

PRETTY HARD TO SWALLOW

Sermon, March 27, 2016

Easter Sunday

Isaiah 25:6-9; Luke 24:1-12; I Corinthians 15:3-8, 12-19, 54-58

Do you know that the early Christians more or less lost the tomb? The early Christians lost the tomb of Jesus. At the time of Jesus' crucifixion it was normal that when sages and holy men and prophets died their followers would make their tombs into shrines, places of veneration and places of pilgrimage. I'm told there were at least fifty such tombs in Palestine when Jesus died ... for example, in Hebron there is a shrine complex built around an ancient double cave that has been revered since at least 1000 BC as the burial site of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their wives. Yet we know that just fifty years after Jesus was placed in the tomb that basically no one was really sure where the tomb was. I know you can go to Jerusalem today, and the tour books can guide you to the two top competing sites (among several) for the "authentic" tomb of Jesus ... one being the Church of the Holy Sepulcher within the Old City and the other being the Garden Tomb just outside the Old City's Muslim quarter. Two different sites within easy walking distance of the other; in fact, last July my family stayed at a wonderful little guest house just a block or so from the Garden Tomb site. The site for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was more or less selected by Helena, the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine, in the fourth century; the Garden Tomb was chosen by archeologists in the 19th century. But nobody knows for sure where THE tomb is ... and the reason nobody knows for sure is that the early Christians apparently ignored the tomb, they did not make it into a shrine. Historians wonder, "How can that be?"

Well, I can understand one possible reason how that might be; in fact, this year I can *especially* understand how that might be. This year is the first time in twenty-six years that I am home alone for Easter. Most of you know I was widowed seventeen years ago, my oldest daughter married a year and a half ago, and my son and my youngest daughter are now away at college. Many of you can relate to this: When your children are at home, when you HAVE your children, when your sons or daughters are living with you, there is nothing special about their bedrooms. You walk into their rooms, you see the shoes in the middle of the floor, you see the bed (*which is often unmade*), and you see the clothes strewn about, and you may think "*Why can't he/she pick things up, why can't he/she keep a neater room?*" But the room and the things on the floor really mean nothing; it's just a room and "stuff." But when that child moves out and goes away to college, or moves out and goes away and gets married, or worst of all, when a child actually dies, the room suddenly becomes very special, more than "just" a room. You walk in and you don't look at the shoes on the floor in the same way. You don't think "*Why can't he pick them up?*" No, you're like, "*Oh, there are his shoes. Sigh. Oh, there's his bed.*" And when a loved one dies, you are reluctant to even touch the room, let alone clean out the drawers and closets ... you can't bear to throw the clothes out. When you *don't* have somebody, it's human nature to almost venerate the places where they last were (*and/or to cherish the things left behind*), and it can become almost like shrine. Well, why is it that the Christians didn't go to the tomb? Why didn't they turn it into a shrine? How could they have lost the location of the tomb? It's very simple. They had HIM. They had Jesus! The tomb was just one more place among many where He had briefly stopped along the way!

I love Easter! I enjoy the fuss about this holiday. The church is full today, we've all come dressed in our best outfits, the bell and chancel and youth choirs are at their very best, we've more flowers here than in the greenhouse across the street. This is our big day! This is the day we get to proclaim the best news that we have: *Jesus Christ is Risen!* The tomb is empty! The tomb was just one more place He stopped along the way! Let me be very clear about what it is we are proclaiming today. We are *not* just saying the *teachings* of Jesus continue to live on in His disciples. Nor are we just saying the "*spirit*" of Jesus lives on today in our hearts. Nor are we just saying Easter is a wonderful metaphor like spring for new life and hope that always comes after the winter of our hard times. If that's all this celebration is about, then we have essentially pushed Jesus back into the tomb and rolled the stone back over it. No! When the main character comes out of the hole to proclaim springtime metaphors, and then goes back in, that's Groundhog Day, not Easter! Jesus has risen ... literally, physically, really *risen* ... from the grave.

I know some find the resurrection pretty hard to swallow, but we are told by eyewitness accounts like Paul's in I Corinthians 15 that hundreds and hundreds of people, perhaps thousands, SAW the resurrected Jesus over a forty day period. Hundreds and hundreds of people! Some said they had one on one experiences, some told of repeated experiences, some were in a huge group of five hundred ... hundreds and hundreds of people who said "*We saw Him. We talked to Him.*" Some even said. "*We touched Him; we put our fingers on His wounds, in the nail prints on His hands!*"

Paul's words were written maybe twenty years after the events; he couldn't write about such things unless they were true, because it could have been so easily refuted by the testimony of eyewitnesses who were around twenty years earlier. Twenty years is NOT a long time! I mean, I've arrived here in this pulpit twenty years ago, and by

