

## **Easter Sunday**

Easter Sunday presents such an interesting and, at times, challenging opportunity for servant of Christ who is called to proclaim. We stand today in the very heart of Christianity. The tomb is empty and death has been rolled back. The implacable foe who cannot be bought off, who cannot be appeased, who will demand our life, that foe, has been defeated in the resurrected body of Jesus of Nazareth.

How different our preaching of Easter is from that of the first generation of Christians. When you read Peter and Paul's reflections on the resurrection, it would seem that Easter's message is not really for the timid. Their hearers' reactions seem to fall into one of two categories. They either hid under the pews or stood upon them and shouted "hallelujah!" Casual indifference did not really seem to be an option. (Paul's Mar's Hill sermon may be the exception) Have we buried this day and its message under something else?

A few observations about preaching this day:

1. The Easter message is often something that is best sung. Like last week, I encourage you to think of the hymns you select as part of the message. Let them carry some of this burden for you. It is OK to talk a little less and sing a little more.
2. After multiple services this week, the preacher will not want to be long winded today. Don't feel the need to write a long sermon.
3. But short sermons are harder to write in some respects. You cannot bore people today of all days! This is Christianity's exciting moment.
4. Think carefully about the Law/Gospel dynamic. As Lutheran preachers, we yearn for the Law/Gospel tension and our tendency is to think that if we don't speak the Law it is not there. This is simply arrogance on our part. Our people will bring lots of law with them this day. The preacher's job is simply to name it or give it a brief voice and let the solution be quick. It is Easter, after all. The people coming to Church are most like the women trudging to the tomb; they needed no one to tell them what the problem was. They knew full well what the problem was. They needed a proclamation of resurrection.

I find this last point to be difficult for me. I imagine that you do too. A sermon without the strong tension of sin/forgiveness to give it energy can seem limp or vacuous. But imagine the sorrows of life all laid out before you in the eyes of the people who look up to you. Your job this day is only to preach the good news. They know the bad news well enough. If you have done your Lenten task, that is been at the fore of your preaching for six weeks. Just preach the good. Let it rest on the problems which your people bring to this day and speak of its solution.

What shall we preach on Easter?

1. Existential resurrection – Jesus has risen and conquered my death as well. This gives courage, hope, peace, and comfort to the sinner who also must someday face death. I just don't need to worry about this anymore.
2. Restoration of Relationship – Good Friday Worked! The sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the whole world has been accepted. God the Father has restored the creation through Christ.
3. Satan is a loser! The Resurrection not only proclaims victory, but also defeat. Satan has been bested by the resurrection. This would of course require that the hearer be willing to accept the reality of Satan. Not always a good idea when you have lots of folks who may not be regulars.
4. The resurrection as a vehicle of change – the resurrection changes us, it changes everything. We are different people now – It plays off of #1 a little, but it also speaks of how people who are transformed by the resurrection are changed in this life now. Peter and the rest of the disciples will be radically changed by their encounters with the resurrected Christ. Paul too! Fearful men become brave. Persecutors become Apostles. My life has been changed from a life defined by “buy and sell” to a life of thanksgiving. There is more than one death – the death of sin is just as real as the cessation of breathing.
5. God did far more than anyone expected – this is better news than any human solution to humanity's problem. We would solve the death problem with some form of life support, but God does not maintain the old life but creates anew. The women came looking for death, but found life. They came in the old covenant, left in the new! They are bid to remember and they do. The words of Jesus have become real!
6. Our beloved is alive! Jesus, the one who loves me and has numbered the very hairs of my head, he has risen from death so that he can care for me. Seated at the right hand of the Father, the place of power, we now know that the secret to the power of the universe runs through his perforated hands.
7. Creation restored – this isn't just for me, but for the whole of the creation. Jesus died physically because he would restore the whole physical world. (see today's OT lesson.) Could be an ecological/environmental sermon without the guilt!
8. God did not forget his Holy One in the Grave – God Remembered (see the description of this under the Gospel lesson for a more complete treatment.) God remembers us – the resurrection declares that death is not oblivion but we are never forgotten by God. We are always on his mind.
9. He remembers his promises of old. The angel reminds the women of Jesus own promise. This is a sermon that plays on Jesus word of promise as trustworthy and true. God keeps his promises and not even Death itself can stop that. God has promised us eternal life in

our baptism, he promises forgiveness and life in the sacrament. He promises that this fellowship is a foretaste of heaven. He doesn't make those promises lightly.

Some of these could be fruitfully combined.

