

The Faith of Jesus Vindicated

Easter Sunday

Text: Ezekiel 37:9; Romans 1:4; Mark 16:6

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...breathe upon these slain, that they may live. Ezekiel 37:9

...declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 1:4

... Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, He has been raised. Mark 16:6

I often have maintained that if Lent is properly preached, if one has been true to the Gospel and honored the Way of Jesus, Easter is just a matter of saying, "The Lord is risen." In this case, this Lent, we have been speaking of *The Faith of Jesus*, and this morning I want to say that the faith of Jesus was vindicated by the Living God who brought Jesus to life from the dead.

Note that the resurrection of Jesus is not really something so significant about Jesus. It is not something that happened because of some intrinsic quality of Jesus, something that would separate Jesus from us, his brothers and sisters. Easter is not the celebration of something that *Jesus* did. It is the celebration of something that *God* did. *God* raised Jesus from the dead. What we celebrate today is a mighty act of God, the Living God, the God whose breath is Spirit. The God whose breath enlivens and inspires. The God who creates in the first place and is able to call the dead to life. We serve the Living God who is able beyond human possibility, beyond human extremity to say 'yes' when we've said our final 'no.'

Let me say it one more time. Jesus died the way he died because he lived the way he lived, and he lived the way he lived because he believed the way he believed. He believed in a gracious God who had drawn near. A God whose presence was unbrokered, available to all. A God who included rather than excluded. A God of the abandoned. A God who forgives, full of grace. Jesus not only believed that, but he lived it out and proclaimed it, and in so doing he ran afoul of the established borders of society: religion, politics, all of those who had a vested interest in the status quo, and keeping things as they were. Jesus was a

destabilizer. Jesus ran counter to conventional wisdom. He challenged the assumptions on which people lived without ever examining them. Jesus destabilized the status quo, and they killed him.

Easter is God's reversal of that human judgment. Easter is the vindication of the faith of Jesus. In raising Jesus from the dead – and he really died – the creed says as much, for it says, "They buried him." This was no masquerade. God called him to life from the dead in order to say Jesus was right, and Jesus' way was God's way, and Jesus' life was *the* Life. And so we celebrate today the act of God in the vindication of the way of Jesus, and the faith of Jesus.

Let me ask you a question for your Easter meditation. It's a very important question. In the midst of all the beauty and wonder, the grand music, the lovely flowers, the festive occasion, which we experience just now, let me ask you this question. If the cross were the last chapter, would you follow Jesus still? If there were no Easter glory? If there were no grand triumph? If there had been no public vindication, would you follow the way of Jesus nonetheless? I suppose what I am really asking you is, "Why in the depths do you follow Jesus? Why do you call yourself Christian?" Is it because in all of the light and splendor of a moment like this we have that triumphant note, "The Lord is risen!" The one who said, "Because I live, you too shall live." Is this then the way to victory and to triumph? Is it the guarantee of life beyond life and all of that? Do you follow Jesus for that reason? Then perhaps you will hesitate a bit as I raise that question to you. If the cross had been the last word, would you still follow Jesus? Would you still believe in that way, in that truth?

I have been wrestling with that question, and my answer is, "Yes I would," falteringly, too often half-heartedly, and always inadequately. But even if Good Friday were the last chapter I would want to live as Jesus lived, and believe as Jesus believed. Think about him for a moment again. He was a grand person. Think of the magnificence of his life. Think of the freedom with which he lived. Don't you love him for the way in which he stared down all of the imposing structures of society? The way he challenged the conventional wisdom. The way he simply refused to be one more sheep in the mass. Don't you love him for that freedom, for that courage? For that consistency. For that faithfulness that, even in the darkness of Gethsemane, could get out the words, "Nevertheless not my will but Thy will be done," which was a commitment to the way that he had gone from the beginning. It was staying the course. It was being true to the vision. It was sealing what he believed with his very life. The *compassion* of the man! Breaking through the taboos of his day. Reaching out. Embracing the abandoned. Touching the leper. Gathering in the sick, the children. The humility of his life. Washing the feet of his disciples. Finally offering his life. Would you say 'Yes' to Jesus, even if the cross were the end? I would. I believe that to live that way carries its own reward and is an end in itself. I think that's really the only way one can really follow Jesus. Not following him because of what he promises us. Not following him because of some external threat, as though there is some gun at my

head if I don't. Not following him out of a sense of obligation, but following him finally because I love him! And I want to be like him! I want my life from the inside to be what I see his life to be, no matter what the end is.

