

The End Is Life

From the sermon series: I Do Believe

Text: Psalm 16:11, I Corinthians 15:20, John 14:19

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The season of Eastertide is a great time to preach, and the series that begins this morning is the affirmation, "I Do Believe." When I say I do believe, I don't mean to exclude you, but I mean to point to the fact that faith, if it is to be anything at all, needs to be personal and passionate. This is not to deny that there is a Christian faith, a body of doctrine, a content to the faith, so that one could say or write a book, "What Christians Believe," "What Jews Believe," and so on. Certainly that's true. But, the problem with institutional religion, the problem with routinization, the problem with the regularization, the problem with the second generation and the third and the fourth and the one-thousandth and so forth, the problem with that is that I begin to point to a body of truth and say, "I believe that. I assent to that." But, that's different than when one says, "I do believe." I believe, that is, it's personal. And I do believe. That is, it's passionate. In this Eastertide season, I'm going to say some of the great things that I believe and you believe. They'll be rooted in the tradition; they'll come out of the scripture. But, they're more than just an overview of what Christians believe. These are personal, passionate convictions of faith, the first of it being, "The End Is Life."

"The end is life." This was the great affirmation of Paul, who gives us the first written documentation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Corinthians, he deals with several problems in the Church, but there is also the problem of those who deny the resurrection of Jesus, and so, to them, Paul addressed this rather complicated and tortuous argument that's found in the 15th chapter of his letter. And in the 20th verse, he makes the strong affirmation, "Now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that shall rise." For it was the resurrection of Jesus Christ that was the catalyst for the whole Jesus Movement that issued ultimately into the Christian Church. It was the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God raising Jesus from the dead, that gave God's "Yes" to that life, to that way, to the truth that came embodied in Jesus that launched the whole movement of which we are a part. And so, this morning we begin with those things that we believe with conviction and with passion, and it is

that, in the end it is life, and it is life because of the one who said, "Because I live, you, too, shall live."

Paul fully expected, I believe, along with Jesus and that whole early community of followers, that they were on the edge of the End. Paul says that Jesus was the first fruits of them that shall rise. Paul was a good Jew, familiar with the terminology of Israel, all of the Hebrew scriptures. There was always the offering of the first fruits, a token of gratitude to God and an acknowledgment that God was the giver of all and to God all belonged, so Israel would waive the first fruits. But, the first fruits were literally that. They were the first fruits, the first grapes ripened, the first wheat that ripened. The first that could be harvested was offered to God. In the wake of that, all of the rest of it followed. And that's what they believed. It was widespread in that time. They felt they were on the edge of the End, that Jesus was God's anointed one who was ushering in those events that would issue in the Kingdom of God. For a little time heaven received this one who was crucified and raised by the power of God, but this one would return after subjecting all things, every opposition to God's rule, and he would render the Kingdom to God and God would be all in all. That was the scheme of things that filled the mind and heart of the Apostle.

The only problem is, it didn't happen. Nothing happened. The heavens didn't open; Jesus didn't return; the Kingdom of God was not established. All they got was persecution and suffering. In fact, in the second letter of Peter you will find that there were those skeptics who were saying, "Where is the day of his appearing? It seems that it's business as usual. Same old death and dying," to which the writer of that letter says, "Ah, but a thousand years are but as a day with the Lord, so just be patient." The great crisis for that early movement was the fact that the king did not appear.

And so, move along about 60 years to the city of Ephesus or maybe Alexandria where there's a Christian community, or rather a Jewish community of those who believe that Jesus was the Messiah. That whole early movement was a Jewish movement of people who believed that Jesus was God's anointed one, crucified and raised by the power of God, and they were waiting for God to bring in the fullness of the Kingdom and the Shalom that the prophets had promised. Paul, of course, was the missionary to the Gentiles and there soon became a Gentile element in the Church, but the community of the fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, was a largely Jewish community that believed that Jesus was the Messiah. And so, the years had passed, the decades passed, and Jesus didn't come back and there were those who were beginning to falter in their faith and there were those who were sifting back into their regular Jewish expression of faith. Not that they ever gave up the synagogue or the temple. Not that they ever gave up their Jewishness. But something did happen in 70 A.D. that changed everything.

