

The Reality of Resurrection
Matthew 28:1–10; Isaiah 25:6–9
Sunday, April 4, 2021 (Easter Sunday)

A year ago, as this pandemic was first getting started, we gathered for virtual worship on Easter Sunday, and we talked about all the things that we *missed* – the sights and sounds and smells and the energy and the music and the food and the *people* that we associate with Easter. I preached about Easter as an opportunity to let go of the *old* life (whatever that old life might be – pre-pandemic expectations or the sin, mistakes, and pain of the past), we have to let go of *that* in order to experience Christ’s risen presence with us *now*. It was a way of relating to the resurrection of Christ *metaphorically*; that Christ is risen, and so how can *we* be raised up to live a new life with him here and now; raised up in our hearts and our minds and our words and our actions. That was the message that I discerned we needed to hear a year ago.

But the other week, I was out for a walk, and I was listening to an interview with a psychologist who was talking about the psychological effects that a year of pandemic and social isolation have taken on us – our inability and our *need* to process the massive losses that we have experienced. After 2.8 million people around the world have died – 550,000 of them in the United States – we have had to face death (real, physical loss) in a way that many of us have never had to face it before. We have lived with the looming specter of death for the past year. It has been this ever-present reality and threat, hovering around our lives everywhere from school to grocery stores to church. And so *this* Easter, we need a way of relating to the resurrection that is more than just *metaphor*. Death has touched this world and our lives in very *real, concrete, physical* ways, and our faith needs to be able to make sense out of that. We need to talk about resurrection in a real, concrete, physical way.

About 15 years ago, when I was just starting out as a pastor, I got a phone call one evening that a 73-year-old member of the church had collapsed at home and was being taken to the hospital, and it didn't look good. She was an incredibly faithful woman and a devoted member of the church. She led Bible studies and prayer groups, taught Sunday School for decades, and served as a Deacon. She hadn't been sick or anything, just all of a sudden collapsed and was unresponsive. So I rushed to the hospital where I met her husband and son, and we stood there in the emergency room, watching them do compressions in an attempt to resuscitate her. Eventually, they stopped, and the doctor turned to us and said, "I'm so sorry. There's nothing else we can do. She's gone." It was a total shock.

But I'll never forget what happened next. As soon as the doctor had finished saying those words – I mean literally the second after he said, "She's gone." – the son turned to his father and said, "Remember, dad, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14." And he *kept* saying it over and over again – "1 Thessalonians 4:13–14." Now, admittedly, I did not know at that time what 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14 *said*. But I had my pocket Bible with me, so I snuck a peak, and I have never forgotten it since: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died."

Now, I have to admit, when I read those words and finally understood what this son had been saying to his father, I cringed a little bit. Because this man had just suddenly and unexpectedly lost his wife of 53 years. His whole world had changed in an instant. You could see the shock on his face. He was speechless; he didn't know where to go or what to do. And it *felt like* his son, in an effort to be *faithful*, was not allowing his father to *grieve*. Like he was saying, "Don't be sad, dad. We know she's with God now." But he *was* sad, and it was *okay* for him to be sad.

It didn't mean that he was grieving "as others do who have no hope." He just loved his wife. And it felt in that moment like this son was denying the reality of her death. Like, "She's not *really* dead! She's alive with God now!"

And I think there's a tendency in *all* of us to do that. To make everything *okay*. To make people *feel better*. To *comfort* them. That's not a *bad* thing, it's a very natural, human, *compassionate* thing to do. But sometimes in the process, we can end up ignoring the reality of pain and sadness and grief in our rush right to the good news and the happy ending. It's why one of the most overlooked days of the Christian calendar is yesterday, Holy Saturday, the day that Christ was in the tomb. We tend to focus on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, and then jump right to Easter Sunday and the good news of resurrection. And that's what it felt like, standing there in that emergency room – like he was *over-spiritualizing* it all, focusing on heaven and resurrection and the life to come, rather than dealing with the concrete, physical reality of what *was*.

But that was 15 years ago, and since then I have come to believe – I have come to *see* – that there is *nothing* more concrete and physical and real than (the) *resurrection*.

When we talk about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we're not just talking about a *metaphor*, like, "He rose in the hearts of his disciples." We are talking about a *physical reality*. In Matthew's account of the resurrection that we heard earlier, *the earth shook*. That is *physical*. The women *took hold of his feet*. They *touched* him. That is *physical*. In the other gospels, the disciples go into the tomb and see the linen cloths that Jesus had been buried in, folded up where Jesus had been laid. That is *physical*. He shows them the *wounds* in his hands and his side, and they *touch* them. That is *physical*. He *eats* with them and *breathes* on them. That is *physical*.

He says to them, “Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” That is *physical*.