**Collect of the Day** (*We have two collects*)

Almighty God and Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*God overcomes death, we don't. I wonder how often we fail to speak this way to people. I often catch myself talking about "going to heaven" like I go there in the same way that I might go to the grocery. The fact of it is, I will be a helpless corpse when that day comes, except God raise me, lift me up, carry me there, open the door, set me inside and bless my presence there, I am no more able to go to heaven than go to the stars in my Volkswagen. Even if I do live to that last day when the Lord reappears in glory, I still don't know the way to heaven, except I know Him. Still he must carry me there. I am but a passenger in that train, not the conductor. I go, yes, but perhaps better said, as this prayer says it, I am the recipient of God's amazing love and grace for me. He brings me to heaven.*

*Grant that we who celebrate with joy – now is the time for joy. In much of the ancient world where harsh penitential measures were the norm, it was forbidden to kneel during these fifty days of Easter. The faithful had to stand and acknowledge that they had been forgiven and now were indeed the children of God! In this day and age, we hardly would need such a measure, but we will still find it hard to really rejoice. Is it because we have not known true penitence that often we find true joy so elusive? What makes for such joy? I know a pastor who equips all the children in the congregation with bells on this day and tells them they must ring them every time they say or sing "alleluia!" it not only keeps them attentive it adds a decidedly festive air to the worship service. How about a parade? How about a party? How about laughter? Does our worship actually reflect the joyful nature of what we are here to celebrate?*

*Raised from the death of sin – how about just from death? I am not sure that this prayer doesn't potentially distract from the real message of Easter by importing the moral component for the close listener. The fact of it is this is the day to celebrate the triumph over one of the evil trinity of sin, **death**, and devil. We focus so much on sin, perhaps we ought to just stick with death for today. Of course, as we have argued elsewhere, death really is the consequence of sin, so we can make that connection as the prayer does. It is the death which comes from sin. But perhaps the preacher might want to do a word play here, and notice that this is also the death of sin.*

**OR**

O God, for our redemption You gave Your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross and by His glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of the enemy. Grant that all our sins may be drowned through daily repentance and that day by day we may arise to live before You in righteousness and purity forever; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*This prayer picks up on the term “redemption” and that is worthy of our attention. For all of us who are preaching in “Redeemer Lutheran Church” or some permutation on the name, this is pretty important. We pretty much only talk about redeeming coupons today and thus the word has lost a great deal of impact. But in Jesus day and the day of the Biblical authors this is what you did when you bought your friend or some cousin from the slave market and set them free. You redeemed them. We have been redeemed from a bondage to sin by Jesus. The price was his very life blood.*

*What is good about this prayer is that it connects the cross and the empty tomb for us. The Biblical authors seem to see the whole death/resurrection event as a singular event, even though it happened over three days. Think about this for a moment. If Jesus had simply died for our sins, the sins surely would be paid for, but how would we know it? The resurrection really proclaims that the cross worked, it succeeded at its vital mission.*

*And that mission has tremendous implications for us. The whole of life is transformed by the cross and resurrection of Jesus. We cannot see anything the same way. If you have not seen it, you might watch the “Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace” film that came out several years ago. You might also think about showing this again in the season of Easter if you have a copy. Throughout the film Bonhoeffer struggles with his fear and convictions. The final scene has him facing a gallows, naked. The Nazi prosecutor sidles up beside him and says, “So, Pastor, here is where it ends.” “No,” replied Bonhoeffer, “it does not end here.” It was a nicely done little piece.*

*The prayer today suggests that the resurrection has us reconsider our sin, and lead the life of repentance which we vowed in Lent. For repentance involves turning from our sins, and Easter provides us with something to turn toward, a life which can be lived in place of the old dying life. When we have nowhere to go, even this old dying life seems better than nothing.*

*This life is lived toward the reality we see in Christ today. We live toward the purity and innocence which will be ours on the day of our own resurrection. It is not that we obtain it through these means, but we live toward it, striving as Paul says in Philippians, not because we are not going to get there if we don’t but because Christ has raised us to a new life which urges toward that fullness and beauty.*

Isaiah 65:17-25

<sup>17</sup>“For behold, I create new heavens  
and a new earth,

and the former things shall not be remembered  
or come into mind.

<sup>18</sup> But be glad and rejoice forever  
in that which I create;

for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy,  
and her people to be a gladness.

<sup>19</sup> I will rejoice in Jerusalem  
and be glad in my people;

no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping  
and the cry of distress.

<sup>20</sup> No more shall there be in it  
an infant who lives but a few days,  
or an old man who does not fill out his days,  
for the young man shall die a hundred years old,  
and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

<sup>21</sup> They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

<sup>22</sup> They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;

for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

<sup>23</sup> They shall not labor in vain  
or bear children for calamity,  
for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD,  
and their descendants with them.

<sup>24</sup> Before they call I will answer;  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.

<sup>25</sup> The wolf and the lamb shall graze together;  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox,  
and dust shall be the serpent's food.

