

**DEFEAT TO VICTORY,
DEATH TO LIFE
Matthew 28:1-15
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012**

Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of Great Britain during the darkest hours of the Second World War, just when Hitler had conquered Western Europe and was poised to invade England. Because Churchill vowed, “We will never surrender,” in God’s time, certain defeat was turned into ultimate victory.

Before he died just over 20 years later Churchill left behind detailed instructions for his funeral. At the conclusion of his state funeral at St. Paul’s in London, a bugler, positioned high up in the great dome of the cathedral played taps, traditionally performed at the graveside and when it’s time to go to sleep. Then, immediately after the last note of taps was sounded, another bugler, positioned across the way suddenly stood up and played reveille, the bugle call at dawn signaling the time to rise up and greet the new day. I can imagine all the faces in that great congregation lighting up with smiles at that last defiant gesture of affirmation.

Easter morning’s message, “The tomb is empty, Christ is risen!” is the ultimate affirmation of life. On Friday evening when all was dark and gloomy it appeared Jesus was defeated. The Temple Priests and their Roman masters congratulated each other. They won!

But on the third day, as the darkness lifted, a few of Jesus’ disciples found the tomb empty and then being told by an angel, “He is risen,” suddenly defeat turned into victory! God had the last word after all.

The strife is o’er, the battle done
The victory of life is won
The song of triumph has begun.
Alleluia!

But not so fast! Don’t think for a minute the disciples’ joy was instantaneous. Truth be told, their initial reaction was fear and confusion. Matthew reports the first witnesses of the resurrection “quickly left” the tomb “with fear and great joy.” (Matthew 28:8.) Luke writes when the women told what happened to the disciples their words, “seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe.” (Luke 24:11.) Mark was blunt. He wrote, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8.) In his account, John alone gives an explanation for their fear and confusion writing, “for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must arise from the dead.” (John 20:9.)

From the beginning, 2,000 years ago, Christ’s resurrection has been the centerpiece of our faith. Without the resurrection there’d be no Christianity. The Apostle Paul said as much when he wrote to the Corinthian Church, “...and if Christ has not been

raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain..." (1 Corinthians 15:13.)

Christ's crucifixion is universally recognized as an actual historical event. Very few serious thinkers dismiss Jesus of Nazareth as an invented myth or legend.

On the other hand, many serious thinkers dismiss Christ's resurrection as an actual historical event, thinking at best it was the shared delusional hope of his closest disciples, or at worst, an outright hoax.

I've said this before, even if CNN, NBC, Fox, CBS and ABC film crews were waiting at the entrance of the sealed tomb and telecast throughout the world the stone rolling away and Jesus stepping out of the tomb and then after immediately submitting to DNA testing comparing his with the DNA of the man crucified on Good Friday and the test came back authentic and positive, there'd still be doubters who'd say, "OK, Jesus was raised from the dead, but what does it have to do with me and my salvation?"

That's a fair question, whose answer can only be found deep within you because after all there's no viable measuring stick devised by man to prove the veracity of Christ's resurrection. Instead, the matter can only be resolved through belief in the unseen. But how can you measure anything unseen? Then again, how can you scientifically verify the power of an idea whose time has come or the timeless presence of a great personality?

On your own you can't, but you can let it verify you because the Christian faith, our Easter faith, is a gift from God.

Still it's necessary to ask the probing questions about resurrection because God gave us brains and the ability to reason. But reason can only take you so far, then, God's grace must kick in to bring you to that place of satisfaction.

Wasn't that true of the first disciples? Remember John's explanation for their initial disbelief, "...for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must arise from the dead."

Before they could come to faith they had to understand, but before they could understand they had to see the Risen Christ revealing himself to each of them that first Easter morning.

Of course all this faith talk adds fuel to the skeptic's fire. They would argue the early Christians made up these stories about the resurrection and life after death if only because they wanted to see Jesus again. These same skeptics would admit many fine and intelligent people, even today, believe these stories, but they still stand by their conviction nobody can disprove death means you simply cease to exist.

Nobody disputes that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were marvelous story tellers, but their stories, especially about Easter morning, weren't invented by them to sugar coat the sting out of death.

So let's dismiss straight away the charge that the disciples conspired to steal Jesus' body. If that's true, each of them was awfully foolish to be put to death for a lie. Really, does that sound plausible? Wouldn't at least one of them have cracked to save his neck? And if one of them did crack, don't you think we'd have heard about it?

But even this reasoned argument for the resurrection won't blow away the conspiracy theories because no one can prove beyond a shadow of a doubt Christ's resurrection ever happened. In a court of law, all that could be produced would be circumstantial evidence, and shaky circumstantial evidence at that.

And yet even shaky circumstantial evidence offers opened minded people food for thought. Look at the impact Christ's resurrection has had on the world. Certainly we can't cover up or ignore the crimes committed in Christ's name by counterfeit church leaders who distorted doctrines for their own selfish ends, but neither can anyone deny the enormous contributions made by countless men and women who allowed themselves to be transformed through prayer which led to good works motivated by a Christ-like compassion for people in need and suffering. Because of Christ's resurrection, the human story has been raised to a level impossible to reach without it inspiring and empowering his disciples to do and be their best for others.

What's more, Christ's resurrection gives believers a new perspective on the meaning of life after death. After pastoring 34 years, fifteen of them as a hospice chaplain, I've had multiple opportunities to speak with people of all ages and creeds knowing they would soon die. I recall hearing most of them, Christians and non-Christians alike expressing their fear of dying but I can't remember a single Christian ever afraid of death itself. If you believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life, how could you possibly fear death? How else can you explain the Apostle Paul's brave taunt...

Death has been swallowed up
in victory.

O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?

(1 Corinthians 15:55)

Christ's resurrection assures us yes, we will surely die but we will surely live. Paul likens our physical bodies to seeds that must die before sprouting to new life and at the right time we will receive new bodies.

"Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised...and we will be changed." (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

Of course we can only speculate when and how this will happen, even so, we're promised the best is yet to come.

But resurrection isn't just for the dead it's also for the living. You don't need to wait until you die. You begin to experience resurrection here and now. I'm not suggesting you can be raised beyond pain and worry in this world but you can be raised to the full abundant life whose hallmarks include a higher regard for the sacredness of life

and the commitment to becoming an agent of change, for your own sake, as well as the welfare and happiness of others.

I began this morning speaking of Churchill's refusal to surrender which brought the free world from defeat to victory. I end with another story from the same period, illustrating the shift from death to life.

At the height of the Blitz in the fall of 1940, a church in London was set to celebrate the harvest with a thanksgiving service. On the altar were sheaves of corn. But the service was never held because the night before the church was bombed.

Months later, in the spring, some parishioners noticed that where the altar once stood, there were new shoots of green. Summer came, the shoots flourished and by autumn a patch of corn was growing in the rubble. While walking through the patch one of the parishioners unearthed a bronze plaque once bolted to the wall. It read,

"I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord, if you believe in me you will not perish but have eternal life. Do you believe this?"

(John 11:25)