I'd better not say that loosely, glibly, because to say that is to say 'No' to so much of my American, twentieth-century culture that has shaped me. I am more a product of my culture than a critic of it. It means saying 'No' to that precious American individualism over against the needs of community. Saying 'Yes' to Jesus means saying 'No' to that wisdom of the street that says, "Take care of Number One." Saying 'Yes' to Jesus means saying 'No' to my consumerist culture that would acquire, and acquire, and secure. Saying 'Yes' to Jesus means saying 'No' to the philosophy that winning is not only the *best* thing, but is the *only* thing.

Would you follow Jesus if we had ended in the darkness of Good Friday at noon, with the thumping of the organ, and the forsakenness of the one who died the way he lived? Well! I anticipate your question. And perhaps your question would be, "Then doesn't this make any difference? Then isn't there any need for Easter? Isn't this essential? Doesn't this add anything?" And I would say, "Yes, it certainly does." Easter is the foundation of hope in the midst of that struggle to follow the Way of Jesus in our world that crucifies him over and over again. In our world of Somalia's and Northern Ireland's and Bosnia's, and Israel's and Palestine's, and Latin America's, and poverty and sickness, and oppression and tyranny, and greed, and all of that. In the midst of that human scene, this gives us a ray of hope because it says to us that love will not finally be crucified. The things for which Jesus lived, and the things for which Jesus died, are the things that matter to the God who created them in the first place, the God who is able to speak a word that will raise the dead.

Easter gives us hope so we might be faithful in following Jesus, where otherwise we could live only with despair, and we look at the victim and only promise more tragedy, with no alleviation of the awful darkness, which is so much a part of the human scene. If Good Friday were the last word, if the Cross were the last word, then history is a terrible tragedy. Then there is unrelieved suffering. Then there is nothing to scatter the darkness. Then I will be true to Jesus, and I would rather die as Jesus died, than to live the way the world tells me to live. But I would have nothing to say to all of those who suffered, and who continue to suffer. I would have nothing to say to those who bear the burden of the human story. Then the victim would always be victimized by the murderer. Then the violated one would always be trampled by the rapist. Then God or the powerful and oppressor, would always lord it over those oppressed and downtrodden. Then human history would be one unrelieved story of crucifixion. Then I would not know, I would not have a clue that there is something in this cosmic reality, some grace, some heart at the heart of things, some love that will not finally allow the darkness to prevail. I need Easter, lest I despair. I need Easter, lest the tragedy finally wear me down. I

need Easter to keep on believing and trusting and hoping. I need Easter to keep on following.

When the Romans decimated Jerusalem in the aftermath of the events that we celebrate today, a band of Jews fled south to the fortress of the Massada and they barricaded themselves in that almost impenetrable fortress. The Romans threw up great ramparts, great building projects in order finally to be able to assault that fortress, and when they finally succeeded they found that band of Jews had fallen on their own swords and taken their own lives rather than be taken. But in the ruins that you can visit even now, there is a room that was the synagogue where they worshiped. In that synagogue when the ruins were excavated they found a fragment of a manuscript. The manuscript was of the prophet Ezekiel. The fragment that they found was Ezekiel 37, read this morning "...a valley of dry bones exceedingly dry." And the words of the Lord, "Son of man, can these bones live? Thou knowest, O Lord." And the word of the Lord is prophesied to the bones and the wind blows, or the Spirit blows, and the bones take on flesh and are joined together, and the bones become a living army standing up, brought back to life from death.

God's possibility in the face of human impossibility. God's people have always been a people of hope, even of joy because, in the face of every human circumstance, they have been able to say, "Nevertheless." I would follow Jesus if Good Friday were all there were. But thank God there's Easter Sunday.