*I create a new heaven and a new earth – this is undoubtedly where John gets the phrase in the final chapters of Revelation. Interesting that Isaiah couples it with God's forgetfulness. This will show up later in the Gospel lesson so hold the thought. As the text unfolds, however, the idea is that the new things are so marvelous that the old are forgotten utterly. God has not come to repair or fix this old world; he has intention to make it anew. He is not simply restoring, he is replacing. Or perhaps the better way to say this: God has not come to offer us therapy for this broken life. He has come to slay and make alive. He is bringing us back to the garden. Look at the transformation of the wolves and the lions in the last verse. What will have to change in me? What will have to change in my heart and mind? I believe that if we are given to compare this*

*earth to heaven after we get there, the greatest change we will see will be in ourselves. I will be profoundly changed. What will be gone? The fierce competitiveness, the constant striving, the suspicion and what else? An eternal life on the trajectory I am currently on does not sound heavenly, but would indeed be hellish.*

*Do you suppose the folks who are out there are dreading meeting Jesus on that day because they will be embarrassed about what they have done? But the gracious and mercy of God are so great, that I won't have to worry about those things. He completely consumes my past. Perhaps I will not even be able to remember it; I will be so fixated on his love.*

*I am especially drawn to the joy which God feels over his own people. God will delight in them. Of course Isaiah's audience was pretty sure that God was angry with them. After all they had ignored his prophets, abused them, and finally God had destroyed the north and sent the south into exile. Isaiah was living through that dissolution. And the news that God delighted in his people must have been really good news to them, and I believe it would be good for us too. We too often think that God is tolerating us, but this is not so. Jesus has made us once more into the delight of God.*

*The reading has a strong Creation motif – Easter is the first fruits of a new creation of God. The old creation, the one which was given to Adam and Eve in the garden is broken, and the greatest sign of that is our own death. It was not supposed to be that way. But the new creation will be different. Unlike the old creation, death will not reign there, claiming every victim, many of them in tragic youth. In the new creation God rejoices over his people, Jerusalem is a joy, not a war zone with walls and thrown stones and boiling hatred.*

*Death itself will be undone – the idea here is that what we consider old age will be but youth in heaven. The language seems to betray Isaiah here. The great sadness of parents who lose a child will never be known there. If you have folks in you congregation who have known that sadness you need to be careful but don't shy away from it, this might just be the very thing their broken hearts really need to hear. Even the death of your child will one day be undone! That sadness too will be dealt with by God himself. God has heard those tears which might be really close to the surface on Easter morning.*

*They shall not labor in vain but live in their houses and eat from their vineyards. When Isaiah wrote this, of course, the North was gone, the South had been nearly destroyed, many a farm and vineyard and house had been ransacked by the enemy. Much labor had been lost. How often don't we labor in vain, only, as the preacher says in Ecclesiastes to give it to an idiot son who will squander our labors? How often don't we see our well devised plans go up in smoke or in some bit of Bernie Madoff chicanery? I remember the stunned look on a friend whose \$80,000 nest egg disappeared in the Enron collapse of less than a decade ago. That sort of stuff just won't happen in heaven. In heaven, in this world which Isaiah envisions we will plant our vines and enjoy their fruit, our lives will be long and stable. For the folks at Isaiah's time, that must have seemed like heaven. I think we need to exercise a little caution here. For many of us, our*

*lives have been long and relatively stable, and we have simply gotten creative in finding new “hells” therein.*

*They will enjoy the work of their hands – they will have things to do. Many times people who consider heaven think of it as boring. Eternal life without a purpose would be miserable. I think so too. Who wants to sit on a cloud and play a harp or sing in the choir for eternity? It isn't just 8 year old boys who think church is boring, there are probably quite a few folks for whom the thought of an eternity in the bass section of the choir doesn't exactly appeal. Isaiah says that life will have purpose, work, tasks, and we will love them, enjoy them. We will delight in that activity and work.*

*Before they call, I will answer – so intimately will we know God, so intimately will God know them. Of course this is true right now, but in heaven we will see it, beautifully, wonderfully.*

*Even nature itself will be reformulated. The predator will not consume the prey, but will lie beside and rest together, not even uncomfortable with one another. They will not kill in the entire holy mountain. This is a radical transformation from what we have known. We have so long thought of predation as natural. We even have a television show which we call Nature on which we are likely to see the lions chase down and eat the gazelles on the Serengeti. Is it natural? Is it God's normal? Apparently not! What else is normal in our lives but not normal to God? Death surely is one of those things with which we might find an accommodation, but God finds a solution. We might find it hard to imagine a world without bubbles and busts economically, or a world in which children don't get cancer and die, or a world in which the poor are not always with us as poor but are in fact with us as princes of the kingdom of heaven. But God has a much larger imagination than we do. Isaiah gives us a little glimpse into that. I don't know what such a world will look like. After all, I have noticed the teeth on that lion. I am not sure how he will manage the vegan diet, but I must leave that in God's hands.*

