

Matthew 27:45-66

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, 'Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, "After three days I will rise again." Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, "He has been raised from the dead", and the last deception would be worse than the first.' Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.' So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

The Irreversible is Reversed - What Do You Say to the Roman Guard? Charles Schuster April 4, 2010

That cross is part of the tradition here. We flower the cross on Easter, and the back of that cross has the spike... For those who don't know, about four years ago, the choir director Colleen Donnelly McRoberts asked me to pound this spike into the cross while you all sang about the crucifixion. The result of which was, I blew out my shoulder and had to have shoulder, rotator cuff surgery. That spike is still in there. It isn't coming out, either. The shoulder's good.

Little league game, first game of the season, unfortunately the father couldn't attend. First game of the season, the little boy came bounding into the house after the game. His father said to him "Son, how did you do?" "You'll never believe it, Dad. You'll never believe it, but I was responsible for the winning run." "Really? How did you do it?" and the little boy answered, "I dropped the ball."

You know who dropped the ball as far as Easter was concerned? It was the Roman guard. They were sent to do a job. "Just stand there at the tomb, don't let anyone in, and don't let anyone out." And according to the story, there was an earthquake, and they ran. And they said the disciples took the body. They dropped the ball, and made up a story. What do you say to the Roman guard who dropped the ball? The Pharisees had said Jesus mentioned before he died that after he died, he would rise again from the dead. And Pilate put guards at the tomb, and put a stone in front of the tomb, and sealed it. And the earthquake came and the guards ran, and the stone was rolled away, and the guards were paid off, and they said the disciples had taken the body. Did the disciples take the body? Did the guards lie, or is it fact? I don't know what happened. The guards don't know what happened, and Pilate doesn't know what happened, and what can we know? What can we know for sure about Easter? Three things.

First of all, there's something put back into our minds. Philip Yancey named it, "the irreversible is reversed." He called it a startling clue to the riddle of the universe. He said there was a new note of hope and faith, that what God did once in a burial ground in Jerusalem, God can do again. Against all odds, the irreversible was reversed. Easter puts that into the back of our minds. Vance Packard wrote a book years ago, *The Hidden Persuaders*. It's about subliminal messages. The way I get that this works, and now it's illegal, but if you went to a movie, in one of the frames of the movie they'd put a box of popcorn, and then all of a sudden you'd have this urge to go buy a box of popcorn. They don't let you do it, because it works. Because it puts stuff in the back of our minds. It works that way.

There was a woman who quit work and stayed at home to take care of her new baby. Hours of peekaboo and the itzy-bitsy spider took their toll on this very bright young woman, and one evening she hit her foot, barefoot, on the corner of the dresser. Ever done that? And she sank to the floor in pain, and her husband ran up to her and helped her up and said to her, "Where does it hurt?" And she looked him straight in the eye and said, with tears in her eyes, "It's the piggy that ate roast beef." Nursery rhymes in the back of her mind. Easter puts into the back of our mind the idea that the irreversible can be reversed. When we think the game is over, when we believe the story was told, and it was a failed effort, nice try, good words, no effect, they listened but they did not hear, Palm Sunday was a high point, it was downhill from there, he peaked early, irreversible, done, finished. They even put armed guards on it, they shut the door of the tomb, they slammed it shut, no question about it, dead and buried. The last chapter was the final act, nothing more to say, nothing more to do. The ultimate weapon was used, the guards were posted, time to walk away, time to get on with life. Some things have to end. Some things can't be changed. It was irreversible. And the irreversible prevailed. There was an earthquake, the guards ran, but the disciples stole the body, or did they? Are we sure? Absolutely

positive of the negative? In the back of our minds, subliminal message, an idea. The irreversible got reversed. They put him to death, they thought they did. It was over - or was it? In the back of our minds, God is in the world, and the world is in God, and life does have an eternal dimension, and love has an immortal quality. Death is only a horizon, and that's just due to the limit of our seeing. We don't know what lies beyond what we see. We don't understand what is beyond what we know. It's an idea put in the back of our minds. The irreversible is reversed.

