Life and Love

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Stan Ott
Romans 8:11, 37-39

April 5, 2015
There is such marvelous electricity to Easter morning. God is doing exciting things in our church and in our own lives. We welcome you to come aboard and join us in the great adventure for which our Lord intends us. Sandi Patti loved to sing, “Was it a morning like this? When the sun still hid from Jerusalem and Mary arose from her bed, to tend the Lord she thought was dead? Was it a morning like this? When Mary walked down from Jerusalem and two angels stood at the tomb, bearers of news she would hear soon?” Yes! It was a morning like this! It was an ordinary day in an ordinary world in which the most extraordinary, stupendous, awesome event in all of history occurred. God raised his dead son, Jesus, to life—and alive he still is, right here, right now, knocking on the door of your heart.

Easter is very much about life and love, and that life and love stand in stark contrast to our own experiences of death. A number of people important to me or to people I love have died in recent months. The mother of my friend Paul Thwaite died three weeks ago. I spoke to her many times. When my own mother died, the funeral was at the remote Ott family cemetery north of New Orleans. My small family had gathered for her memorial service when I glanced out the window and saw Paul Thwaite walking down the sidewalk. He had flown one thousand miles and driven one hundred miles to stand by my side. Believe me, when I spoke with him on the death of his mother, it was an emotional moment. A little over a month ago, Steve Hayner died, the wonderful president of Columbia Theological Seminary and more than that, a friend to many, including Pete James and me. Robert H. Schuller died last week, founding pastor of the Crystal Cathedral. It’s a long story but the reason my pulpit robe is gray is because his robe was gray. I will miss him.

Death is a difficult thing and we often find ways to avoid talking about it or we talk around it. Take the concept of a euphemism. A euphemism is a mild or agreeable word used in place of a word that is unpleasant or offensive. If you say, “Stan, you are a few sandwiches short of a picnic” or “a few fries short of a Happy Meal” then you are using euphemisms to say something about my intelligence! The euphemism, “putting on your face” means putting on make-up, but to “powder your nose,” means to go the rest room. If you’ve got a “bat in the cave” you have a booger in your nose. You learn all sorts of useful information when you come to church!
Interestingly, there are well over one hundred euphemisms for the ideas of death and dying because death is an unpleasantness we like to avoid. So if someone says of you, “You are departed, you bought the farm, you bit the dust, you kicked the bucket, you’re pushing up daisies, you’ve gone to the last round-up,” well, you’re dead! You are dead if you are “past your sell date,” “sleeping with the fishes,” “resting in peace” or if you’ve “cashed in your chips.” A common euphemism for death is is the term “passed away.” Marty passed away. Bill passed away.

I remember, as a young pastor, telling Jim Tozer, the senior pastor for whom I worked, that a member of the congregation had passed away. He looked me in the eye and said, “Stan, don’t use the euphemism, “passed away.” It just avoids the reality of death and tries to ignore the pain of grief. Jim loved to say that love is not buried. It is eternal, the gift of God, and grief is the natural expression of that love.

I remember visiting my mother, who during her last months lived in a skilled nursing residence in Phoenix. I noticed some commotion down the hall, where it turned out that one of the residents had died. So I asked Mom, “How do you handle it knowing just about everyone in this facility is going to die here?” She replied, “No one dies here, honey.” I gave her a puzzled look and she said, “The staff here doesn’t speak of the residents as passing away or dying but rather they speak of “going celestial.” “Lillian has gone celestial. John has gone celestial.” Mom and I laughed and laughed about that euphemism and the day she would “go celestial!”

Our text for this morning, taken from the Book of Romans, addresses death head on and in a wonderful way because it is good news. No euphemisms are needed or used! “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Romans 8:11). This is a simple if-then statement with huge implications. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then the Spirit will give life to your mortal body through his Spirit.” So the obvious question is, “How does God’s Spirit come to dwell in you?” When you open your life to the person of Jesus and acknowledge him as Lord of your life, the Spirit of God takes up residence in you! And if God’s Spirit lives in you, then God who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal body!

This tells us two marvelous things about resurrection that are immense! First, God raised Jesus from the dead and gave life to his mortal – his physical - body. Second, God will raise you from the dead and give life to your mortal body through the Spirit of Jesus. Years ago, the King Tut exhibit made its way around the United States. It displayed some of the incredible treasures discovered in the tomb of this ancient pharaoh of
Egypt. Ann Marie and I drove up to Chicago to see the exhibit. The gold, the jewels, the gold sarcophagus, the head covering for King Tut were magnificent. I will never forget as we finished the last display and prepared to exit the exhibit, we came upon a large banner hanging over the hallway. The banner said, "To speak the name of the dead is to make them live again." Under that saying were the words, "Old Egyptian Proverb."