*Isaiah is addressing the very real and present issues which his exiled audience has experienced. Their houses have been taken, their vineyards feed others, if they are not destroyed. Their children have been slain. What does our parishioner bring to church this day that Easter addresses?*

- 1. Distraction – we often cannot focus on God. Our lives seem disjointed and fractured.*
- 2. We are compelled by our culture to imagine that all revolves around us, and that means we are supposed to fix the problems. We cannot fix the problems and that burden weighs us down.*
- 3. Death of course still haunts us. For all our medical advances, the mortality rate has not gone down. Our prayer lists still involve the many who suffer from cancers and griefs which we must lay at Jesus' feet.*

4. *Faith and doubt – our culture cannot see that this is mutually possible. We tend to think this is impossible and so many come with faith which they are questioning. They look for affirmation of their faith.*
5. *Insecurity – many of us are feeling insecure about our futures. Do we feel at the mercy of forces which are beyond our control? Belgium has just had a terrible terrorist attack. Will this ever end? Will this always plague us?*
6. *Misplaced expectations and hopes. We imagine that this service, this day, when we are all here, will make it all right again. We look at fractured families and relationships and long for a solution which will bring us joy and peace. We want that when our lives are chaos and conflict.*

### Psalm 16

Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

<sup>2</sup> I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord;  
I have no good apart from you.”

<sup>3</sup> As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones,  
in whom is all my delight.

<sup>4</sup> The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;  
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out  
or take their names on my lips.

<sup>5</sup> The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;  
you hold my lot.

<sup>6</sup> The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

<sup>7</sup> I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;  
in the night also my heart instructs me.

<sup>8</sup> I have set the LORD always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;  
my flesh also dwells secure.

<sup>10</sup> For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,  
or let your holy one see corruption.

<sup>11</sup> You make known to me the path of life;  
in your presence there is fullness of joy;  
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

*The psalmist is voicing the prayer of the Easter celebrant. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. The inheritance I have from the Lord is good and pleasant. God has given me life. At God's right hand are eternal pleasures, not the fleeting pleasures of this life. God will not abandon me to the grave (Sheol) nor will he let his holy one (me for I have been baptized) see decay. I shall be raised to an eternal life. So I bless the Lord and sing His praise.*

I Corinthians 15:19-26 *I have stretched this into the next several verses which complete the thought.*

<sup>19</sup> If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

<sup>20</sup> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

<sup>21</sup> For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. <sup>23</sup> But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. <sup>24</sup> Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. <sup>25</sup> For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be destroyed is death. <sup>27</sup> For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. <sup>28</sup> When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

*Has our reductive materialistic culture left us in the same place as the ancient Corinthians to whom Paul wrote? They apparently thought that this life was it. We were raised in baptism and that is it. God's kingdom is only for this life, there is no real life to come. Our cartoons portray it as a vaporous existence on clouds. It just isn't real. Biology tells us that life is impossible without death. So we cannot really believe in a resurrection, a real resurrection with body and senses and the whole of the created life. Do many of those who sit in pews struggle with this too? Is this something we need to preach? I am not sure that this is an Easter sermon – but perhaps it is. Do we preach as if this is true? Or do we grab this bull by horns and wrestle it to the ground? Both are pastorally defensible.*

*There are a couple of films in theaters either now or just recently which make for an entry point. One has to be careful here. The films are most likely trite and often have questionable theology. But they can also raise important questions.*

*Vs. 19 reminds us that our proclamation of the resurrection always has an eschatological element to it. If we preach the transformation of lives without the hope of resurrection, we are simply lousy therapists and the church is a pitiable NGO. I say this because there are powerful voices which are advocating for exactly this. There is a strong movement which says that God will prosper the Christian right now. It is called prosperity Gospel. There is another movement*

*which says that the purpose of Christianity is solely to be a force for social change. Both of them miss this element. God has gathered the Church to hope, and without that hope, that joyful expectation in Christ's reappearing in glory and our resurrection, we might as well simply close our doors. We are pitiable.*

*What about the logic of vss. 21 and 22? It seems that this logic is utterly inside the tradition. But perhaps a biological example might be helpful. If one man brings a contagion into a population which has no resistance to that bug, he brings death to all. On the other hand, if one man's body generates a resistance, his antibodies can be the salvation of all.*

*Many consider that this chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is the key to understanding the whole book. It seems that the many problems which the Apostle found in this troubled parish came back to a root in their understanding of the end of Christ's salvation, its goal and especially the resurrection, especially what would happen to us after we died.*

