

Easter Day

April 4, 2010

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Acts 10:34-43

Peter testifies that faith in Jesus is available to everyone.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Corinthians 15:19-26 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

John 20:1-18

Mary Magdalene first sees Jesus raised from the dead.

Despite the ads on TV, the Easter message does not involve Cadbury chocolate eggs. Easter is not even primarily about news of a miracle 2000 years ago in the Middle East. Easter is about the quality of YOUR life, right here, right now. For the past six weeks we have been working on Sundays and in weekday small groups, studying a number of the ways that Fear can debilitate us, and make us lose out on the life God wants for us. But we can break the grip of fear. I want to revisit a few points of our study, because the Easter Event has everything to do with the Christian response to fear.

We have discussed Fear of living an Insignificant Life; letting our life be defined by what we CANNOT do, rather than by what we CAN do. We are convinced by our culture and maybe even by our family that we do not matter very much, and so we do not try doing much that matters. Your significance, your importance, why you matter, and why your life matters to God, is not for what YOU can accomplish in this life; it is because of **WHAT GOD CAN ACCOMPLISH through you.**

We discussed Fear of the End of Life. We studied the rather undefined OT view of the afterlife, in which at death the body goes in the ground, and the soul goes to a shadowy place named Sheol. The NT teaches a lot more detail about what happens after death. And it all comes from the fact of Jesus' resurrection, and his promise that where he has going, he will take us. In 1 Cor 15:35ff, Paul states that our resurrected body will be new and 'spiritual', just as Jesus was given new life at his resurrection. This new body will be raised above the limitations of the earthly body; without illness, infirmity, or disability. There is no reason for the Christian to fear death.

There is also fear of little deaths, deaths of dreams and desires during our lifetime. We looked at the story of the Prodigal Son, and saw how he discovered that **something even better** than his dream for independence was waiting for him; he could be unconditionally loved and accepted. But he had to be ready to accept it; he had to be ready to appreciate it. Your little deaths are not a cause for

fear, but times to pay even closer attention to what God is preparing next for your life.

We discussed the fear of Calamity, and that calamity or adversity can come from several different sources, but God will not waste a hurt; He will bring good from it. In the midst of calamity we can go to God, we can depend on God, we can place ourselves in God's hands, instead of depending on ourselves; maybe for the first time in our lives. Regardless of the source of the adversities and calamities, God will use those events to shape our character for us to become like Jesus Christ.

There is the Fear of Releasing Control, the Fear of God getting out of the Box we tend to put Him in. God is sovereign; He holds absolute authority. But God is NOT just presiding over the big picture. He is passionately orchestrating the details of every part of your life. If you have been able to place God in your own box, then your God isn't big enough. God will not fit in any box you or I can build.

The record of the passion, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus presents lots of examples of people fighting their fears. Consider the fears that Jesus fought at the Garden of Gethsemane. Or the fear that overtook the disciples as Jesus was arrested, tried, and executed. The women who went to the tomb and found it empty were terrified. But they stayed and encountered angels who told them that their Lord had risen from the dead. The apostles could not believe the report from the women of Jesus' resurrection; only Peter went back to inspect the tomb. Can you imagine the fear he must have felt? If Jesus is alive, he would have to face him after having denied three times that he even knew him. But Peter saw, and was amazed. We are left to think that his fear had transformed into faith. Fear transformed into faith.

Fear is contagious, it limits us, it drains our energy, and it disables us from being the person God wants us to be. Some fears protect us from harm; but God does not want us to feed the fears that disable us.

1 John 4:18, 19 "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us."

If you want to know how much you are worth to God, how much you are loved by God, look at the cross. That is what Easter is all about. Jesus didn't just die and rise again; he died and rose again FOR YOU. This is personal. It is about our God loving you so much that he sent his Son to be a model for your own life, and to

die and rise again for you, making your relationship with God that of being His child.

Debilitating fear is a warning light that says two things. First, it says that something has become too important to you, so you are worrying about it. It is more important than it should be. It is taking first place in your life; but God should be first. Jesus said, "Not my will, but thine." Second, it means you are trying to solve it. You are trying to control an issue that you cannot control. You are trying to be God. That does not work; but you probably already know that.

Romans 8:15, "You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

That relationship with the God of creation, which we get through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, changes the power that fear can have in our life. It is based in self-giving love, and is more powerful than any fear we face.

Each of us came to this Easter Day service for different reasons. Some of us came out of a habit. Maybe you came out of tradition. Maybe you came because it's something to do on Easter. Maybe you were invited by a friend. I firmly believe that you are not here today by coincidence or chance. God brought you here today to consider the place that God has in your life. God wants to direct your life. He wants you to know how much He loves you. He wants to comfort your fears.

The message of Easter is this: Jesus came out of an empty tomb to fill your heart, to fill it with His self-giving love. Where this love is, there is no fear. That is the Easter promise.

Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia. Amen.