Secondly, it's more than that, because we see right before our eyes, not just an idea, but we see right before our eyes, in the back of our minds, an inspiration right before our eyes. There's a sign in a dry cleaner's window that reads, "No matter how bad the stain is, we'll take it out and sew up the hole." How many people we know have taken out the stain of life and have sewn up the hold? Inspiration right before our eyes. We see it, and we've seen enough of it to look for it, and to listen. Someone said, "You know you're drinking too much coffee if you start answering the door before somebody knocks." But truly, it's a good thing to look for inspiration before you actually see it.

Let me tell you a story. It's a resurrection story. It's an Easter story. It's an inspiration, and it's true. Years ago, it began in an apartment in late November when the rain had come and the place she rented had flooded and most of what she owned was ruined. Her piano was saved from the water, but it sat silent, because her plan was to teach piano lessons, but she had no students. Her plan was to make it on her own, but she had no money. She was out of money. Her plan was to live happily ever after, but she failed at every attempt, and her last attempt that she failed in was suicide. She failed at that too. No future, no hope, no plan, when the phone rang. It was a friend. They needed a choir director to get them through Advent and Christmas. She could live with the friend and his wife. She took the job. They got through Advent. They got through Christmas. They hired her. Her life began to change. A glimpse of hope. But she had an empty place in her heart, and had stipulated that she would only date a man who had all his hair, all his teeth, and his name wasn't Bob. Somewhere back in time, there was a bad history with somebody named Bob. His name was Sean. They met. They were married. She wore an orange wedding dress. They moved to Iowa. She still directs a choir. Occasionally, she does some writing. This week she sent me something. "Lots of what I read," she said, "and hear, these days, it's all hopelessness and distrust, it's all fear and anger." And then she wrote, "Christ in us claims transformation over domination. It impels a response. It redeems the shame. It comforts those who mourn. It says, "Walk out the open door." It says, "Tomorrow will be a better day." It says, "We are not alone." It says, "Act on trust."

When we think about where she was at one stage of her life, and she wrote about it, for all of us to read, and we see where she is now, the impossible became possible, and she is an inspiration. But you know, even more compelling, it was right before our eyes. It happened right here among us. Colleen Donnelly, Colleen McRoberts, our choir director. And this week she wrote a word that we need to hear about hopelessness and defeatism and frustration and name-calling, about hope and trust and joy. She's an inspiration, and the impossible became possible, right before our eyes. Like the women who saw the angel at the tomb, and who saw the Christ whose aura was white as snow. That's when

we can begin to know that something happened at the tomb like the disciples who ran in fear until the spirit caught up to them, and they began to turn it around and live it with faith and act it with courage, right before our eyes. And we see it. It makes believers out of us. We've read about a convicted felon who had nowhere to go, nothing to do, turned out to be Israel's greatest leader, whose name was Moses, and who let his people on their great exodus adventure, and we read about the shepherd boy with the slingshot who stood up against Goliath and the giant fell and the rest is history.

It was Easter before it came. It was resurrection before Jesus was resurrected, and it happened before it happened to Jesus. It happens even yet. The impossible is possible. We can see it, right before our eyes. It's an inspiration. How many people do we know who were told it couldn't be done, and got it done? How many women were told "you live in a man's world" who showed us a new way to run the world? How many young people were told to wait their turn, who took their turn, and then took their place in line? The impossible becomes possible. It's Easter. It's a resurrection of spirit. It happens right before our eyes. The irreversible is reversed. An idea in the back of our mind. The impossible becomes possible, an inspiration right before our eyes, and finally, the impossible becomes possible becomes personal, deep in our hearts. The story becomes ours. The risen Christ in us, as he said, "Lo, I am with you to the end of the age." Easter never happens if it doesn't come down from the cross, or out from the tomb, and into our hearts.

