

Easter Day
April 4, 2010

The Very Rev. Bill Lupfer

Come with me to an empty tomb 2000 years ago. This is an abandoned old rock quarry that was used to build the palaces for Herod. The stones that were not suitable for use were thrown in the middle so there's this big pile in the middle. If you looked far away from it and looked upon it, it looked like a skull. Once it was abandoned, people threw trash in there and then people came out and I'm not sure how they did this but they actually dug into the stone itself and they created tombs. When you walked into one of these tombs there was a room large enough to prepare the body and then usually two rooms off of that main room where the body was laid and then sealed. The climate at that time would ossify the bones in about two years, so the family would come back, remove the bones, put them in a box for a second proper burial. That's the way it worked in those days. It's fascinating that we have that box of bones for Caiaphas; we think we might have that box of bones for James, Jesus' brother, but Jesus' bones – we don't know where those are and that's part of the reason we gather today. There's a lot of ideas about how Easter is related to our personal immortality, in fact it's so much a part of our culture that there's even jokes. I'm sure you've heard this one but I just can't resist. You know the one about the guy who's driving down the highway and he stops at a rest area and right then a motorcycle gang pulls into the rest area. They start harassing a family. This guy gets really upset; you know his justice juice is flowing so he's like – I'm gonna stop this. So he picks out the leader, the biggest badest guy in the gang and he walks up and rips his nose ring out, throws it on the ground, slaps him in the face, kicks his bike over and he says "now you leave them alone!" A few minutes later when he's talking to St. Peter at the pearly gates -- We all sorta have that yearning, don't we for immortality? Wouldn't that be our dream to live well, live right and a few minutes later enter the pearly gates and have Peter say "Come on in! Good job!" And I wish Easter was like that! But I'm not sure it is. I think Easter's a lot more mysterious. I think Easter invites us into a deeper relationship with God and ourselves and others. The Apostle Paul looked at Easter when he saw resurrection, he didn't think resuscitation; he thought transformation. Read the letters of Paul; resurrection is about transformation, about opening our lives so that mysterious life force that comes to us through God in Jesus. N.T. Wright, the

English Bishop, a friend of our Canon theologian, Marcus Borg; N.T. Wright says “Easter is about new creation and any interest in personal immortality”, he goes on to say “is always set within the context of God’s new creation in this world”

Going back to the Apostle Paul – Paul sees the church as a group of people gathered to bring about that transformation. The church for the Apostle Paul at Easter is that group gathering to claim the power of God and the transformative power of God. The wonderful sixteenth century saint, Teresa of Avila wrote a little poem about this – I want to read it to you so I get it right – Teresa says that “Christ has no hands but ours, no feet but ours. We bear him to humanity; we bring him forth to his world like Mary his mother. Without us he can do nothing; that is how he chooses it to be”. What a bold statement; that’s how you become a saint; you make really bold outrageous statements. That Jesus chooses to do nothing except through you. That’s the transformation message at Easter – way past that sorta personal quest for immortality, a life without pain. No, you gather with your brothers and sisters in this crazy thought that maybe you can make a difference and that Jesus who gathered the disciples in that way can show you that pathway to make a difference; you can imitate Jesus’ faith; Jesus’ life -- looking to God and then building a community that seeks justice here. You know the Lord’s Prayer, you’ll say it “thou will be done on *earth* as it is in heaven. That *on earth* part is Easter transformation, so when we say it later in our worship, let that go into your heart. The great theologian H. Richard Niebuhr talked about this kind of faith that Jesus has in God and Jesus shows us. Niebuhr says that that faith is kinda three-parts and that each of those parts are really important. In Paul’s time one of the parts was really small; it was called “faith as assent” – and we all have this kind of faith; so it’s something like “I believe that the state of Oregon is in the United States”. It’s true; it’s a truth claim – you believe it? -- yeah, I believe that. I believe that Trinity Cathedral is the Episcopal Cathedral in the Diocese of Oregon – Yeah, I’m in, I believe that – very small part of faith when the Apostle Paul was there. The second type that Niebuhr talks about was much more important to Paul and the disciples – to practicing Christians at that time. The second kind of faith or aspect of faith was the “faith that believes *in*” – not that believes *about*, but believes *in*. And I hope this has happened to you; ever have your mother or your father, maybe an aunt or an uncle, a coach or teacher or partner say “I believe *in* you”. You ever had that? I hope so. *I believe in you*. It’s a real statement of commitment. It’s a real statement of faith and when someone says that to you it sort of naturally pulls you up, right? You want a work out of the best part of who you are because they believe in you. This kind of faith

