

He is risen! Death is dead.

Easter Sunday

The weekend edition of most newspapers features obituaries. That edition is usually available late Saturday night. If there were such a thing in Jesus' day, imagine what the Saturday night edition of Jesus' obituary might have said. Perhaps something like this:

"Jesus, Son of Joseph, died, crucified. He had come into conflict with the Jewish and Roman authorities. Known as a carpenter and wandering preacher and healer, there were those who said he said would redeem Israel. He was preceded in death by his father, Joseph. Survivors include his mother, Mary, and several brothers and sisters. He was buried immediately because he was crucified just before the Sabbath, the high Holy Day of Passover. Visitation at the tomb is provided by Joseph of Arimathea, beginning Sunday morning."

We could then begin this morning to say we are gathered to celebrate the life and mourn the passing of Jesus, Son of Joseph. How inappropriate, how scandalous. We say "No! That's not the way it goes!" But seen from a certain angle, that is the story.

We say: "No, the real story is: Death is dead. Death has been conquered. Death is over." The last and only taboo in our culture is to talk about death. Yet even though it might seem impolite, we need to look squarely at what people really think.

Surveys show that most people think that when you're dead, you're dead. And it may be good life insurance to have a few beliefs and practices on this side of the grave, but when you're dead, it's over. Eat, drink and be merry. This view is already represented in the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 22:13, 1 Cor 15:32). It's been a common view. We end. That's it.

Along with this view is a similar but slightly different concept, that death is natural. It's like the seasons. It's like the life of plants and animals. It comes and goes. What we have to do is accept it, become comfortable with it, because that's the way it is. It's the cycle of life. This is exactly what it says in Ecclesiastes 3:2: There's "a time to be born and a time to die."

With that comes a certain kind of fatalism. When your time is up, your time is up. And we just have to accept it.

About 10% of the people in this country are atheists or agnostics. They openly and publicly don't believe in God. Yet many of them believe that life goes on beyond death. Not heaven, not God. But they are so centered on themselves that they imagine they will continue to live no matter what.

We who are Christian try to express and describe what the resurrection is about. We have a difficult time. We use metaphors: butterflies, lilies, and chicks, trying to point beyond death, but these are all part of the cycle of nature.

If we go beyond the metaphors, we talk about mythology. There have been throughout the ages those religions that have held there is a dying and rising god. But it's a fantasy, a myth, not really real. It's an idea. We take our account of Good Friday and Easter and turn it into an idea of goodness and love and then we still don't get it because all our ideas themselves are caught in death.

Or there is among us a movement called spirituality, that holds that everyone has his or her own spirituality or spiritual experience. As long as you have your spirituality, your own experience, everything's fine.

Over against that is the basic Christian message: Death is dead. This is something that is entirely new. That for which there is no parallel. It smashes all our categories. God has done something which is even more than reversing the second law of thermodynamics. Death is dead.

How did it happen? How was it accomplished?

This again is something that bursts all our categories. God himself came to be one of us. And not only came to be one of us but truly died. That, as we all know, does not work in any kind of category, any kind of parallel in life as we know it. God died on the cross and rose again. In that way, death is conquered. Death is over. As it says in 1 Cor 15:26: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

"Thine is the glory . . . Endless is the vict'ry." Endless is the victory because death is conquered. All of our categories, all of our ways of thinking – because we are not only limited but caught in sin and death – can't capture, can't even begin to capture what the resurrection is about, although we try and our trying can lead us astray.

It's important to be plain and simple: Death is over. Death is conquered.

How did Mary Magdalene know him? It says that she knew him when he called her by name (John 20:16). That is the same for you and me.

Isaiah 43:1 states: "I have called you by name, you are mine." That is specifically stated for you and me in Romans 6:5: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall **certainly** be united with him in a resurrection like his." When we are baptized, he calls us by name. "We shall **certainly** be united with him in a resurrection like his." (The Greek idiom in the original text requires the word "certainly.")

Col 3:3-4 makes the same point: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

In a few minutes we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. As we do so today, we think also of what happened on the road to Emmaus, three days after the crucifixion. There were two of the disciples walking toward Emmaus shaking their heads and wondering about what had happened three days earlier. A third man joined them and talked about the crucifixion and the whole of the Old Testament. When they arrived at their destination, they all sat down at the evening meal and then their eyes were opened and they knew him in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:35).

We, too, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, have a foretaste, a down payment of his kingdom to come. It begins now. It isn't that which begins sometime in the future. The life which he gives now and forever. Amen