**Easter Day 2014 Sermon**

It is so good to have all of you here this morning! A special welcome today to those who are visiting! I pray that you may be blessed, even as you bless us with your presence.

One week ago today, in this place, we read the Passion Narrative from Matthew’s Gospel – that long, heart-wrenching story of Jesus’ last week. It is our tradition on Palm Sunday, Passion Sunday, to let the Scripture story speak for itself, and not comment on it – and I still believe this is a good way to do things.

But a *downside* is that sometimes little facts and meanings can be missed amongst the sheer volume of words.

I would like to start today by focusing on a few verses which are *only* found in **Matthew’s** version of the Passion story – verses which you may not remember even hearing last week. Jesus has just been nailed to the cross, and Matthew tells us, “From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.” (27:45) At 3:00, Jesus utters a loud cry, and breathes his last. And *then* come the verses I would suspect we often miss: “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.” (27:51-53)

***Other*** bodies were raised, and walked out of tombs?

None of the *other* Gospels mentions the earthquake, or this strange spectacle of tombs being opened and the bodies from these tombs walking out into the streets of Jerusalem, where many saw them.

I don’t know what your Sunday School teachers taught you as a child, but I can tell you for *certain* that in my Sunday School classes there was no mention of tombs (other than Jesus’) being opened and bodies that *had* been **dead** walking out of these tombs and through the streets of town. I can say this for certain because I promise you, if I ***had*** been told those facts, I would have had nightmares for years.

And I would not have been alone. A prominent scholar of ancient history once commented on the proclamation of the resurrection as it would have been heard in the ancient, classical world. He said, “If an educated Greek or Roman had been told that someone had been raised from the dead, his first question would have been ‘How do you get him back into his grave again?’ The point is that most of those who **first** heard the Easter gospel would have found it grotesque or even frightening. Resurrection was **not** a joyful sign of hope but an alarming oddity, something potentially very dangerous…” *(Rowan Williams, Easter Sermon, 2004)* It was against the natural order of things: Things live, and then they die. And they *stay* dead. Isn’t that what’s *supposed* to happen, what we all believe?

In another obscure passage, this one in John’s Gospel, we read where the chief priests plan to kill Lazarus – who had *just* been raised from the dead by Jesus! But this will not do, you see, because the dead must *stay* dead; life coming from death seems too strange and threatening. Resurrection from the dead was not a joyful sign of hope, but something that frightened, since it seemed to defy the natural order.

But Matthew shows us that the natural order, Creation, has its *own* role in this story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus is crucified, and while his disciples flee and the women grieve, all creation *groans*. The sky turns dark at the crucifixion of the Light of the World. Just as Jesus wept and groaned deep within him at the death of Lazarus, so does ***all creation*** grieve and groan at the death of him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Professor David Lose writes:

“Jesus’ death is an offense against creation… And in response, the natural order itself is disrupted, as some of the saints who had been laid to rest awaken and are called out of their tombs and raised to new life…” *(from his blog, “…in the Meantime”)*

Rob Bell, in his book *Love Wins*, strongly emphasizes the fact that Jesus’ death and resurrection **must** be seen as affecting not just *humans*, but all of Creation. “When people say that Jesus came to die on the cross so that we can have a relationship with God, yes, that is true,” Bell writes. “But that explanation as the *first* explanation puts **us** at the center. For the *first* Christians, the story was, first and foremost, bigger, grander. More massive. When Jesus is presented *only* as the answer that saves individuals from their sin and death, we run the risk of shrinking the Gospel down to something just for humans, when God has inaugurated a movement in Jesus’s resurrection to renew, restore, and reconcile *everything* ‘on earth or in heaven’ (Col. 1), just as God originally intended it. The powers of death and destruction have been defeated on the most epic scale imaginable. Individuals are then invited to see *their* story in the context of a far larger story, one that includes **all** of creation.” *(LOVE WINS: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived. Copyright © 2011 by Robert H. Bell Jr. Trust.HarperCollins. Kindle Edition. Chapter 5, “Dying to Live”)*

We should not be *surprised*, then, when the sky darkens (Luke says “the sun’s light failed”), and earth quakes, and the rocks split in two, and the graves of the dead are opened. What St. Augustine called “the Paschal Mystery” of Jesus’ death and resurrection, affects not just *humans*, but **all of creation**.

“A gospel that leaves out its cosmic scope will always feel small,” Rob Bell explains. “A gospel that has as its chief message avoiding hell or not sinning will *never* be the full story.” *(ibid.)*

But there is more to say about Creation’s relationship to Jesus’ cross and resurrection: In his pouring his life out on the cross, and then being raised to life again, Jesus was entering into – and *transforming* – a pattern which has been at the heart God’s Creation from the beginning: the pattern of “dying to live.” You see, if we think the normal order of things was that everything dies and then *stays* dead, we are wrong. A grain of wheat must fall to the earth and die, in order that more wheat might grow. That wheat plant must die, if we are to have bread. A cow or chicken must die if we are to have meat. The sun daily burns itself out in order that everything on earth might live. Leaves die in Autumn and fall off the trees, and in the Spring, **new** leaves appear. “The cells in our bodies are dying at a rate of millions a second, only to be *replaced* at a similar rate of millions a second. Our skin is constantly flaking off and our body is continually replacing the skin cells with new ones; we have entirely new skin every week or so.” *(Rob Bell, ibid.)*

Dying to live; death and resurrection. It is the cycle of the created world since the beginning. In being born into our physical universe, emptying himself and taking human flesh, Jesus is entering into this primordial cosmic pattern of dying to live, and by his death and resurrection that cosmic pattern is deepened, transformed, and revealed for all the cosmos to see and respond.

If those ancient Greeks, Jews, and Romans had delved deeply enough into the universal pattern of creation, they would have found that there was no need to fear resurrection, to want the dead to remain buried! Jesus teaches about this God-ordained pattern of dying to live, even instructs us to participate in it! “Unless a grain of wheat fall to the earth and die, it remains a single grain…” “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.” “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

If you and I learn those teachings well, we will not be afraid of the pattern of “dying to live”, will not be afraid of those tombs opening up, will not be afraid of our **own** dying. For what was experienced as a frightening *disruption of the natural order* “on that Friday of Jesus’ death becomes the birth pangs for a new creation, a transforming new way of relating to God and each other. Come Easter, there is a **new** order in *all of Creation*, not a return to the old or the chaos of disruption, but a *new world altogether*, one governed by love and grace and forgiveness. And so the saints that were raised on Friday suspending the natural order now bear witness to the fact that death is no match for the life-giving power of God’s grace and love.” *(David Lose, …in the Meantime)*

What the risen Lord invites us to do is to follow what he taught, deny ourselves and take up our cross, and enter with him into that primordial pattern, dying *with him* and *in him*, that we might be **raised** with him into a new and transformed Creation.

Amen