*I say this because I wonder if we are not in a similar situation. Most consider that death means we become some sort of a spiritual, but not physical, being. Heaven is a place of harps, halos, clouds, wings, and see-through people who float around, just read the Family Circus or watch a "Tom and Jerry" cartoon. And so our understanding of this world is also skewed. Some see it as more real, more substantive than the world to come. If you ever get a chance and have not yet done it, read CS Lewis' "Great Divorce". Despite what you might conclude from the title, Lewis is not talking about marital discord at all. In it some folks get the chance to journey from hell to the outskirts of heaven. There they find they cannot walk comfortably on the grass because it is so much more real than they are, it cuts their feet.*

*All this makes for a better bible study than an Easter morning sermon. But the proclamation of Easter will best be based on this factualness. God cares very much for the physical world in which we live. He has gone so far as to shed real live red blood on a hard wooden cross to save it, not just our souls, but us, all of us. The resurrection we proclaim today has real physical characteristics to it. We will walk the streets of heaven, our hands will pluck its fruit and our mouths will taste its sweetness and we will be satisfied wholly there. I have been struck by how stubbornly held this mistaken idea of heaven is among the young people I teach. It is simply infused into their language and their way of thinking. "Heaven is a wonderful place, I will be able to float around there and pass through real things."*

*Paul's rejection of this notion is expressed in the incarnation of Christ. Jesus has assumed the flesh of broken humanity, run that human race to a perfect end and in so doing given every human being hope and joy. Our expectation is that because Christ has done this, death itself is undone. We are simply waiting for that process, that prison house to completely collapse and free the rest of humanity.*

*All this is on its own time table, now we must wait, but because that tomb was empty so long ago, our tomb is empty as well.*

*The preacher who opts for this text may also want to hit that authority piece. Our proclamation of the resurrection, its good news, is really an act of authority. I am authorized by God to preach today, I have a message delivered first to women and fisherman but to two billion Christians today from God to proclaim this message. He reigns until every enemy is utterly subdued and lies prostrate at his feet, the last enemy will be death, but it is no longer a matter which is in any question. Death has already been defeated, we await the day when utterly subjected it owns up to Jesus victory. Now it stubbornly holds on, but its day comes.*

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. <sup>2</sup> And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup> but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. <sup>4</sup> While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. <sup>5</sup> And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? <sup>6</sup> He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup> that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” <sup>8</sup> And they remembered his words, <sup>9</sup> and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup> Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, <sup>11</sup> but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup> But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

*Is Mary the mother of Jesus not in this list of women because she did not think that the body would be there? Did she need no reminder?*

*There is an interesting word play going on in this text. The word for grave or tomb is related to the Greek word for remember or memory. We of course can do the same thing with “memorial” as in a memorial service for someone who has died or a memorial for the fallen from some war, even Memorial Day. There is a connection in our culture with remembering and death. Greeks did the same thing. In Roman culture, the best one could hope for was to be remembered. The Appian way was cluttered with the memorials which grieving family had erected in memory of their loved ones, usually people who had been cremated. The Christians changed that with burial and a deep respect for the body of the deceased, but they incorporated the memory part of this, hence the catacombs of Rome.*

*Memory and remembering play a big role in this text. Notice what the two men say. “Remember what he said to you.” They do remember and they go and tell the disciples. Of course the loutish disciples do not believe them, but Peter runs out and marvels at what has happened.*

*You might just play with this for this sermon. Re-member can also mean that we are reintegrated into the body of Christ, we are re-connected to the One who is the very Life of the World! A severed limb (member) must die when it is unconnected from the body, so too death reigns in us. But we are now “re-membered” or reconnected to the head, to the source of life itself. If you use “Member Connect” the congregational software suite which allows one to keep track of a congregation and its activities and members, you might just want to play with that too.*

*Memory has a strange dual effect. It brings us to the past. Class reunions and memorial services and the like often cause us to return to the past. But memory also impacts the present. You might wonder if you are still able to hold a child, but then when you pick up the baby in your arms, the memories of your own children come flooding back and you are a natural parent again. It is not only looking back, but it is also the past looking forward to this moment and that is a good thing too.*

*Is there a third thing that memory does? We remember the past and see in that a pattern which gives us a way to navigate the future. We have a track record with God. He is a promise keeper. We can step into a future with confidence because memory serves us with comfort.*

*Is this the opposite side of confession? In confession we remember the sins we have committed. But Jesus/God remembers the cross and what he has done. Does baptism, which Luther urges us to remember, place us into a relationship with God in which he remembers the cross and we are given to forget our past, or at least remember the cross with God when those ghosts of our past come to haunt us?*

