

Only Made it Out to Needles
Easter Sunday 2010
 April 4, 2010

So the tomb was empty! Jesus wasn't there! When his friends made the initial discovery, they couldn't grasp that something otherworldly had happened, that God had done something beyond what any human has experienced. They could think only in terms of what they knew. Grave robbers. Someone had stolen the corpse of Jesus. It took a while for it to sink in what had happened. But when it did, their lives were changed forever. What had happened on that first Easter Sunday transformed all of Jesus' followers from uncertain disciples, unconfident and very ordinary – changed them to people who would literally transform the whole world. Because what had happened that Easter morning was the greatest single event in human history. God raised Jesus from the dead.

What the reality of the Resurrection means for us is that:

- **You do not have to be afraid**, because there is an active, involved God who stops at nothing to save you.
- **You are deeply loved** – this creator God, who made the whole universe cares most deeply about you, so much that he will stop at nothing to restore and transform and heal your life.
- **There is ultimate victory in your life** – even death will not defeat you.

And yet, all that doesn't sink in on us any more clearly than it did for Jesus' followers on that first Easter morning.

We still struggle with defeat and failure. We are still afraid. We still seem to need more love. Why?

I was talking with another priest this past week about preaching on the Resurrection. We talked about how Easter Sunday is the hardest Sunday to preach on, and this seems paradoxical because the Resurrection is the greatest story, it is the pinnacle and the culmination of the church year – so why is it so hard to preach on this day?

We agreed that it is because we have no direct experience with resurrection. We can get our arms around this Jesus as a teacher, a wise leader, even divinely inspired, even as a baby – we are familiar with those things ... but we are not familiar with Resurrection. We look around and we see that things decay, they wither like leaves, they wear out and die. And that's it. Physicists call it the second law of thermodynamics – it's such a widespread phenomenon in our life experience. Resurrection is alien to us. So in the Resurrection, we encounter something that is completely in God's realm. And, as Former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey once said, "*It was an action of God indescribable in human terms.*"

So we cannot easily describe or grasp it in our finite human ways. But it changed the lives of the disciples forever. And God wants it to change ours!

But if the Resurrection is going to change our lives, we must stop thinking so small. Stop setting our sights so low that we miss the great love and power of God in our lives. Stop settling for less than what God offers.

Our popular culture is full of references to the disappointments of life, the withering, the falling short. For some reason this past week, I've been humming an old Hoyt Axton song from the early seventies called *Never Been to Spain*. It was a big hit for the rock group Three Dog Night. It tells about a simple country boy who had never amounted to much in his life, of how he had settled for less than his dreams had once been. He'd never been anywhere special, had only heard about the wonders of places like Spain and England – had lived a life of disappointment in places like rural Oklahoma. His falling short in life is summarized in one line -- it says, *I was headed to Las Vegas, I only made it out to Needles.*"

Now I suspect that very few of you here have ever been to the town of Needles, California. It's a small town in the middle of the Mojave Desert, with 200 miles of hot barren desert in all directions. It gets to 120 degrees in the

summer. There are no trees to speak of. Needles was on the old Route 66, but now the interstate now bypasses the town, its main street store fronts mostly vacant. It is a depressing place to be. On our journey through life, sometimes it seems like we've settled for living in Needles.

Holy Week is like a journey. We travel it with Jesus during this week. It represents the last week of Jesus' life, but it also represents the entirety of our lives. From the unrealistic hopes and idealism of Palm Sunday to the disappointment and fear of Maundy Thursday, to the loss and death on Good Friday, the sad resignation of Holy Saturday. Then comes the shattering culmination of history – Resurrection on Sunday morning.

Unfortunately, too many of get off the bus before we reach Sunday – in our lives we are stuck somewhere between Thursday and Saturday – with fear, despair, or sad acceptance of our lot. We got off the bus in Needles.

There's an old Woody Allen story that tells about two women talking about a terrible restaurant. One woman said, "The food there is just awful." And the other woman replied, "Yes, and the portions are so small." And the pessimistic Allen concludes that life is like that – the food is awful – it's got more than its share of broken dreams, disappointments, and times of desperation. And the portions are so small – despite all its disappointments, all too soon our lives are over.

We got off the bus in Needles. We didn't make it to Easter Sunday on our journey. We stopped at Saturday. One Christian scholar has called our present generation "*Saturday's children*" because so many people do not live lives in the light of the victory of Easter Sunday. This scholar says, "*Our great American cities are, for the most part, teeming with pools of human misery where people live out their days in a kind of ritual dance toward death, with little hope or illusion. In the midst of an increasing Godless world, despair grips people's hearts everywhere. Hopelessness and meaninglessness come rushing in on us from every side.*"

And so – because we are often Saturday's children, because we got off the bus in Needles, because we are not living in the light of the Resurrection – therefore, we pin our hopes on the things of the world: acquiring wealth and glory, searching for love, diverting our attention away from the inevitability of death. We argue over whether the glass is half full or half empty. We live out of a philosophy of scarcity, not abundance. We don't live in the light of the Resurrection – the commanding, shattering act of God by which everything is made new, fear is abolished, there are no half full glasses, only overflowing full ones, and we have everything we need. St. Paul talks about what it is like to be stuck in Needles, to not live in the light of the Resurrection. He writes, "*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*" St. Paul says that when we don't live lives transformed by the Resurrection, we are pathetic.

Another song. This one a little more appropriate for Easter and perhaps more familiar to you. It's the soprano aria from Handel's Messiah, "*I Know that My Redeemer Liveth.*" For some of you that I have talked with, this is your favorite song. The story goes of a great young soprano rehearsing the song before the other choir members, before a performance of the Messiah. She went out and sung the piece brilliantly, and everyone stood and applauded and cheered. As she left the stage, feeling good about her performance, she was greeted by the conductor, who said to her, "You don't really believe those words, do you?" The young woman was shocked and stammered, "Well, yes, I do believe those words." And the conductor said, "Then sing it!" She went back out and sang the song again, and this time everyone wept.

One of the central purposes of the Church is to take us all from Holy Saturday and move us to Easter Sunday, to get us back on the bus and headed out of Needles, to plant in our hearts the truth of the Resurrection: that we are deeply loved, that we never have to be afraid again, and that we are people of victory. And to send to us out into the world with a new song to sing and the faith to sing it! AMEN