Leonard Sweet said it in a book, *Spiritual Awakening*. He said, "Every baseball team could use a player who plays every position perfectly, a player who never strikes out, who never makes an error. The problem is, how do you get that player to put down the hot dog and come out of the stands?" That's the most important part of the message this day. How do we get ourselves to put down the hot dog, put down our doubts, put down our skeptical attitudes, and come out of the stands and get onto the field? See, Easter is not just a story about how Jesus rose from the dead. Easter is a story of the resurrected Christ who lives in us.

Earl Weaver was the manager of the Baltimore Orioles baseball team in the 1970s. He had this player, Pat Kelley, who was a born-again Christian, who said to the manager one day, "Earl, aren't you glad that I walk with the Lord?" And Weaver looked at him and said, "Yes, but I'd rather you walked with the bases loaded." If Christ is in us, we have to do more than talk about it. We can't help ourselves. We've got to act on it. There is the story about a West Virginia hillbilly sitting on a fence at the crossing of two narrow roads. A man in a large car from Pennsylvania, with Pennsylvania plates, pulls up to the spot and rolls down the window. "Hey, I'm lost. Can you tell me where that road goes?" "No, sir, I can't." "Well, can you tell me where that road goes?" pointing to the other one. "No, sir, I can't." "Well, buddy, you don't know much, do you?" "Yes sir, I know I'm not lost."

We may not know where the road goes, but when Easter comes and Christ is in us, we know we're not lost. Easter is not a story that we can say we believe, and can prove it, because we can't. The best we can do, if we believe it, is to live it. Easter is not for our

amusement, but for our fulfillment. It is not something we can debate or proclaim, a powerful influence that becomes a way of life. It's in the back of our minds, and it's right before our eyes. And it gets deep into our hearts. The irreversible is reversed. The impossible is possible, and we walk with the Lord, and sometimes with the bases loaded.

Karl Barth had this word that he used to describe Easter and Christianity. He called it kenosis. He said it is what happens when we take on the mind of Christ. It's personal. The possible is personal. Kenosis, we take on the mind of Christ, and we ask more than "What would Jesus do?" which is the question lots of people ask. That's too broad, too vague. Our question is, "What do we do, when the God-likeness of Christ is in us? And who do we become?" When I'm more than a follower of Christ, trying to imitate what was written about him hears ago. Easter comes to me when I realize his spirit is alive in me, and how his goodness and good news is uniquely expressed as my life unfolds, so that I want what I have, so that I can give what I'm able, so I can do what I must, so that good conquers evil, and life conquers death, through me. So that I can be who I am. So that I become the best I can be. It is deep in my heart, and the possible becomes personal.

James Michener is a person, somebody who had it. Here is a man drawn in his life to explore people of various places, like Hawaii and Texas and Centennial and space and all those books that Michener wrote. His genius was his ability to make history come alive, because there was something in him that drove him to do it. In his autobiography he explains it. "I was born to a woman I never knew, raised by another who took in orphans. I do not know my background, my lineage, my biological or cultural heritage, but when I meet someone now, I treat them with ultimate respect, for after all, they could be my people." Deep in our heart, if Easter means anything, the risen Christ must come to life. The values he taught, the courage he had, the respect for others, the concern for the outcast, the hope for the future, the joy for life, the presence of God. Deep in our heart, deep in our heart. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us we are followers of a Lord who waited tables and washed feet, and we are heirs of the spirit that has the power to revive the whole creation, beginning with us. What might Jesus say to the Roman guard? You know, the ones who stood at the tomb? The ones who ran when the earthquake hit? The ones who got paid to say the disciples took the body? What would Jesus say to the guard who dropped the ball? The same thing he'd be saying to us: "The irreversible is reversed. The impossible is possible, and the possible is intensely personal." And then I think he'd say, "And I am with you always, even if you don't believe it." Amen.