*This could have an even more compelling line of thought if you connect it to the Maundy Thursday service of this past week where Jesus said that we should do this for the “remembrance of me.” That sounds funny in Greek too and it has the unusual ambiguity that it could be either an objective or a subjective genitive. That is a fancy way of saying that we don’t know who is doing the remembering here. We tend to hear those words and think of them in terms of a memorial on our part. We remember the suffering that Jesus endured on our behalf. That is quite possible and plausible and has the nice benefit of being the way that many people think of it. But it could also be the other way around. We could be doing this so that Jesus remembers us and the promise that he makes to us. It is sort holding up the wafer and saying “Jesus, you promised, remember, if I eat this, you will dwell in my life and I shall live forever. Remember your promise!”*

*This takes on an especially interesting dimension if you did the Easter Vigil and read the Flood story and the Exodus story there. In both of those stories it uses the strange formulation that God remembers. In the flood he remembers Noah and sends the great wind that dries up the waters. In the Exodus story he hears the cries of the Israelites and remembers his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and sends Moses to deliver them. As if God can forget? What is going on with the remembering here?*

*So perhaps it is Jesus who remembers us. Does that mean he reconnects us to himself? Does he literally take his members/limbs, cut off by sin, and re-attach them to himself like some surgeon re-attaching a hand or a limb to a poor accident victim? Most of the time when we consider the word “remember” we are thinking of a mental activity. Are we talking about more than a mental activity here?*

*The women are reminded, they remember at the memorial/tomb. The early Christians made a great deal of this, erecting huge shrines over the graves of the saints. This act of remembering was central to a great deal of early Christian piety. I think that the great fear of humanity when it faces death is that it will be forgotten. How many human beings do not lie forgotten in some unmarked grave? The state of Oregon a few years ago was in a bit of a dither when the Oregonian (Portland’s newspaper) revealed that the patients at the state mental hospital who had died were often simply cremated and their remains shelved in a basement room for decades without any attempt made to contact the families. Pictures of rusting cans with a fading label made the front page. “Forgotten” was the terror of the article.*

*Peter believes the women. He jumps up and runs out. What does he remember? Does he remember Jesus saying “do this for the remembrance of me?” or is he remembering Jesus glance toward him after that rooster crowed? Is he remembering the one he betrayed? He leaves marveling, comforted? Is his guilt assuaged here? Is resurrection about the rising of the one who forgives? Does Peter listen to the women’s account and remember the two witnesses of Transfiguration Sunday? They had spoken at that time of Jesus “exodus” literally the “road out.” Does he connect these two stories? Does Luke at least want us to connect them by describing the clothing the same way?*

*The women tell their story and almost everyone looks up from their lox and bagels, and figures they are just a bunch of foolish women telling tales. But one guy jumps up. Isn’t that about par for the course? Here are the first witnesses to the resurrection, and they are ignored by all but one. But what a one that was – Peter, the man who had betrayed Jesus and would become the great leader of God’s early Christian community.*

*Peter “marvels.” This is the word which is used to describe the disciples when they witness the miracles of Jesus. It of course is also a name for a whole comic book universe with characters like Iron Man, Spider Man, and the Incredible Hulk. Did you see the recent Marvel comic film “Infinity War.” If you are not into these sorts of films, you probably won’t enjoy this. Except, this film was profoundly pro-life. Death was the enemy. In fact the bad guy was named Thanos – which is Greek for death. I am thinking that the next film in the series may have a lot of Easter resonance.*

*On a more preachable note, when I was a young man, I used to mow the lawn for my father’s congregation in Missouri. It is now nearly 150 years old and its cemetery actually predates the congregation a little. In the far back corner were three rows of children’s graves. Packed together in tight rows were the victims of the diseases that often ravaged communities before*

*modern public sanitation and immunizations made these pestilent afflictions much less fearsome, diseases like Cholera, Tuberculosis, and Dysentery. It might have been a sad place but that the grieving parents and parishioners of that congregation had planted the area with countless bulbs which had naturalized over the years. This time of the spring that whole back section is alive with the brilliant colors of old fashioned hyacinths and daffodils and tulips and crocus. The leaning and broken tombstones are not the real story there. They speak of the grief that parents felt as they committed their little children to the grave. The flowers speak much more eloquently of the hope they also felt. Jesus is the first fruit, we too shall follow him up and out of that grave to heaven's glory and eternal peace!*

## **Law**

1. We die at an alarming rate.
2. Death does terrible things to us, physically, relationally, and otherwise.
3. It not only buries us in the ground but before too long anyone who ever knew us will be moldering in a grave as well. We will be forgotten except as a tombstone perhaps, a footnote in someone's genealogy. Death renders us anonymous dust.
4. Without hope, we lead miserable lives. If it is only for this life we believe in Christ we are stupid. Christians don't get ahead and don't succeed more than other people. In fact, sometimes we get drug into arenas and people make sport of our grisly deaths.
5. Our message seems to be little heard today. Like women who return with glorious news, the world thinks this an idle tale, foolish talk.