In 70 A.D. the Roman legions came in and they leveled Jerusalem and burned the Temple. Mark's Gospel was written on the supposition that this was the sign that

the End would certainly come now. Now things were beginning to happen. But nothing did happen, except that this was a time of turmoil in the Jewish Church. For, what would be the nature of Israel, of Jewish faith, now that the Temple was gone? Obviously, the priestly party was out of business. There was a widespread dispersal. There was a very strong Jewish Jesus Movement; there was the possibility that that Jewish Jesus Movement might emerge as the classic expression of Judaism in a new key. There was also the Pharisaic Rabbinic Movement, the teachers of Torah. And, as a matter of fact, what did happen after 70 A.D. is that, in the struggle for power and control and in the attempt to find a new identity, it was precisely that Rabbinic, Pharisaic model of Jewish faith that emerged victorious.

Now what's going to happen? Well, there's a struggle for power. There are those who are part of the strong and vital movement of Jesus Jews. And there is this other increasingly stronger movement of Rabbinic Judaism that does not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and that movement, coming to the ascendancy in those decades immediately following the destruction of the Temple, eventually muscled out of the synagogue the Jesus people. When you read the Gospel of John, you'll find that there is a very strong adversarial expression between Jesus and the Jews. There are passages of the Gospel of John that ought not to be read in Christian worship without some word of explanation, because they are so harsh, so condemnatory.

We've come to see that the reason they're so harsh and condemnatory is that this little Jewish Jesus Movement was in a struggle for its life over against an emerging Rabbinic Judaism. About the year 90 A.D., into the liturgy of the synagogue, there was actually inserted a benediction against heretics. That's the kind of thing that was going on. When you read John's Gospel and those harsh statements against the Jews, that's not Christianity against Judaism, that's not Gentiles against Jews, that's an intra-Jewish squabble and there's nothing that gets so mean as an intra-family squabble. And this Jewish Jesus Movement, through this benediction against heretics, was being crowded out of the synagogue. The emerging, powerful Rabbinic Judaism was drawing the lines and defining who was in, and this little band of Jews that believed Jesus was the Messiah and that were waiting for him to return were being crowded out of the only spiritual home they had ever known.

They had never given up going to synagogue; they had never given up reciting the Psalter; they had never given up believing in the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David. It's the only God they knew. It was the God to whom Jesus had pointed them. It was the God of Creation and the God of the Consummation. Now the stronger party was saying, "Hey you, you believe Jesus was the Messiah? You're out of here." Well, what happens to a people in a situation like that? You have to remember how vulnerable they were. They had been holding their breath for Jesus to come. Nothing was happening. Every day and every week and every month and every year and every decade was a nail in

their coffin. And there were those who were saying maybe we were wrong. Maybe Jesus was just another pretender to Messianic claims. There were those whose knees were weak and faith was faltering who simply gave up on Jesus and went back into their Jewishness.

But there were others. In all of those communities scattered throughout the empire, there were others who said, "No. No, we know that Jesus was the Messiah." And probably at Ephesus or at Alexandria somewhere, there was a person who said, "I do believe. I do believe. I don't know how to put it together; I don't know about the calendar, this unfolding of this drama of history, but I do believe this - I do believe that the God of Israel was embodied in the person of Jesus to an extent that I have never, never before felt the nearness and the mercy and the love of that God. I do believe." And so this preacher or teacher in this little minority persecuted community of Jews following Jesus taught and he preached and they remembered all of the stories, the oral tradition that had been passed along.

Remember, now, for decades it was not a literate society, it was an oral society. They told the stories over and over and over again, and they taught and they preached, and eventually those who studied carefully this Gospel of John, about five layers - the oral tradition and then the gathering of the teaching and the preaching and then perhaps the writing of a document and the finessing of a document and a final literary form that we have in our scripture - it was a very normal and natural process and it was because there was someone who said, "I do believe! I believe in spite of the fact that the time is rolling on and nothing seems to be happening. I don't know about that, but this I know - the Word became flesh and in Jesus the truth that had come through Moses took on a splendor, a grace that I had never known before."

