

“REMEMBERING HIS WORDS”
JOHN 20: 1-18

Easter Day, 2010 – April 4
University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

We’ve come through the focused devotion of Lent, forty days of discipline and sacrifice for some, and for those of us who live on the frozen tundra of the north a season of cold and rain and ever-changing weather. Easter comes like Kipling’s “thunder across the bay,” too quickly for those of us who have not fully wrestled with sorrow and the unknown, who have lived through the wilderness.

Most of us prefer Christmas, don’t we? The birth of the Son of God gives us something more tangible and comforting—not quite graspable but at least more familiar: a baby, a mother, shepherds, the Magi. And, of course, gifts and trips and Christmas trees and lights.

But Easter reminds us that someday we’re going to die, that, as Sigmund Freud said so long ago, “We keep putting off thinking about death, and because we do, we never learn how to live or die.” Easter makes us question the things that we value most: money and success and achievement and technology, because we are reminded again that someday every one of us will be remembered for nothing more than having our name on a tombstone in a cemetery or having our ashes scattered over a forest preserve or beneath a bush in the church’s memorial garden. To put it as the old-time preachers did doesn’t work for us: that “our true home is in heaven” and we don’t have to worry about this life is to devalue all that we know of human reality and our present lives.

Moreover, the church has often used heaven as a convenient cop-out in face of all of the world’s suffering, much of it inflicted by western capitalism on our behalf. We tell the poor and homeless, the hungry and the persecuted that there is a certain hope that God will, in the words of St. John, wipe away every tear—sometime in the future. Tell that to seventeen million unemployed folks who are suffering through the Great Recession or 700,000 unemployed, homeless people in East Timor or Palestinians who have lived for four generations in Gaza Strip hovels or hundreds of thousands Congolese who are being slaughtered and raped by Rwandan guerrillas and who are the victims of corruption and ambition and misplaced loyalties.

The mournful question Mary asks of the One she supposes is a gardener is our question on Easter Day, 2010: “Tell me where you have laid him.” Tell us how to make sense of our lives, how to understand the invasion of our privacy, the betrayals perpetrated by friends and colleagues, the technology that rules our very existence, the fact that probably a third of us here today are enormously wealthy (even though we don’t think

we are), approximately ten percent are desperately poor and the rest of us worry all the time about money and security and retirement and advancement and failure. Tell us where the body is, where the reality of Easter can be found.

Our usual way of dealing with the problem of Easter is to reject the humanity of Jesus. We say he was God-come-down-to-earth (remember Christmas?), he appeared for the most part to be human, suffered temptation and despair (that was Lent), went through incredible persecution and even death (that was Good Friday), but then retired to heaven (that's why we're here today). If what you want from life is money, success, pleasure, friends, trips, sex, a nice home and all the trappings, if that is what you call life, that's attainable in America, and for many people that's all there is. Easter is foreign to their imagination.

However, they are like us and we are like them in one very important myth by which we live: that first you live, then you die, then if you believe right, if God, that great accountant in the sky doctors the books enough, you can get to heaven. But that's not the Easter message at all. The shattering truth of Easter is very different from all that stuff. The resurrection of Jesus means that he forever remains one of us, for he is raised not as a disembodied spirit, an ex-human being, but "in the flesh"—different to be sure but ultimately recognizable by his friends and even to his former enemies like Paul. He is God's plunge into our humanity, God's risk in creation, "farther up and farther in," as Aslan cries to the children in C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

The Fourth Gospel makes clear that eternity begins the moment you surrender your life to God's purposes, the moment you become a true follower of Jesus of Nazareth. Eternity is not something that is put off until everything else in this world is done.

Emily Dickinson, that wonderful poet of faith and mystery said it well:

When Choice of Life—is past—
There yet remains a Love
Its little Fate to stipulate—

The Miracle to tease
With Babble of the styles
How "they are Dying mostly—now"—

St. John's narrative is the most elaborated of the four in the Gospels; it has five fully developed scenes: Mary Magdalene at the tomb, her meeting with Peter and the beloved disciple, their visit to the tomb, and her encounter with the angels and finally with the risen Jesus. After she asks that mournful question of Jesus, thinking that he is a gardener, Our Lord commands her: "Do not hold on to me." That's a very important command for us who live in a post-Easter, post-Christian world. The relationship Jesus

had with his followers during his pre-Easter life cannot continue in the same way, nor can it be replicated.

