

“Unfinished Easter”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

March 27, 2005

Text: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8).

Over the last weeks we have all watched with a sense of horror the events surrounding a young woman in Florida named Terri Schiavo. In many ways she represents many of the ethical struggles that we all face today: the question of when life begins and ends; the problems that emerge when the technology of medicine at times appears to outrun the natural course of events in a person’s life; the whole issue of “quality of life” and what that really means; the “culture of life” versus the “culture of death;” a terrible conflict between a husband and the parents of this young woman.

David Brooks, writing in yesterday’s *New York Time*, points out that social conservatives have generally argued that the value of a human is intrinsic and does not depend on what an

individual can physically do, experience or achieve. Social liberals, on the one hand, warn against vitalism, the elevation of physical existence over other values. They believe that it is up to each individual or family to draw the line that defines when life passes to mere existence. Brooks asserts that what we are experiencing today is a clash between two serious but flawed arguments. Brooks argues that the socially conservative argument has tremendous moral force, but does not accord with the reality we see when we walk through a hospice. The socially liberal argument is pragmatic, but lacks moral force.

Perhaps that is why many of us feel a great deal of agony as we sit and watch a young woman die.

I.

There is something about Easter Sunday that focuses on the problem of death in a way that is not true on any other Sunday. Whether the preacher is willing to admit it or not, the stakes are higher today than any other Sunday. There is a sense in which if one gets it right on Easter Sunday, then it doesn't matter so much if he or she doesn't get it right the rest of the Sundays. But if we can't get it right on Easter Sunday, then it doesn't really matter what we say on any other Sunday.

The Apostle Paul certainly understood this. "If Christ has not been raised," he wrote to the church at Corinth, "then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain"(I Corinthians 15: 14). N.T. Wright, a well-known New Testament scholar echoes that sentiment, when he says, "The bodily resurrection of Jesus isn't a take it or leave it thing, as though some Christians are welcome to believe and others are welcome not to believe it. Take it away, and the whole picture is totally different. Take it away, and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christians of ignoring the problems of the material world. Take it away, and Sigmund Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is a wish fulfillment religion."

II.

In the New Testament there are two types of stories that describe the resurrection of Christ. There are, first of all, the stories of the "empty tomb." Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John-- each of these gospels contain a story of a group of women coming to the tomb where Jesus was buried and finding that the tomb was empty. The second type of story is the "appearance narratives." In these stories the risen Christ encounters disciples and other people.

One of the most enigmatic stories of the resurrection is found at the end of Mark's gospel. Mark tells us that three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome went on that Sunday morning to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. They found that the stone that guarded the tomb had been rolled away. When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man who announced to them the news, "Do not be afraid; you are seeking Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised."

So, let us not deceive ourselves. When we speak of the resurrection of Christ, we are at the very heart of the faith. “Take away the resurrection,” writes N.T. Wright, “and the center of Christianity collapses.” So, what do we mean when we affirm, as in the Apostle’s Creed, that we believe in the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting?”

III.

The resurrection is “good news” because it is an answer to the problem of historical evil. Some years ago a Jewish Rabbi, Richard Rubenstein, wrote a book that he entitled *After Auschwitz* in which he made the case that it was impossible for a Jew to believe in a God that would allow eight million Jews to die during the Holocaust of World War II.

Many historians have described the Twentieth Century as one of the most violent in all of civilization with the destruction of two World Wars, Hitler’s near annihilation of the Jews and Stalin’s killing of 12 million people in the U.S.S.R.

On September 11, 2001, we too witnessed that kind of senseless killing as we watched jet airliners crash into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington taking the lives of almost three thousand innocent people.

On Good Friday a good man named Jesus was put to death by a weak and vacillating Roman governor named Pontius Pilate, and a conniving high priest, Caiaphas, and a howling, senseless mob. On Good Friday Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas went home confident that they had put to rest for all times the matter of Jesus of Nazareth. They could not have imagined that God would raise Jesus from the dead on that Easter morning thus undoing the evil and wickedness that had been done on that Good Friday.

During World War II, Martin Niemoller published a sermon that he had written while imprisoned by the Nazis. The title of the sermon was “But God.” Niemoller pointed out that on Good Friday the forces of evil seemed so dominant. But God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Therefore, the Hitlers of the world, the Pilates, the Caiaphases, the howling crowds had to barricade themselves from a word spoken from beyond the grave, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

IV.

The resurrection is also good news because it deals with the problem of “natural evil.” On December 26, 2004, the world was brought into a terrible state of shock as we witnessed the Tsunami destruction in South Asia. In a matter of a few hours over a hundred and fifty thousand people had been killed. Most of these people were either poor village fishermen and their families or tourist enjoying the beautiful beaches of that area. One witness of the damage done by this natural disaster was Secretary of State Colin Powell, a former military man, who said he had never in his life witnessed such destruction. Physical evil is devastating in dramatic forms such as tornado, hurricanes, and Tsunami waves.

But it can also be damaging on an individual basis. Paul Tillich once called the painting *The Crucifixion* by Matthias Grunewald, the greatest portrayal of the incarnation in visual art. The basis of this judgment is the sheer horror of the dead body upon the cross and the obvious anguish of those who stood at the foot of the cross. It puts in visual form the theological question of the incarnation: How can this man be the Son of God?

The resurrection of Jesus Christ demonstrates that in human history there are resources of divine mercy and power that can take the broken wounded pieces of life and put them together again.

Some years ago when a group of archaeologists began to excavate some of the ancient cemeteries in the city of Rome, they found everywhere tombstones with seven letters on them: NFFNSNC. These letters represented an old inscription that was so familiar that the Romans put only the initials down: Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo. And this is the translation: I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care. So sons buried fathers, and fathers sons; wives interred husbands, and husbands wives; and over their graves, this cynical, hopeless summary of life was put: I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care.

Contrast that cynicism and surrender when the words of a man, Dean Alford, who lies buried in Canterbury, England and on whose grave are inscribed these words: “The inn of a traveler on his road to Jerusalem.”

V.

Then, too, the resurrection is good news because it affirms that the risen Christ lives and sends forth his spirit into the world.

That is what is so significant about the ending of Mark’s gospel. The gospel ends with these three women at the tomb of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark tells us that after the young man in the tomb told them that Jesus had been raised from the dead, “They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid”(Mark 16:8).

And why not trembling and dread? Our problem is no longer that we cannot find Jesus, but that we cannot escape him. That is our real uneasiness. Because the tomb was empty, we are now given over to the constant expectation of meeting one who has an absolute claim on us. We are not safe with our beloved evil--for he will not cease forgiving us. We are not safe with our pride--for he insists on showing us his hands and feet. We are not safe with our selfishness-for he keeps merging with the poor and sick and dying.

To say that Jesus is risen is to say that Easter is unfinished. To say, as the angel in the tomb said to those women, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee is to affirm that the work of Easter is just beginning.

That is what we proclaim this morning. Because God has raised Christ from the dead, there is no problem that cannot be faced, no hardship that cannot be overcome, no suffering that cannot be endured, and no life that cannot be redeemed. Once when the great Reformer Martin Luther was facing some great struggle in his life, his friends saw him writing with his fingers on the dust of a table top: "Vivit, Vivit"--he lives, he lives. Let us say that to ourselves this morning; Christ is alive.

Let us make no bones about it. If Easter isn't good news, then there is no good news. But if it is--if it true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed--the Easter Day, and the Easter message, is the true sun which, when it rises, puts all other suns to shame.