

A Matter of Death and Life

Luke 24:1-12

Crossroads Christian Church

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

March 27, 2016 Easter C

Easter is more than a day. Let's face it—the resurrection is so important, so central to our faith, and so complex a story that we can't possibly unpack it in a day. It's like a diamond, with many facets, always revealing new light. So, we have 7 Sundays of Easter. Not to mention the fact that every Sunday is Easter Sunday, because every Sunday we celebrate the risen Christ.

You're all familiar with the expression, "It's a matter of life and death." That refers to a situation which is urgent, critical, and literally, where a human life may hang in the balance. It's true of our human lives in times of medical emergencies. Will the ambulance arrive in time? Will someone receive CPR or other life-saving treatment before it's too late?

But when you get to Easter, we can turn that sentence around. Good Friday was a matter of life and death. The one who God sent to bring us life died a cruel and barbarous death on a cross. But Easter turns it around, stands it on its head, and gives it an entirely different meaning. "It's a matter of life and death?" No. Not anymore. Now, it's a matter of death and life. Easter is a matter of death and life. From that death, new life came—not just for Jesus, but for us all.

Way back in April, 1968, I first preached a sermon called "A Matter of Death and Life" at the First Christian Church in Oelwein, Iowa. No, this isn't the same sermon. Only the title's the same. Of course, it was an Easter sermon—my first one, I think. Of course, it was about the resurrection, about God raising Jesus from the dead, and the new life that it gave us all. A few weeks later, on May 15, a tornado roared through town and the lovely old church building was a shambles, unsafe and needing to be demolished. On May 19, the congregation gathered on folding chairs in the parsonage to worship, wondering what their future would be. I called that sermon "Another Matter of Death and Life," and preached that God was in the resurrection business for churches as well as for people, and that we should trust God and accept God's offer of new life, no matter what shape it should turn out to be.

So now, 48 years later, different congregation, different state, and a way older minister, here I am saying that God is still in the business of bringing new life from death. Because of that, God brings new hope from despair.

Despair is where our Easter story starts. After the intimate meal with his disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus led them to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives for a time of prayer. Then Judas came with the armed temple guards to arrest Jesus. He was tried before the Sanhedrin and condemned. He was tried before Pilate, who attempted half-heartedly to let him go with a whipping, but Pilate caved under the crowd's rage and ordered him to be beaten and sent to Golgotha—execution hill. His followers fled. Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. His women followers—always important in Luke's gospel—blended into the woodwork but stayed faithful as Jesus was executed in the most humiliating and painful way possible. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who was sympathetic to Jesus, asked for his body so that he could be buried with some semblance of dignity and honor. The women saw where Jesus was laid, and prepared fragrant spices and perfumed oils to honor his body. But it was the Sabbath, so they waited.

Early they gathered, and carrying the spices, they made their way along the dark paths to the tomb. The dark sky matched their hopeless spirits. They were heartbroken, but Jesus had meant so much to them. They groped their way to the tomb, and half-felt, half-looked for the rock in the darkness—the rock that sealed the entrance to Jesus' burial chamber. But the rock wasn't there. They probably didn't want to go inside, but somehow they had to. They owed that much to Jesus. The rock shelf on which the body had laid was empty. Had they stumbled into the wrong tomb in the darkness? Had someone already been there and stolen the body? What was going on? What should they do?

They backed out of the tomb to where things were a little brighter. Suddenly, their hearts leapt in terror as two men, two beings, with gleaming bright clothing, stood before them. Frightened, the women bowed their faces to the ground, where they could feel the sand of the path on their foreheads. Do you suppose that they recalled the stories about the angels singing to the shepherds when Jesus was born?

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the visitors asked. "He isn't here, but has been raised. Remember what he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." (24:5-7)

Suddenly it all came back to them. Suddenly it all made sense. Suddenly their hearts swelled with hope as they remembered what Jesus had taught them. So off they went, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and other unnamed women with them,

rushing through the early morning streets of Jerusalem, to bring the surprising good news. Jesus had risen from the dead!

Excitable, hysterical women, the apostles must have muttered. Their grief must have put them over the edge. But Peter, poor, impulsive basket-case Peter, who just a couple of days before had denied even knowing Jesus, had a hunch. What if they were right? And he dashed off to the tomb. He bent over to look inside, and saw only a piece of linen cloth draped where Jesus had been. He wondered. Could the women have been right? Where were the angels now? Hadn't Jesus said something about this that he should remember? What were those words again?

The first part of the story ends there, with Peter pondering, trying to figure things out. Later in the day Jesus would appear, walking with two followers who were too filled with their grief over Jesus' death to recognize him, until at the inn he broke bread and blessed it. And he appeared to the disciples and their friends gathered in Jerusalem. In a hellish world, heaven had broken loose. In a bad news world, the good news was being experienced. In a world where evil had done its worst, and death had seemed the final word, came the realization that love had won. God had won.

A generation later, Paul had something to say about this subject to the Christians in Corinth. Paul himself had been a persecutor of the new faith, until he had experienced the risen Christ for himself on the road to Damascus. Now, many years later, some believers were doubting the resurrection. Did it really happen? Some others said that yes, Jesus had been raised from the dead, but that was a one-time only thing. It didn't apply to us. How could dead, decomposed bodies come back to life? So Paul wrote that wonderful passage that we label 1 Corinthians 15 as a ringing climax to his letter. He used all kinds of arguments, all kinds of metaphors, all kinds of scriptural references, but it all boiled down to this. The resurrection of Jesus Christ wasn't a one-and-done deal. Christ had been raised from the dead, and he was the first fruits of the harvest of new life for all believers. Christ's resurrection was the great, decisive victory in the battle over sin and death, and we share in that victory. He would go on to write that we would be given new resurrection bodies, and he would cry in triumph, "Death, where is your victory? Grave, where is your sting?..Thanks be to God who gives us the victory in Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 15:54-57)

That's the message of Easter. We worship a risen Christ, and in Christ we have the gift of new life. Is that message, that presence, that life too good to be true? No, it's the one and only thing that's too good NOT to be true, for it is based upon the power and steadfast love of

God. Christ is alive, and suddenly appears in the locked rooms of our own grief, our own fear, our own despair, and then we experience a joy that can never die. Amen.

by Michael E Dixon