## **Gospel**

1. Jesus lives
2. Jesus promises to wipe every tear away from our faces, the broken bodies restored, the relationships, even the strange things we never missed, like vegetarians lions.
3. Jesus never forgets, and deliberately remembers us. The world may forget us, but he does not. No one will lie forgotten on that great day, but lovingly, tenderly, and individually he will call all of us from our graves, the creatures God has always delighted in.
4. Hope changes everything. Christ has recast our entire lives. Even the dying of this world becomes simply God brushing away the old and decaying structure that he may build anew. Every sin is a moment for forgiveness, every death a moment for resurrection, every tear a moment for his tenderness and care. You just cannot get a resurrection person down.

5. Some are moved to jump up and run, they see what we have seen, and they marvel. Praise God for the work he does.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. An Easter Sermon Outline (I usually like to preach fairly briefly this day – let the music also bear some of the load – the hymnody of Easter is just too good to shorten because I want to talk. I will have lots of opportunities over the next seven weeks to talk about Easter.)
  - I. A proclamation – Death is Undone – Christ has Risen, Alleluia!
  - II. Know the enemy – name him, for our victory is assured
    - a. Cut to the chase here, don't spend a lot of time, but don't speak limpidly either. The cruel reality is that every one of us will taste death's bitter dregs. Our hope is not that we will eat right, exercise and live forever. That is a fool's dream. We will eat right, exercise, take our vitamins and die anyway!
    - b. Our death is the fruit of this world which was broken by sin. We can no more stop it than we can stop the earth from circling the sun. We are too wrapped up in this world, its living and its dying. We cannot free ourselves from it.
    - c. Death is a real problem – it cuts us off from God. Dead people are not just happy ghosts – they are dead.
  - III. Hear the doom of this enemy – Christ has crushed his power by his death upon a cross
    - a. But one is able to stop the earth from circling the sun. He stood outside this broken world and ruled it as its creator, but he has also entered it that he might save it. Jesus has come because he hates death. He suffered death himself that he might defeat this foe of ours.
    - b. This Friday past we call Good, because on it, Jesus Christ has taken your death and my death and nailed it to a tree. He has crushed its power and now it cannot hold us because it could not hold him.
  - IV. Celebrate the victory – Christ has indeed risen from the dead and death no longer has power over us!
    - a. Now, no-one lies forgotten in a tomb. Christ who cared for the little and the least has remembered them all. They are all connected to the one who is the Life of the World.

- b. Now, Jesus lives and reigns to all eternity, and nothing shall cut us off from that blessed kingdom, not even death. He has conquered and we are blessed! The end of Romans 8 seems appropriate to quote here.
2. Remember (OT and Gospel – The idea of this memorial appealed to the assembled preachers, but we could not agree on what we wanted this to look like. After several attempts we realized that we were actually looking at three different sermons, all based on the same foundational idea. Thus, after the initial development we will propose three sermon avenues for you – each with its own goal.)

This sermon begins by retelling the story, focusing on the word remember. The women enter the “memorial” the tomb, which is a remembrance of something past, something dead, something lost. They came to remember, to love the one whose death they had witnessed. For them, this would always be the place where Jesus crucified and dead body had been laid. A sad memory.

This intersects with our lives. We look around and see many memorials to our mortality. In the medicine cabinets and the cemeteries, in the insurance premiums we pay and the empty chairs at our Easter feasts. We trudge through this world of death, constantly reminded of our death. “Remember, you are dust” we said as the ashes of Lent were applied to our heads.

But the women are surprised that first Easter morning to find that Jesus is not there. The one who died has risen, the one whose body they had come to prepare for eternal death lives. Now they find only two of his messengers, shining brightly before them, reminding them of the promises he had made to them. He would die, but rise again.

They remember, and suddenly it is the spices and the linens which are forgotten, a moment before they were critically important, now they lie forgotten on the memorial’s floor. They race back to the community of grieving followers of Jesus. Their words of those angels are not forgotten, but retold, recounted. The story is remembered.

And the disciples and others who are gathered there look up from their weeping and consider this an idle tale, but not all of them. One remembers what Jesus said, remembers what he himself said, perhaps what he denied. He remembers the word of hope that Jesus had spoken to him in Luke 22:32, “when you turn again, strengthen your brothers.” Had Jesus really risen from the grave, to forgive me, he wondered. These words of the women spark something within him. He jumps up and runs to the tomb, and he marvels.

The people who are here this morning are reminded of something that is not new, but is gloriously true, the tomb is empty. Like Peter, we too have come, perhaps in haste, to hear what others have said and to hear with our own ears and see with our own eyes and to believe and marvel this day.

1. Goal: That the hearer be comforted by the remembered promise which God has made to us – he remembers even when we forget. The empty tomb of Christ and the cross are memorials to God of what he has done for us.