So, this preacher this teacher, this passionate believer takes this little community of people and he writes the story for them. He doesn't write a history for them so that they'll know what happened back there as an end in itself. He refers back to what happens there because he wants them to believe now, here and now, to hold on, to continue to see in the face of Jesus into the heart of God. So, we come to that 14th chapter and he says, "Let not your hearts be troubled." Were their hearts troubled? You bet they were. Same old world of death and dying and darkness and unrighteousness and injustice. Where was the Kingdom of God? Where was the Shalom promised? This evangelist, this preacher says to this community, "Let me remind you of Jesus. Jesus said, 'Let not your heart be troubled.'" That word *troubled* in Greek is *tarasso*. It's used three times previously in the Gospel of John, always to describe Jesus' agitation of spirit. One time when he's at the grave of Lazarus and he sees Mary weeping and he feels the power of death in human experience and we read, "Jesus wept. His soul was troubled." And then there was a time when Phillip brought those Greeks who wanted to see Jesus and it triggered something in him. He knew the hour. "Now is the hour," he said. "And now is my soul troubled. What shall I say, 'Father,

deliver me from this hour?' But for this hour came I forth. Father, glorify Your name." And then he gathered his disciples in that last supper and he looked over at Judas and he thought about all of the darkness in that heart and once again he was face to face with the power of death and he said, "Now is my soul troubled."

This preacher in Ephesus in the year 90 or 95 A.D. is telling this story now of that last gathering, and we hear Jesus say, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it weren't so, I would have told you. I'm going to prepare a place for you." The whole Gospel of John has the indwelling of Jesus in God and God in Jesus, and Jesus is saying to that intimate circle around him now, in these moving moments when he's going to depart from them, he's saying to them, "You'll be all right. I am going to the Father and I am preparing a place for you. You know where I am going." Thomas says, "We don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said, "I am the way. I'm the truth. I'm the life."

There's an interesting citation from a Palestinian *Targum* of an earlier time which uses that same combination of way and life in connection with the Torah. The first five books of the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, we call the Torah. The Torah we sometimes call the Law, but that's a bad name for it. Torah meant way of life. And in this citation in the Palestinian *Targum* it says that the study of the Torah bears fruits which show the way to life. That's not incidental. This was part and parcel of Israel's faith. They believed that God in holy scripture had shown them the way to life. It was the truth. Now, this preacher-evangelist in Ephesus to these faltering followers of Jesus, 60-some years after the event, says to them in the words that he hears echoing from that earlier day, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe. Believe in God. Believe in me. Because the way of life, the true way of life was embodied in Jesus, in this one, in me, and there is no way to God, not God in general, but God as Father, God as revealed in Jesus - there's no way to such a God other than that way of Jesus, that way of Jesus which is a true way which gives life." And so, the evangelist puts in the mouth of Jesus those very words which were the expression of that first community and a community decades later still saying, "Jesus is it!" Something happened in Jesus. I don't why the End hasn't come. I don't know why the Kingdom hasn't dawned, but I know this - that in the human flesh of that one was the embodiment of God. I don't know when the End is coming, but I know when I look in the face of Jesus, I see into the heart of God. There is no other way. There is no other truth. Believe. Don't let go. Don't give up. Don't let your heart be troubled. Believe in God. Believe in Jesus, Jesus who is the window into the heart of the Eternal."

Phillip says, "Jesus, could you show us the father?" Jesus said, "How long have I been with you? You still don't get it? When you've seen me, you've seen the Father."

That little community, some of whom were drifting back off into their old faith patterns, and some of whom were still feeling the sting of being ostracized from

the synagogue, and all of them wondering when the End would come - they heard the evangelist, they listened to the preacher, they believed in God, they believed in Jesus who was the embodiment of God, who was crucified and who was raised by the power of God and who inexplicably, surprisingly, marvelously was tangibly present when they gathered together, when they broke bread, poured out a cup, when they sang praises, and when in the solitude of their own soul they called to the God of Israel Who had come close to them in Jesus Christ their Lord. How do I know that happened? Because we're still doing it.

We are the people who look to the risen Jesus and we see the power and grace of God.

We're the people, 2000 years later, who are still looking through Jesus and with Thomas saying, "My Lord, and my God."

We are the people who are a people of hope because we follow the One who said "Because I live, you, too, shall live."

We are the people with personal, passionate conviction and belief that the end is life!