Easter Sunday, April 11, 2004
THE INNER MEANINGS OF EASTER
Luke 24:1-12

The Easter story, as remembered in the gospels, is filled with symbols or what I prefer to call inner meanings about the power of God's immortal and unconditional love.

Because of these truths or inner meanings, which I will describe in a few minutes, it is not surprising that the story of Jesus' death on Good Friday and the empty tomb on Easter Sunday has a mysterious attraction for all kinds of people, even those who do not consider themselves religious. Therefore, people who do not regularly attend worship services at other times of the year want to be in worship on Easter Sunday.

I am convinced that most people, whether you consider yourself to be religious or not, intuitively sense that there are inner meanings of utmost importance in the stories of Jesus's death and resurrection. These stories convey certain truths about the mystery of the holy and the sacred, and, as I mentioned earlier, about the power of God's immortal and unconditional love. The inner meanings of Easter are so important that if this day didn't exist, another observance carrying the same eternal truths would have filled the void.

The Easter story is a simple one. After Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried on the Friday before, the religious authorities all went to bed that night secure in the belief that the man called Jesus would bother them no longer. They all believed in the power of death. The troublemaker Jesus was out of the way. Soon, the little movement he started would also die.

Even Jesus' closest followers found themselves believing more in the power of death than in the power of love that Jesus had demonstrated with his life and teachings. They thought it was all over. It wasn't the first or the last time that people were sure that killing someone would be the end of the problem. Like many people today, they forgot that you can't kill an idea by killing the person who represents that idea.

Earlier in his ministry, when Jesus had made up his mind to go to Jerusalem for the Passover, he sent several of his disciples ahead to Samaria to make preparations because he wanted to pass through that area and wanted to be sure that he and his traveling companions would be welcome. In that day, the Samaritans and the Jews had nothing to do with each other. They were enemies. The disciples returned and reported that the Samaritans did not want Jesus and his little group to come through their territory and stay overnight among them. The disciples were angry about this lack of hospitality. They proposed a simple solution: "Call fire from heaven and kill them all. That would teach them a lesson." But Jesus would have none of it.

It's amazing that so many people are still tempted, especially in times of difficulty, to believe in and even worship the power of death. It's the exact opposite of one of the inner meanings of Easter. That's why each Easter I'm so thankful that so many of you are here in the worship services. It shows that you want to believe there is a better way than killing people in an attempt to solve a difficult problem. You demonstrate by your presence that, deep down, you are convinced that the power of unconditional love, as taught and lived by Jesus and others throughout history, is stronger than the power of the gun or any other weapon.

Your presence here is an indication that you affirm this fact as one of the inner meanings and truths conveyed by the Easter story.

Another inner meaning of the Easter story can be found in the following statement, which appears in the gospel accounts. When the women got to the tomb, they found the stone rolled away from the opening of the tomb so they could see and go inside. Nothing blocked their way. In other words, the power of God's immortal and unconditional love was open to them, and it is open to all.

In another gospel, the same theme appears. It reports that when Jesus died, "The curtain of the Temple in Jerusalem was torn in two." That curtain, which had previously separated the "holy of holies" in the Temple from everyone except the high priest, who was allowed to go inside one time each year, was now open to everyone. These are powerful and revealing symbols.

In the time of Jesus, Temple religion was a brokerage system in which priestly mediation, including animal sacrifice, was a necessary link between people and God. By contrast, the message that Jesus taught and lived is that individuals have direct, immediate access to God. "God's domain is already in the midst of you." It is available to everyone. Furthermore, the light of God and the Spirit of God are within each human being.

Jesus did not even regard himself as a broker. The many healing stories in the gospels illustrate this. In one healing story, when four people let their friend down through the roof to be healed, Jesus noticed their trust and said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven." In another healing story, he said to the woman with a hemorrhage, "Daughter, your trust has cured you." In the story of the blind man, he said, "Go on your way, your trust has cured you." The point is, Jesus never told those who were cured, "I cured you." He never even said, "God has cured you." No brokers were needed.

Individuals are invited to function as their own brokers in relation to God. Those who require forgiveness can be forgiven only if they offer forgiveness. "Forgive, and you'll be forgiven." Jesus is out of the loop. Even God is out of the loop. The curtain in the Temple is no more. The stone has been rolled away from the tomb. All are invited to enter the holy of holies. There are no barriers to experiencing the Spirit of God. That's another inner meaning of the Easter story.

These inner meanings, these inner truths in the Easter story had their beginning when a young carpenter from Nazareth offered an alternative vision of God and how God relates to you. He said, "God is in the midst of you. God is the power of immortal and unconditional love at work in the world. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." God's love is stronger than death or the threat of death.

His ministry and teachings stirred people as they had not been stirred before. People who had previously been excluded from society and who had been put down as having little or no worth now began to believe that they did have worth. He reminded them that they were created in God's image in the same way as everyone else. They could live with dignity and hope.

He described God's domain as a huge banquet where everyone can sit at the table. As he went around Galilee, he gathered at his table prostitutes, beggars, lepers, tax collectors, Pharisees, rich people, and poor people. All are welcome in God's domain. He taught that inclusiveness is the rule in God's domain, whereas exclusiveness is the rule in communities with high social and ethnic boundaries.

What the young carpenter represented was not new. It had been built into creation from the beginning. In the life and teachings of Jesus, it had the power to set people free. But the hope and dynamism of this young carpenter offended people who wanted to hold onto another way of seeing the world. There are always people who think they can only go up if someone else is going down.

New visions of reality always offend people who think they are in control, especially those who have come to believe in the power of death rather than the power of love. The inner meaning of Easter is that even his crucifixion could not kill this vision.

Following the Easter event, his followers discovered that this Spirit of God, revealed in Jesus, lived on and is still alive today in our midst.

When you understand these inner meanings of Easter, you know that love is always stronger than hate; the love of God is stronger than evil. There is no power strong enough to kill the selfless love of God.

The inner meaning of Easter is that God forgives the worst you can do, over and over again, and makes all things new.

The inner meaning of Easter tells you that you have an eternal glory. This means that all of the false boundaries you set up — such as social status, wealth, fame, all the qualities by which you like to judge yourself and others — in God's domain are meaningless. Now that's good news!

The inner meaning of Easter reminds you that all the tenderness and strength which on Good Friday you saw scourged, buffeted, made fun of, and nailed to a cross — all that beauty, love, and goodness — could not be sealed up in a tomb. The stone was rolled away. That Spirit of God, which was so powerfully demonstrated in Jesus, is alive and with you now — not as a memory that fades, but as an undying presence in the life of every single one of you. It is the strongest power in creation. Nothing can ultimately overcome it.

It is the Easter faith that evil never has the last word. To put it in more personal terms, you can poison Socrates, you can assassinate Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., but the spirit of freedom is indestructible. You can crucify Jesus, but the Love incarnate in him lives on. Evil never has the last word. The last word is always God's love. Amen.