I thought to myself, "Wow, to speak the name of the dead is to make them live again.” That sums up how a lot of people think today about the idea of resurrection. Just speak the name of a dead person, Abraham Lincoln, Mother Theresa, Moses, Jesus, my own grandmother and they live again. Well, just how do they live again when you speak their names? Perhaps in a symbolic way they live on in our memories, in our conversations, in the culture of our lives, but do they really live again, flesh and blood, spirit and soul, a living, loving, thinking person? No way. Get real. They are dead. They’re dead dead!

Jesus was walking along one day and came across a funeral procession heading to the cemetery with the son of a widow. Luke reports, “Then he [Jesus] came forward and touched the [stretcher] bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, ‘Young man, I say to you, rise!’ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother” (Luke 7:14-15). When Jesus says, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" he wasn't just speaking the name of the dead man so he would live again in the memories of his mother and the other mourners—as if she would ever forget her son. Jesus really meant it when he said: "Get up!” The man got up. Believe me, that got the crowd's attention. This was a real resurrection. When God raised Jesus from the dead, it was the real resurrection of his real, physical body.

So the Apostle Paul has said, " If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” First, God raised Jesus from the dead and gave life to his mortal—physical—body. Second, God will raise you from the dead and give life to your mortal—physical—body, in the same way, if you trust in Jesus. This, of course, is the greatest promise ever made. Jesus said to Martha upon the death of her dear brother, Lazarus, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live even though they die.” And then he asked her the ultimate question, “Do you believe this?” (John 11:25). This is the ultimate question put to you and to me: do you believe this?
Do you believe that Jesus was crucified, killed, dead, buried and was raised to life in his physical, mortal body? Do you trust in him? I do believe it and I do trust in him. The testimony of scripture is clear. I invite you to believe and to trust in him as well.

My friend Glenn McDonald tells the story of Herbie Wirth, who was buried in Crownsville Cemetery in Indianapolis some years ago. His neighbors knew him as a peddler who walked door-to-door selling needles, pins, threads, pot-holders and dish clothes. He was a quiet man who lived a quiet life, living by himself. A few years before he died, he sat with a funeral director to make preparations for his own burial. He expressed his greatest fear that no one would come to his funeral and that no one would remember his life. It occurred to the funeral director that probably would be true.

Herbie had no church, no pastor, no family, and no friends. When he did die, there was no one to contact. He would be buried next to his mother, Anna. The funeral director asked a pastor to say a few words and all he had to say was that Herbie was a nice, friendly man who peddled wares door-to-door. Somehow, Tom Keating, a feature writer for the Indianapolis Star newspaper, heard of this and reported Herbie’s concern that he would be utterly alone. The day of the funeral at the Crown Hill Cemetery was bitterly cold. The pastor arrived early and dozed in his warm car for a few minutes. He awoke with a start. Outside, incredibly there were people, hundreds and hundreds of them, men and women, young and old, some in wheelchairs, some on walkers. All gathering in silence. Two thousand people had come to say goodbye to Herbie.

Something about Keating's column touched people. The great Crown Hill Bells that had not rung for 40 years and only rang for important people like governors and mayors and Benjamin Harrison, Indiana's only U.S. president, now rang for Herbie. He was nobody special, yet his death somehow drew together the hearts of an entire city. You and I know we are nobody special either, and we can easily feel the very same way Herbie did. Does anybody notice? Does anybody care? Does anybody really know my name? The great message of Jesus is that he does notice you, does know your name, does care about you and does invite you to believe in him. He is alive and he is here for you.

Indeed, when Jesus was born he was nobody special to the people in

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this world, an anonymous child born to an unmarried couple. Yet, the
Scripture says, “He came to his own home and his own people did not
accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he
gave power to become children of God” (John 1:11-13). You are very
noticed by Jesus, who loves you intensely, cares for you deeply. He
invites you to receive him. He loves you more than you love your next
breath. The Apostle Paul said, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor
life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor
powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be
able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”
(Romans 8:38-39).

A couple of weeks ago, I was looking for the wonderful song by
Darlene Zschech, “This is the Air I Breathe,” when I noticed the video of
an interview in which she was asked, “Why did you write the song, Shout
to the Lord,” a song she wrote many years ago, an Easter song of triumph
and of joy, and I assumed she wrote it in a joyous Easter moment. So, I
listened to her interview. I was stunned to discover the situation in which
she found herself when she first wrote and sung that song. I would like
you to listen to her interview which may be found at:

It turned out she wrote the song while in a really tough moment, a
rough moment, yet she knew in her deepest heart it was also an Easter
moment because Jesus is the Easter Lord who was with her. Jesus is the
Easter Lord who lives and who notices you, cares for you, calls you by
name and is with you no matter what you are going through. Jesus, the
Lord who loves you, raised from the dead, invites you to open your life to
him, to receive him, believe in him and trust him from this day forward. If
that is your heart’s desire, I invite you to pray the prayer with me you will
find on the screen.

Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins
and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor from
this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I
trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become.
Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love
with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name.

Shout to the Lord: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gn5CMSSAxA_c

Happy Easter!