does not know the future. This kind of faith simply offers our heart to the one we believe in. This is the faith that in the medieval English word was actually not to *believe*, it was to *belove*. That's where *believe* comes from – to *belove*. This is the faith that asks who do you love? And who do you put your heart into? I think the modern example of this might be when one of us finds out we need quadruple by-pass surgery. I'm sure someone here has heard those words. So you're having quadruple by-pass surgery. The first thing you do is you find a doctor you can believe in, right? You get in there; you make sure you have a doctor you can believe in and then that annoying friend comes over to help you, right? And they start to ask all those questions that you don't know anything about – “Well, what kind of a procedure will they be doing?” Do they have this kind of sutures or that kind of sutures? What's the scalpel like? You say “I don't know but I believe in my doctor and whatever happens they have the capacity and experience to do this. Niebuhr says that kind of faith in God is disciple faith; that's the kind of faith that we're called into at Easter – to remember who we *belove* and who loves us and in whose hands we place ourselves. The third kind of faith that Niebuhr talks about is trust; we trust -- we put our hearts to, we give ourselves to. Again, we see Jesus doing that. Now there's something that happened about two hundred years ago. That full spectrum of faith narrowed down into the assent: “I know this to be true and I assent to it and Jesus will come and save me at the last – you know, it's a formula. That whole mysterious putting ourselves in the hands of God and loving God so much that we get active; that part of faith has dropped out since the Enlightenment. Part of our task is to reclaim it, to live boldly in those ways. When Niebuhr looks at us who simply look for certainty with that narrow band of faith that the disciple had; when Niebuhr looks at us as we struggle this way he says the opposite of this kind of faith is trusting faith that loves God. The opposite of this kind of faith is anxiety, worry. It doesn't have to do with belief or doubt; it's about worrying. When we really put ourselves in God's hands the challenge comes back to us to actually relax; to relax into God's hands just as Jesus did when he walked his way through the cross into resurrection inviting us into that same transformation. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard describes that kind of relaxing in this way: he says this kind of relaxing into God's arms is like swimming in a very deep ocean. Kierkegaard says 70,000 fathoms – that means *deep*. One time when I was young I went to Galapagos Islands and you take these little boats from island to island. The water there is very very deep. I couldn't resist it -- I had to go for a swim, so I jumped off the boat, I took about eight strokes and I was cruising; it was so incredible to

be that high over the ground simply supported by water. And I got out and I got as far away as I was and I turned back and I thought the boat seemed really far and then I realized I think it's like miles below me – the ground -- and these waters are actually shark infested. So then the theme song for Jaws started playing in my mind. I got anxious so I swam back to the boat. It took forever to get back. The water was no longer my friend. Kierkegaard says when we worry we start to sink, we start to just keep our noses above water, instead we place our trust in God. Frederick Beckner says another way to work this is to listen to our lives. Imagine that the activities of your life are saying something to you. So one of the ways we reflect on our faith is to listen to our life. What's going on? What things keep happening over and over again? Where do you offend the person you love the most? -- repeatedly – what are those patterns? Beckner says to listen – listen to your life. I think Wendell Barry says it best – he says –“practice resurrection”. Practice this living with transformation, this imitation with Christ, but Barry, you know the poet, right? He's crazy, he's fun, he's wonderful. His idea of practicing resurrection – one of the lines in the poem is to say “plant Sequoias”. Now I'll bet you didn't think when you came to church this morning you'd hear that you're supposed to go plant Sequoias. But that could be a profound way of practicing resurrection, because Sequoias live very long, much longer than you do, much longer than I do. That's one of the fun parts of driving into Portland, seeing all these Sequoias. People in Portland love Sequoias. It's an act of practicing resurrection; it's an outrageous statement of hope. I plant this tree; I'll never see it grow past a little baby because it takes a thousand years to mature. Plant a Sequoia! Another one that Wendell Barry says in practicing resurrection is to ask questions that you don't know the answer to. This is a problem when we become sophisticated, smart adults. We don't ask questions we don't know the answer to. So we have children who come near us and remind us that we don't know everything. My dear children – 10 and 13 – Sara and Kyle often ask me questions I have no idea – and you know sometimes it's tempting to fake it, isn't it? But then they ask another question so you know you can't fake it. so I'm walking through the kitchen – “Dad, how do you build a hovercraft?” I don't know. “What makes a hovercraft work, Dad?” I don't know. “If I were going to build an airplane how big would it have to be and how would I build it?” There are so many questions we don't know, but if we're only in that band with the faith that has to do with knowing certainty we'll never live that richness, we'll never place our hands and our souls in the living God. We'll never ask those questions. We sometimes as adults filter out so much. Recently with this crisis in

Haiti I know all of our hearts have been breaking for the people there. I was reading a news story about that where reporters were going past and saw all these children at a dump, a junk yard. The children were crawling all over the junk and the reporters' hearts broke so they did a story and then they moved on, except one reporter stayed and watched, realized that all the kids were actually looking for were plastic bags. You know those evil plastic bags that we're never supposed to have or use from the grocery store? – that pollute. These kids were looking for those plastic bags and making kites; taking the junk and building a toy and flying those kites; finding joy in some of the deepest misery we can imagine. And I do not want to say that we're making light of what's going on in Haiti – not at all – we're grateful for Mercy Corps, for Medical teams and other groups that reach out, but even in that disaster if we look with the eyes of faith we can practice resurrection and see God's joy even there. Often it's a child or maybe another exemplar. Jim Wallis who came here – he started the magazine "Sojourners" he's spoken here before. He tells a story in his book, "God's Politics". He tells a story about Bishop Tutu, who recently was in Portland through The Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. This story happened way back when Apartheid was still really strong; it was at a time ten years before Mandela was released from prison. This was a time of probably utterly hopelessness for some and many in South Africa. Jim Wallis was there and he was in the worship space with Bishop Tutu as the community with Bishop Tutu gathered. Now Tutu had been arrested just within the last two weeks so you can imagine he might have been jumpy, he'd been called in for questioning. As they were worshipping they began to hear a commotion outside the cathedral. And then these troops from the government burst in – just imagine, right now you hear the noise and the troops come down the side aisles; they stand shoulder to shoulder looking at all of us, taking notes and pictures. Tutu's there. What does he say? He says, "well, since you guys have lost, you might as well join the winning side and right then everyone in the congregation jumped up and they started dancing and singing as is the custom there. They let go of their fear. They began to live with that kind of Easter joy that saw themselves as the transformation of this world here and now. They actually danced out of the cathedral into the surrounding area and the poor government troops were sort of backing up getting out of the way as these crazy Christians danced. So I say to you Alleluia! Christ is Risen! And what I do at the end of this service is watch you dance your way out of here into the transformation of this world!

