s not primarily about an empty tomb, which sends the only ones brave enough to go inside running away in fear. Easter is about love and life. “He is not here ... He is going ahead of you to Galilee.” It’s about the present and the future.

That’s why I like the way Mark ends his Easter story, because it is not neat. He doesn’t try to explain what happened. He makes no claims. Jesus is not where everyone expects to find him. He is already out ahead of them, and they will experience him again and again, in the present and in the future.

“He is not here ... He is going ahead of you to Galilee.” In last weekend’s Palm Sunday sermon, I described that event as a kind of “protest walk,” because the ministry and message of Jesus was a protest against much of the conventional wisdom, the conventional image of God, and what life is all about. He presented an alternative vision. That’s also true of the Easter story. It proclaims an alternative vision of life and death. It proclaims that love is stronger than hate, that it is better to give than to receive, that peacemakers are blessed and little children are always signs of God’s realm, that those you want to exclude are included in God’s hospitality, that the lame, weak, blind, and poor are made whole and are accepted in God’s realm, and that you are living your life to its best, fullest, and happiest when you are actually giving it away.

“He is not here ... He is going ahead of you to Galilee.” Galilee is home for those to whom this announcement was first given. It’s where they live, have families, work, and play. Galilee is daily routine. That’s where the risen Christ, the living Spirit of God, promises to meet you and me.

That’s good news. The risen Christ comes to you, and the Spirit of God is present, not only in the places you expect, such as religious tradition, creeds, and prayers. The Spirit of the living Christ promises to be where you live, work, and play. That living Spirit promises to bring hope, life, rebirth, love, and new possibilities into your life in its most human and ordinary places.

It seems to me that too many people accommodate too easily to the status quo. Large forces seem to be in control of their lives. When things are not going well professionally, spiritually, or sometimes physically, they are inclined to give in to realities that are deadly. But the Easter story proclaims that the Spirit of the Living Christ promises to meet you in Galilee, in your ordinary life.

“He is not here ... He is going ahead of you to Galilee.” The present and the future are where the living Spirit of Christ promises to meet you. And yet, if you’re honest, the future is always a mixed prospect. Somewhere out there are losses, mortality, tragedy, and disappointment. You’ve noticed. People you love die.

One of my favorite theologians, Henri Nouwen, wrote: “The resurrection is God’s way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost. The resurrection doesn’t answer any of our common questions about life after death, such as ‘How long will it be? How will it look?’ But it does reveal to us that love is stronger than death. God’s love for us, our love for each other, and our love for those who lived before and who will live after us is not just a quickly passing experience, but a reality transcending all time and space.”

I treasure the story Nouwen tells about The Flying Rodleigh, German trapeze artists he greatly admired — so much so that he became their friend, attended their practices, and even traveled with them. “What’s it like?” he once asked the leader. The flyer said, “I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I’m the star — but the real star is Joe, my catcher.” “How does that work?” Nouwen asked. “The secret,” Rodleigh said, “is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything.” “You do nothing?” Nouwen asked. Rodleigh responded, “The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher ... the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that the catcher will be there for him.”

The more Nouwen thought about it, the more the words of Jesus flashed through his mind. He remembered the words of Jesus as he was dying on the cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” “That’s it,” Nouwen wrote, “Dying is trusting in the catcher. Don’t be afraid. Remember you are the beloved child of God. God will be there when you make your long jump. Don’t try to grab him; he will grab you. Stretch out your arms and trust, trust, trust.”

Easter is the “big one.” So many people. High expectations. Christ is risen! “He is not here ... he is going ahead of you to Galilee.” He is not here, but of course, in the deepest sense, he is here, and he is wherever you are going. The risen Christ is where you expect him to be, and he is also where you do not expect him to be.

There is a wonderful line in a popular song written by Bono, a rock star who is very popular and is now working to raise awareness about the AIDS epidemic, especially in Africa. I didn’t discover the words of his song. A friend of mine showed them to me.

And if the darkness is to keep us apart
And if the daylight feels like it’s a long way off ...
And if your glass heart should crack
And for a second you turn back
Oh no, be strong
Walk on, walk on
You’re packing a suitcase for a place none of us have been
A place that has to be believed to be seen.

Listen to that last line in the song again—“A place that has to be believed to be seen.” That’s not conventional wisdom. It’s ordinarily the other way around — seeing is believing. You see it first, then you believe. But Bono, and people of faith down through the ages, know that you trust, you give your soul to it, you invest yourself, your love, your passion, your hope, and then maybe you see. It has to be believed to be seen.

You cannot prove this claim. You can’t always see it, but Easter means that you are living in a new world where hope is always present, regardless of what is going on, where love is more powerful than hate, where life overcomes death. Amen.