Rhode Island standards, I'm still the new pastor ... people have lo-o-ong memories in provincial New England! Well, things were even more provincial in Paul's day. And these hundreds and hundreds of people who saw Him first hand went on to speak to thousands and thousands of their friends and relatives and neighbors, "I know it sounds nutty, I know it doesn't make any sense, I know this may be pretty hard to swallow, but I saw Him! I touched Him! I talked to Him!" As a result, thousands and thousands of people became Christians in those early years. The movement grew incredibly fast. By the way, those thousands and thousands of friends and relatives and neighbors didn't get this faith through wishful thinking. They got it through **thinking**. They sat down and **thought**, "Why do all these people we personally know and trust and respect and love say these things happened?" Would this be a hallucination? No, hallucinations don't happen in groups, much less do FIVE HUNDRED people have the same hallucination at once (although this political campaign season you have to wonder, but I digress)! Well, could this all be a big hoax? No, nobody dies for a hoax ... we know many of those who said they saw Jesus died for their faith. In fact, the original apostles were beaten, stoned, thrown in prison and all but one eventually died a martyr's death without ever once renouncing their belief in the resurrection. They were confident, they were fearless, they weren't afraid of death anymore, because they SAW HIM.

Quoting the Old Testament text with which we opened our service this morning, Paul writes, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?" What interesting metaphors; you talk about something being pretty hard to swallow! Swallowed death? Note that Paul doesn't say death is *removed*, it is *swallowed*. The victory of the resurrection doesn't just remove death, it *swallows* death and suffering. There's much that can be said about this, but for now think of it this way. If you go downstairs to the 29Eleven brunch and there is a piece of sausage bread still remaining on the table, there are essentially two ways for you to get it off the table. One is you remove it, wrap it up and put it away, the other is that you EAT it, you swallow it. Then it becomes part of you, part of your energy in life, it feeds you, it nourishes you, it makes you more alive, it enhances who you are, as it were. The resurrection doesn't just get rid of death; it swallows it and uses this once-dreaded sting to transform you. The resurrection transforms death and suffering. It uses suffering to make us greater. It uses death to give us life like we've never known it before!

To go into this in detail will take all day, but let me just make this one little observation: What do we notice about the resurrected Jesus in the biblical accounts? We notice His wounds are still there, His sorrows are still part of His glory and I don't know fully what this means other than this ... I believe it means even the worst things we had to endure on earth, all our sufferings in this life, will only make our joy greater than it would have been otherwise. All things can and do work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes! This passage from Corinthians tells us the perishable will put on the imperishable; we will be *clothed* in the imperishable (this is, again, a sermon in itself but this is what the Apostles' Creed is referring to as "the resurrection of the body" ... its referring to our bodies, not just Jesus' body). The perishable will not put on the *immaterial*, the "spiritual." We aren't going to be like immaterial wraiths or floating pure energy fields or anything of that nature. The resurrection hope is we are going to get *more* physical, not less ... more physical in the sense that we are going to be solid, we are going to last, we will be indestructible, tireless, not prone to disease, we're not going to shrivel or fall apart as time goes on for eternity. What's it going to be like to be more physical? One thing that might mean is this: how many senses do we have now? Most of us are born with five senses ... some of us who are older than, say, fifty may already have one or more of our senses getting bad; we wear bifocals or hearing aids and I'm getting to the point where I can hide my own Easter eggs because twenty minutes later I'll forget where I put them. But in heaven, it's possible we're going to have maybe a hundred or even a thousand senses, and all of them heightened and sharp. I believe we are going to blossom in places we didn't even know we had buds! We are going to be more physical, not less.

Years ago I told you about **The Christian Herald** story about a family with three small boys who enjoyed have sing-alongs while traveling long trips by car. On one trip the eldest son, Aaron, asked if they could sing the "Gravy Song." The rest of the family asked, "The Gravy Song? What's that? Why don't you teach it to us, Aaron?" Aaron began singing, "Low in the gravy lay, Jesus my savior ..." "Up from the gravy arose!" This is that glorious day of the year we get to sing the Gravy Song! And "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." This is Easter Sunday, and we celebrate that Jesus indeed rose from the gravy ... er, grave! Today we are proclaiming an audacious thing that may be pretty hard for some to swallow, but it really is an historical reality: the tomb really was empty, Jesus really, physically, personally came back from the dead, and in so doing He has swallowed up death and suffering. That's the message of Easter. It wasn't the message of springtime and love being stronger than death and pretty flowers that empowered a small band of frightened, doubting disciples who were hiding for fear in an upper room to eventually go on to shake the foundations of the mighty Roman Empire! No! It was knowing Jesus had risen from the dead. It literally took away their fear of death. It made them fearless! Paul writes that if Christ is not risen from the dead, then our proclamation is in vain and your faith is futile and your pastor will have to find another line of work! But I really do believe this, and I trust you do as well! Our faith is NOT futile.

He is risen! HE IS RISEN, INDEED!