

“An Easter People Living in a Good Friday World”

Matthew 28:1-10 Easter Sunday 2005 CCPC Rev. James Brassard

I never noticed it before Sharon sent me a script for the “Press Conference.” Those that arranged Jesus' execution were more concerned about what would happen after his death than his disciples. The Romans and the High Priests knew the content of Jesus' message—*“after three days he would be raised up.”* Moreover, they not only knew the substance of his prediction, they understood the significance of it: that if Jesus overcame death, his **followers would never fear anything. Nothing** could stop them. This group they thought they had extinguished would grow explosively.

So the guards were in place and a heavy stone sealed the entrance to the tomb in order to prevent the predicted resurrection from taking place. When even that failed to prevent it, they are reduced to hindering belief in it with a **“disinformation campaign.”**

Chuck Colson is familiar to most of you as the convicted conspirator in the Watergate cover up 30 years ago that brought down the presidency of Richard Nixon. Since that time, Colson has done remarkable ministry in prisons and churches around the world.

A couple of years ago he wrote that it was Watergate that proved the resurrection to him.

Colson says that Watergate was a conspiracy perpetrated by some of the smartest and most powerful men in the world. They were the closest advisors to the most powerful person in the world, and intensely loyal to him, and they were trying to cover up petty crimes committed against the political opposition. At worst they faced short sentences in federal prison and public embarrassment. But when the heat was applied, they held together for exactly two weeks. Then John Dean turned state's evidence and the whole conspiracy was exposed.

Given the chance, most people will save their own neck.

Colson noted that the followers of Jesus were eleven working class men without any political connections who each faced every form of torture and death for their convictions, yet went to their death claiming that they had literally and physically seen Jesus alive after the crucifixion.

Colson said, *“You can take it from the expert on cover ups—that nothing less than a resurrected Christ could have caused those men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive and is Lord. And 2000 years later, despite torture, prison and death—Christians around the world remain faithful. That proves the resurrection to me.”*

It is perhaps a little unusual to read the burial and the resurrection on Easter morning.

My wife, Andrea, was in New Jersey this week and ran into Ken Vanderjack, the campus pastor where she teaches. She asked him what he was doing for students for Easter.

Ken answered that they were hosting a free showing of Mel Gibson's **“The Passion of the Christ.”** Since we endured this particularly brutal but powerful movie last year on Palm Sunday, Andrea inquired if he was showing the original version or the less violent edited version, which cut out most of the beatings and blood.

“No, we're showing the original,” he said. “The edited version gives the

impression that Jesus was sentenced to “Community Service.”

Make no doubt about it—Jesus was brutally killed and buried in a tomb.

Easter is not a cancellation of the cross. There are two events: a crucifixion and a rising from the dead. But they are two parts of a **single** story with a **single** meaning. Easter is **how faith looks at the cross.**

The **weather** this Easter week was no better than the news.

Another senseless school massacre.

More mayhem in Iraq.

Then Congress made our preaching about spreading democracy abroad a farce as we witnessed the further deterioration of our democracy.

For a country that spends a minuscule amount to alleviate suffering and poverty abroad, and is debating a budget that cuts even deeper into the inadequate health care of its most vulnerable citizens, Congress burns the midnight oil trying to **force** the reinsertion of a feeding tube that has kept, Teri Schiavo in a “persistent vegetative state” for 15 years.

“One of our problems as Americans,” said a Post columnist, **“is we treat death as if it's an option instead of a reality. We tend to believe that technology can conquer anything. But we all will die.”**

Anne Lamott in her book, “Plan B—further thoughts on Faith,” laments how we consistently choose to honor death instead of embracing faith and new life. She quotes writer Barbara Johnson, who says:

“We are an Easter people living in a Good Friday world.”

I don't know him, but was proud to listen to a tape of the speech our Rep. Steny Hoyer gave during the debate in Congress in the Schiavo case. Hoyer spoke about his three grown daughters, who were always close, but more so after his wife died of cancer a few years ago. He called them and they asked what he was going to say and how he would vote.

He asked them, “What would you want me to do if you were lying there like Ms. Schiavo and I had to make the decision.”

