Easter Sunday, March 27, 2005
THERE YOU WILL SEE HIM
Matthew 28:1-10

I am going to begin this Easter sermon with several questions for each one of you. There are no right or wrong answers. First question: when you came to the Easter worship service today, what were you expecting or seeking? You knew the music would be inspiring. You were hoping the sermon would be equally so. I'll try not to let you down. But what is it that makes Easter Sunday different? Why is it that people who are not regular church attenders feel the urge to be in worship on Easter?

Second question: after you leave the worship service, what do you hope will have happened to make a difference in your life today, tomorrow, next week, or next month? I wish I had the opportunity to ask each one of you these questions personally. Since that's not possible, I encourage each one of you to try to answer these questions in your own mind. Here's one way to do it. Next Sunday or two or three Sundays later, when you are puttering around the house or doing something other than being in a worship service, ask yourself, "Why did I decide to participate in worship on Easter Sunday and not today?"

All these questions and more were on my mind this past week as I was preparing this Easter sermon. Each year, I struggle more with the Easter sermon because there is extra responsibility on the preacher since more people attend on this day than any other time during the year except for Christmas. Therefore, I want to have something to say that will hopefully make a difference for the good in your life. I also want to have something to say that will be so inspiring to you that you will want to come back next week and in the weeks following.

Here are some of my tentative answers to the questions with which I began this sermon. I believe that you, as a human being, are created with a need for feeling connected with the Sacred and with one another. Therefore, you need spiritual food as much as you need food for your physical body. Dr. Herbert Benson, a physician on the faculty of Harvard University Medical School, presents some solid evidence and arguments to support this hypothesis of the need for spiritual nurture and exercise. For more than 30 years, he has conducted scientific research in this area. As a result of his research, he has come to the conclusion that your human self is "wired" in such a way that you benefit from exercising not only your muscles but your rich inner, human core — your beliefs, thoughts, and feelings; your connection to the Sacred and to others. Your overall health and well-being benefit tremendously from "spiritual physical exercise."

Therefore, I am convinced there's something about the Easter story that causes you to remember your need for spiritual exercise. It begins to provide some answers to the search within you for something lasting, something eternal, something beyond the everyday routines of life. The Easter story speaks to this deep human longing in several ways.

First of all, the stories of Easter in the four gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — are quite modest. Curiously missing is any note of celebration. There is no shouting, singing, dancing, no trumpets or fanfare. Instead, the stories describe emotions of fear, confusion, and doubt — emotions you can understand. That's because it took the original followers of Jesus time to comprehend what had happened and its implications. Emily Dickinson wrote, "Truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind."

That's why I especially like Matthew's version of the Easter story. In it, the truth dazzles gradually. When the women got to the tomb on Sunday morning, they could not understand what had happened. To help them to understand, they are given three important messages. First, "Do not be afraid." Second, "He is not here." Third, "Tell the other disciples what you have discovered and that all of you are to go to Galilee — there you will see him."

"There you will see him." Why in Galilee? Because that's where most of his ministry had been carried out. It was a familiar place to all of them. It's where they received most of his teachings. It was where they first met him, where they went fishing with him, where they walked and talked with him, where they had meals with him.

When I was studying this story from Matthew's gospel again this week, this striking phrase, "Go to Galilee. There you will see him," reminded me of an old song, "I'll Be Seeing You." Some of you know it. The song begins, "I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places, that this heart of mine embraces all day through."

Perhaps you've had the experience of remembering once again the presence of family members and friends who are no longer physically with you. So it was that the followers of Jesus were told to go to Galilee—"there you will see him."

However, there's a deeper truth in this story of the followers of Jesus being told to go to Galilee. It tells you where the power of the Risen Christ can be discovered today — in the Galilees of today. Where are today's Galilees? They are everywhere.

Perhaps you came to worship today thinking and hoping that you would experience the power of the risen Christ right here in church. The risen Christ is here. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." He's here, and he's also in other places. Worship can be an important beginning point.

Maybe for some of you, coming to a worship service is something like the women coming to the tomb early that Sunday morning. There, they found a messenger who told them where to find the Risen Christ. They had to go to the tomb to get directions. That's part of the role of the church today, and especially worship — to give directions and hopefully to help you discover where the power of God is at work outside your life and inside it. Maybe that's also why no men came to the tomb early that morning. It's a well-known fact that men don't like to ask for directions.

There's an important principle at work here. If you want to discover the Spirit of God in the power of the Risen Christ, it's helpful to come here in the same way as the women came to the tomb, but then you must also go out to the "Galilees" in today's world, where you will also find the Spirit of the living Jesus at work.

One person described 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 places and know that he is alive. I saw him last week, and Easter had not yet arrived. I saw him on the subway, where the 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."

Another person said, "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 baby."

One of our church members said, "I met the risen Christ in the Matt Talbot Kitchen here in Lincoln, as I was volunteering my time in providing meals to the homeless. One of his teachings came alive to me, the one in which he said, 'for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. ... As you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me.'"

Another one of our church members said, "I met the risen Christ in the many people I worked with as we volunteered our time in building a Habitat for Humanity house here in Lincoln."

Some people think of Easter only in the past tense. They picture it as something that occurred several thousand years ago and, therefore, as something to be commemorated each year. It is that, but Easter is also in the present tense. Easter is a verb in addition to being a noun.

In the broadest terms, it's helpful to think of Easter as a verb that describes the continuing alive, loving energy of God flowing through all things, all time, all space. Easter is not only about an empty tomb, it is above all a message about the victory of selfless love over loveless power. It's an event that reminds you that the loving energy of God endures all pain and suffering, even death, without being overwhelmed or conquered by it.

Some of you may look around you and say, "But death, sin, evil, and suffering still thrive. Therefore, where is the power of the risen Christ at work?" The story of Easter does not promise that there will be no more suffering, pain, struggle, or death. What it does is assure you that God's creative loving power will always overcome sin, evil, suffering, and death.

As human beings with free will, you can decide to go to the "Galilees" of this present world, and there you will see him, or you can decide not to go. In other words, you can decide to let Easter work in you and through you, or you can ignore it. But you cannot keep it from working in the world at large.

I am delighted that you have come to one modern kind of Galilee. I hope you have at least experienced a little bit of the loving energy of the risen Christ in this place. I also hope you will continue to meet the risen Christ in the many other Galilees of today's world.

I began this sermon with several questions. I want to end it with one more. It's the big Easter question. How will you continue to live in this world? Will you live from your fear, as though who you are can be taken away from you along with what you have? Will you continue to live as if the temporary thrill of acquiring more and more stuff is the closest you will ever come to human fulfillment? Or will you live as though your worth and value are a given, as though nothing in creation can ever separate you from the love of God? If you live this way, you are living the deepest truth of the Easter story. Amen.