When we talk about the resurrection of Jesus, we’re not talking about some disembodied *spiritual* event where Jesus’ *soul* rises while his *body* is still in the tomb. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a physical, tangible, *bodily* event. Christ, who was *physically dead*, is now *physically, bodily alive*, walking, talking, eating, breathing, and *living* with his disciples.

And so when we talk about the resurrection that we will one day *share* with Christ, we’re not just talking about a metaphor or a purely spiritual state. We are talking about a *physical, bodily reality* in which those who have *died* are *alive* again and forever.

First century Jewish people like Jesus and his disciples believed that, when you die, your body does not rise right away. Rather, you go to a place of *rest* where you essentially sleep and are renewed after the trials of life. And then Jewish belief was that on the “last day,” the end of time, when God’s kingdom comes to earth, at *that* time, God would raise *all the dead* at once for judgment; the righteous and the unrighteous. But it would be a bodily, physical resurrection. This is one of the reasons why Jesus’ resurrection was so surprising, because it didn’t fit into that understanding. It wasn’t just, “*This* person is raised when *they* die, and then *that* person is raised when *they* die.” Resurrection was understood to be a *collective* event. *All* the dead are raised at once.

But what Paul says is that Jesus Christ is the “first fruits of those who have died.” He is saying that Jesus’ resurrection is preview, a foretaste of what God is going to do for *everyone*, for *all of creation*. Paul writes that “when we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his

death...so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, we too might live a new life. For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” And Christ’s resurrection was not simply spiritual or metaphorical, it was *physical* and *bodily*. This is why we profess in the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” Not just the resurrection of *Christ’s* body, but also the resurrection of *our own* bodies. That there will be a day when we are physically, bodily raised to live a new life with God and with each other. The resurrection is not just an *idea*, it is a *reality*, inaugurated by Christ, in which one day we will *all* take part.

We hear this promise echoing through the words of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah talks about a time when God will raise the people up out of the valley of death and despair to God’s holy mountain, where God will make for *all peoples* a feast of rich food, of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow. Those are *physical* things. Isaiah talks about how God will wipe away all the tears from all faces. That is a *physical* act. He says that God will swallow up death forever.

And all of these things we see happening in Jesus Christ. Christ, in his body broken and his blood shed on the cross, *becomes* the feast of rich food and well-aged wine that we celebrate with bread and cup. In the book of Revelation, John describes the day when the Kingdom of God comes to earth and Christ “will dwell with them, and they will be his people. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And Paul talks about how, in Christ, “death has been swallowed up in victory...thanks be to God, who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The physicality of Isaiah’s vision, of God’s promise, is made manifest in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah says that God will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples. The shroud is that which is covering us, looming over us, casting the shadow of death upon us. For the people of Israel, it was being invaded and conquered by Babylon and being forced to live in exile; the death and despair that they experienced. And we don't have to think too hard to know what that shroud is for us. For the past year, this pandemic has covered this world and our lives like a shroud, looming over every aspect of our lives, and casting the shadow of death upon us. We see it in the very way that we are worshipping today, that we still can't be *here, together*. We see it in the 2.8 million of our fellow human beings and the 550,000 of our fellow Americans who have died. The reality and the threat of death hang heavy over us.

There is a sense in which we can become *numb* to the reality of death. We either try to ignore it, or we say, "Well, death is just a natural part of life." But I think that what this pandemic has made us aware of is that death is *not* a natural part of life. Death is the most *unnatural* part of life. It was not supposed to *be* this way. When we look back at the story of creation, God did not create us to die. God created us to live with God forever. Death is a result of the broken, sinful world in which we live, but it was *never* God's *intention* for us.

But the *good news* is that, in Jesus Christ, God has *overcome* death! The promise we have from God through Isaiah that has been made concrete in Jesus Christ is that God will destroy the shroud that is cast over us, and God will swallow up death forever. Because *in* Christ, we are promised – we are *shown* – that death is no longer the end. That death no longer has any *real, lasting* power over us, because God is *stronger* than death. Death no longer has the last word in our lives, because through his resurrection, Jesus Christ has the last word in our lives, and that word is this: "I am the resurrection and the life...Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

We believe in the resurrection of the body. Those who have died in this past year, while we grieve the tragedy of their loss, will one day be raised up in body and in spirit to live a new life with God. Those we love who have died before us, while we miss them and grieve their loss, will one day be raised up in body and in spirit to live a new life with God. And we, who will one day die, will be raised up in body and in spirit to live a new life with God. Because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. He has broken the power that death holds in this world and in our lives. While we do not deny the reality of death, it is not our *ultimate* reality. Our *ultimate* reality is that which is promised to us in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.”

Resurrection is not just a metaphor or an idea or a spiritual state of being. It is the concrete, physical, bodily reality in which we will all one day live again. That is the promise that we have from God and the hope that sustains us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Christ is risen, and we shall be risen with him, through the glory of God. Amen!