We try desperately to hold on to the way things were. Like Mary, we come to faith through the Word of Christ and by that Word we are sustained. Mary Magdalene cannot resume her old relationship with her Lord. This is Jesus to be sure; the Risen Christ is none other than the crucified Jesus, but the ministry of the historical Jesus is over. Now begins the ministry of the Christ who relates to us by giving us the Spirit who abides with us forever. "Do not hold me" tells us that we cannot return to some past relationship with God. We are called, compelled to move forward in faith.

In 1932 in DeWitt, Arkansas, my Dad built a hunting and fishing boat of his own design. He worked on it day after day at his father's house; the big house still stands on a large, grand lawn diagonally across the street from the Methodist parsonage. Behind the house was a three-car garage, a rarity in those days, which faced onto Main Street which everyone who was going south toward the rice mill had to travel. My grandfather, Dr. Eugene H. Winkler II, was the only physician in Arkansas County for many years, so everybody called Dad "Little Doc" when he was a boy, and "Doc" when he became an adult.

As Dad would work to cut the boards for his boat, glue and nail them carefully together, waterproof it, allowing within the design room for ducks killed and fish caught and seats for his cronies, his friends would stop by to ogle, talk and, of course, criticize his work. "Doc, why don't you try this?" "Doc, I think you should change that." My Dad, stubborn German to the core, would simply reply to each criticism and suggestion, "It suits me."

So, when he finished the boat, he named it "Suits Me." I still have pictures of both him and the boat. "Suits me." Which meant it fit his needs.

Easter is the most fitting festival of the Christian year. Easter fits our needs because it answers the deepest longing of the human spirit: assurance that life has meaning, that there is something more than the surface stuff that governs, momentarily delights and then disappears.

In an essay about Mozart's "Don Giovanni," Kierkegaard sets up three "stages" of immediacy and desire: dreaming desire, searching desire and desiring desire. When we are children, we live in that first stage, a dream life, a life of imagination, our senses open to every impression, our lives attentive all day long. But just as the child confounds himself with his sense impressions, when we get older we develop a kind of provisional identity. We are searching for the forbidden unknown. We see this in youths and young adults. The individual has a multiplicity of shadows, all of which resemble the searching person but the true personality has not yet been discovered.

It is that third stage, the stage that causes Don Giovanni's conflict. His whole life is built on seduction and absolute faithlessness. He is the supreme aesthete who always requires a reflection, always looking in the mirror. In the opera the only person who exists beyond Don Giovanni's charmed circle is the Commendatore, the one person over whom Don Giovanni cannot exercise power.

Two forces battle for mastery in Mozart's opera just as they do in each of our individual lives and in the life of the church: the dark and the light, the serious and the frivolous, the force that tells us that everything is o.k., that we're good and worthy of approval and we deserve to have things go our way and the voice of God that says, "There is more to life than you have ever known. It's yours for free. It's a gift of grace. True desire is the desire for spiritual wholeness and a community of loving, faithful seekers. Come on in.

When Danny Thomas's father came to die, he was surrounded by his large, extended Lebanese family. The old patriarch had immigrated to America, had worked long and hard, established a flourishing mercantile business, raised a wonderful family with many children and grandchildren, kept the faith and remained loyal to the ideas and things that really matter. As his wife and children stood, holding his hands, touching him, watching him in his coma and quietly waiting, the old man suddenly raised up in his bed and shouted, "GOD DAMN DEATH!" Then he collapsed back on the sheets and died.

A curse? A cry for help? "I don't think so," said his famous son. "I believe it was an affirmation. God has damned death forever."

I don't have to remind you that Easter is not about springtime and bunnies and flowers and eggs any more than Christmas is about trees and presents and lights. You know that. I know that. But it's easy to forget, especially on a beautiful spring morning in a sanctuary so beautifully decorated. Easter is about God's eternal damnation of death and our promise of new life in Christ. Beginning now. This moment.