This sermon will remember just how prone to forgetting we all are. There is much of my life in which I forget God. It is so easy for me to forget all about him. Usually when I do that, I am getting myself into some sort of trouble or simply living my life rather selfishly. Watching basketball instead of worshipping is a form of forgetfulness.

But God never forgets us and even when we don't think about him, he never stops thinking about us. The old woman in an Alzheimer's unit, the man moldering away in a grave, the young man who has forgotten to set his alarm clock on Sunday mornings for the last seven years, they all are in a state of forgetfulness.

Today Christ reminds us of God's memory. The women had forgotten the good news Jesus had spoken, they needed to be reminded. Peter needed to be reminded or he would have already been out at that tomb. We need to be reminded. God does not.

2. Goal: That the hearer would be the living memorials of Christ's resurrection love. This is an action sort of sermon – a memorial functions when it causes others to remember something.

Jesus has risen. He lives today, we are the living memorial of Christ, there is no tomb of Jesus at which people come and grieve, only this lily festooned house, the place which today celebrates the empty tomb, remembers the emptiness of that tomb that Peter saw and in which God remembers us.

For this day also remembers forward a promise Jesus also made to us. His is not the only empty tomb, but ours is empty as well. Jesus also said "He who believes in me shall never die and if he dies he shall live again – I am the resurrection and the life." This remembering, this reminding, brings us back to the central promise which Jesus has made to all of us. His death and His life, is our eternal life.

And that reality has changed the way we live it. No longer as lived for ourselves and to ourselves, but now as the living memorials of Jesus. We call him to mind just as this text called the women to mind and then sent them to remind the

disciples. That reminding action is what has been going on for the last two thousand years and continues today in every one of the thousands who will come to faith around the world today, the millions this year.

Peter might make a good illustration here. He was afraid but then remembered and became bold.

3. Goal: That the hearer encounter the risen Christ, remembering them in this sacramental meal, in this moment in which Christ speaks to us.

At this rail and in this meal we share here, Jesus exhorts us to do this for his remembrance. That of course involves us remembering him, but that can also mean that Jesus remembers me. When we commune, when we partake, we are calling upon Jesus to remember his promise to us.

For many of our people, the great fear of this age is not only death, but it is the terror of being institutionalized in some Alzheimer unit, unable to remember what you just said. When we cannot remember how to tie our shoes, God promises never to forget us. In this sacramental moment, when we partake of this body broken and blood shed, we receive from his hand the blessings of his promise to us. We encounter the living Christ who does not forget, and who is reminded in the physicality of this act. We remember and more importantly, he remembers.

As Isaiah says, the former things are forgotten, but that is because the new creation, the new thing which God is doing is so much better. In Christ, God has invested his only-begotten Son's blood, willfully and freely shed for us. He will never forget that, even when we lie down in the forgetful sleep of death, even when we cannot remember any more. Even when we willfully forget Him, He never forgets.

3. God's great joy (OT – That the hearer, naturally joyful at Easter, situate his/her joy in the greater joy of God.)

Christians come and sing joyful songs today. We celebrate Easter, having observed Good Friday and the events of Holy Week, we celebrate this day. And it is the right thing to do, this celebration. Jesus has risen from the dead, our own death undone, the promise of resurrection is ours. We do not need to cower before death's threats or grieve our loved ones without hope. Jesus has risen from the dead and this brings us joy.

But Isaiah today reminds us that this joy flows from God's joy. The stain of death, its blot upon creation, was not as God wanted things to turn out. Jesus' great work in cross and empty tomb is nothing less than God's plan coming to fruition and he is happy too.

Isaiah tells us that God delights in his people. That comes as something that sounds about right to people of our age, but Isaiah's people lived in a time when they were not so sure. He tells us that God's great joy is to delight once more in his people.

Easter proclaims more than just a thing which is good for us, we rise from the dead. It also proclaims that we rise from the dead as the cherished, delighted over, treasured people of God. Jesus' great work in cross and tomb has not only beaten back the scourge of death, but it has also purified and cleansed us as a people who may with all honesty call ourselves the children of God, his delight and treasure.

Yes, that truth has great blessing and benefit for us. Isaiah speaks beautifully of lives free from sorrow and pain. But our blessing and our benefits all flow from the joy which God has found in us right now through Jesus.

And so this Easter message is simply an exhortation to rejoice with God. He is happy now and his people join him in that joy.

4. The Blessing (Easter – That the hearer would be able to articulate the blessings of the resurrection)

This sermon is going to mine the list under the opening essay of these notes. There are many reasons that the resurrection is a great blessing and boon to us. But do we even know how to talk about them? This sermon would simply take two or three of those things and explore and explain them. Illustrate them with a good story or two, and this sermon is done. This is not a day for a heavy proclamation, but a day to call people to believe that this thing we celebrate is real and a good thing.