One responded, **“Dad if you really loved me, you would let me go to my rest with God.”**

The women, particularly Mary and Mary Magdalene, form the **living link of the story.** They were the only people to witness the whole event—crucifixion, burial and then resurrection.

The angel's first words to the women are of **reassurance.**

“Do not be afraid, Jesus is not here, for he has been raised.”

They take off and then they run into Jesus. He greets them. Then the women are again in shock, exhibiting the **twin emotions, fear and joy.** They come right up to Jesus and grab his feet and worship him, affirming that physically it is him.

Then Jesus assures them again, **“Do not be afraid.”**

Peter Gomes, pastor at Harvard Chapel, says that Easter is when life truly begins. **“Life begins when you realize that by removing the fear of death, Christ has given**

you, for the first time, full possession of your own life. What you have always had, you now own. It's yours—free and clear.”

Gomes goes on to say, *“I believe the basic fundamental thing that appears to hold our professional lives together and define all our relationships with our clients and parishioners and our colleagues is not sin—but **fear**.*

Everybody is fearful, terrified of some public or private demon, some terrible unnamed fear that gnaws away even in the midst of our joy, some cloud that hangs over our head.”

It is a fear that not only holds us together but keeps us from being whole.
Fear is the great curse.
Fear that I'll be exposed as an imposer.
Fear that I won't get done in life what I've dreamed of doing.
Fear I won't get the promotion, fear our kids won't turn out right,
Fear I will get hurt or sick, fear that my love will be painful.
Fear that by standing for what is right will cost me my political future

Every one of us is a hostage to fear.

But Jesus comes out of the tomb and says to us,
“Be not afraid, you have nothing to fear.”

Freedom from fear is the achievement of the resurrection.
We do not fear death. To defeat death is to defeat fear. It is not death that lurks in the background it is the fear of death...and when we diminish those fears we gain life everlasting.

We are a resurrection people living in a Good Friday world.

A friend of mine who grew up in a rural area of the Midwest got married and moved to Chicago. He had kids and thought they were missing all the great experiences he had as a child. So he took his three kids, the oldest being 7, on an overnight camping trip. They hiked in and set up camp along a lake up in the mountains. They told stories at night and roasted marshmallows.

Very early the next morning while it was still dark, my friend got up and started a fire and made coffee and set aside breakfast. Then he went to wake his children. After protesting a little, the kids got up and stood near the fire while they waited to witness the sunrise their father had billed as so remarkable.

Soon it began! The blackness in the east gradually turned to gray, then the gray turned to blue. The image of the lake and the shadowy trees began to emerge out of the darkness. Blue turned to near white and finally to pink, violet and orange hues emerged in the east over the tall pine trees.

Suddenly the valley was flooded with light. They watched this unfold in silent awe.

Finally the oldest boy couldn't stand the silence any longer. He turned to his father and wistfully said, **“Dad, do it again! Do it again!”**

Don't you often feel that way about Easter?
We need it again and again and again.
We need victory and to be lovingly rescued from disappointments and feelings of being trapped in life's struggles.

I don't have a personality for Good Friday or the crucifixion. I would like to join the kids and hunt for chocolate eggs and then eat them. Ten years ago in my last church I initiated the practice of the elders doing children's sermons on Easter. I had three rules: tell part of the Easter story, make it interactive, and gift them a gift to take home. One elder told the story well and then asked the children, "Who was standing next to the tomb when the stone was rolled away? What did they say to Mary?"

His questions were greeted with stone silence.
"I'll give you a hint: He was big and dressed in dazzling white."
"Oh," shouted one child, "It was the Easter bunny and he said, JESUS IS NOT DEAD—HAVE SOME CHOCOLATE!"

Dr. E. Stanley Jones, the street missionary, stood in the pulpit when he was 83 years old and said, "the next ten years are going to be the greatest I have ever had!" The congregation looked at the feeble looking old man and wondered what he was talking about. Then with a twinkle in his eye, Jones added, "I didn't say where they are going to be, but whether here or there, but they will be with Christ and they will be grand."

For those that believe in Easter—all of life is grand!

He is risen. He is risen indeed!
Amen.