

# LOVE, DEATH AND EASTER

Forrest Church

A sermon preached at All Souls Church

March 16, 2008

How delighted I am to be here with you again. For one thing, it gives me a chance in person to thank you for your many kindnesses to my family and me over the past two months—really, over the past thirty years! You are a bunch of sweethearts, that's for sure. I hope you know that about yourselves. I can attest to it, I really can.

It's not quite Easter yet—a week to go, in fact, but I'm not going to let that stop me. I'm going to preach an Easter sermon anyway. After all, there can never be too many Easter sermons, not really.

In fact, if I were only to come to church once a year, I would almost certainly choose Easter. Easter is a better choice than Christmas. Christmas doesn't have death in it, not at its very center anyway, and if you are going to go to church only rarely, church should have death in it.

Christmas does have animals and presents and babies and stars. These are all splendid things. And Christmas has birth. But Easter has death and rebirth. Birth is essential, but for our spiritual journey death and rebirth are far more consequential. Easter also has flowers, of course, but flowers don't really have anything to do with Easter. They have to do with spring. I have nothing against flowers. They are as splendid as animals, presents, babies and stars. But Easter is not about flowers. Yes, flowers are beautiful for a brief season and then languish and die, just like we do. But then they cast their seeds to the wind, seeds which crack open springing new life from the husk of death. It's a pretty metaphor. There is only one problem with it. We are not flowers. And Easter is about us.

I have no idea whether Jesus was physically resurrected or not, but I suspect he wasn't. If I am right, for many people that would be it for Jesus, period, end of story. Christianity would be a delusion, a miscommunication of events faithfully transmitted from generation to generation for two thousand years. File it with the Easter bunny under springtime fantasies. Bequeath it to Harvard psychologists as evidence of cognitive dissonance. Or to the Jesus Seminar, a

brace of New Testament scholars, who, after thirty years of deliberation, can find no compelling evidence that the resurrection took place.

That this fails to shake my faith is irrelevant, because my faith isn't grounded in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I ground my faith, my Christian faith, instead in the spiritual rebirth of Jesus' followers, a saving transformation as available to us today as it was to his disciples so very long ago.

For millions around the world, the greatest story ever told is that of Jesus the carpenter's son. Yet it is a story without any of the markings by which the world measures success. No riches. No earthly power. Not to mention that the hero dies young, branded a criminal and nailed to a cross. Yet all of us, whether Christian or not, can draw meaning from his tale. His courage can sustain our courage and deepen our understanding of the complex interplay among love, death and freedom

Jesus entered Jerusalem with fanfare, leading a band of followers who believed that he was the Messiah. Within a week he was betrayed by one of his disciples, brought before Pilate, sentenced, and crucified. His followers disbanded and went into hiding, in fear for their own lives. His chief disciple, Peter, forswore him three times rather than admitting to any knowledge of him. This is not the way the story was supposed to turn out. By ancient tradition the promised messiah, scion of David, King of the Jews, would march triumphantly into Jerusalem to be crowned. Apparently, this was the expectation of many of Jesus' Palm Sunday followers. The problem is, their expectations had nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus' gospel.

Reminding us that the world doesn't owe us a living—rather it is we who owe the world a living, our very own—Jesus' good news celebrates the gift of sacrificial love. Take his most challenging injunction. By loving our enemy, we give away our entitlement to revenge; we sacrifice our pride. We also sacrifice our sense of entitlement and all the pleasures that go with vengefulness, bitterness, and hate. Forgiveness, too, requires sacrifice. We must sacrifice self-righteousness, our preoccupation with having been wronged, and the advantage of holding another in our debt. Finally, and most important, we must sacrifice our control over everything that lies beyond our power—including our control over others, over events, and over the future. Ultimately, the courage to be requires the courage to let go. Fear accompanies us all the way to the grave, but we needn't hold its hand or accept its cold comfort. The word sacrifice literally means, "to render sacred."

When most believers reach out to Jesus, it is to the fully human Jesus. His are hands we can hold. When tears well in his eyes, we know our own are blessed. The fear of Jesus is just like our fear. He worries. He wonders if he has done all he could to accomplish his mission, and at the end of his life, for one dramatic moment, he fears that he has failed, that everything was for naught.

We know that Jesus struggled with fear as he hung dying on the cross. It is written all over his last words. Jesus almost never quoted Scripture, but here we

find him, at the hour of his death, quoting not the comforting 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm but the starker 22<sup>nd</sup>— not “I shall walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil for thou are with me” but “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me?” Instead of the comforting words that usher in the close of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “My cup runneth over,” Jesus moans, “I thirst.”

Where, then, in this drama is the breakthrough? Where does courage answer death? It comes first when Jesus further says, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” He thinks not about his own fate but about the fate of others. He returns to the very essence of his gospel—to love our neighbor as ourself. And also to love God. Jesus completes his surrender of self by placing his life in God’s hands, saying, “Father, I commend my life unto thy spirit.”

When we feel that we are alone, that God is not with us— when our heart is filled with dread about life or about death— we can take to heart the saving fear of Jesus, his own sense of abandonment by God, his all-too-human thirst. We can reach out as he did, not only for help—though that is a very fine thing to do—but to help as well. Letting go, Jesus recalled his own saving truth: love your neighbor; love your enemy; God is love; and love casts out all fear.

Since Easter is the holiday of love and death, think about your parents for a moment. Since all our love is imperfect, honor their imperfect love. So much of what they felt or feel toward you and about you, you will never know. You will never know this unless and until, perchance, you too feel it in turn, perhaps toward children of your own, surmising then what your parents may have felt. Their amazement at your birth. The way they cradled you, helpless, wholly dependent, in their arms. Their unconditional love, however imperfectly expressed. How they sacrificed for you. You really never knew. You couldn’t know. How they suffered when you burned with a fever as a baby. How much your pains in growing hurt them. How they wished they might suffer for you, protect you, make you safe from others and yourself, even from them, from all the inherited and acquired quirks and flaws that they brought to hearth and table. But they couldn’t. And they probably knew they couldn’t. They knew that nothing in their power, no amount of caring, even were they to do the impossible and get everything right, could protect you finally, either from life or from death. They also knew or know that you will never ever realize how deeply they loved you, not only because of their own failures as parents or people, but also because children, even grown children, cannot know these things, not really, not fully. Yet when they die, if they let you and you let them, their love, perfected of all blemish and confusion, lives on. It lives on in your heart.

Here—between parent and child, our most basic human bond—to consecrate death with love, we must move beyond deciphering half-communications and miscommunications. We must move beyond reckoning all the ways in which our parents caused us pain by guarding themselves against it, even how much pain and fear they themselves endured without our knowledge in their poignant desire to protect and not to disappoint us. For this dance of love and death, forgiveness

provides the music. To a lesser degree, the same is true of all our imperfect loves. We must move beyond reckoning to forgiveness, not only of others but of ourselves. Otherwise our love will remain captive, and when we die it too will die.

Death is love's measure, not only because at a loved one's death our grief, however we express it, is equal to our love, but also because, when we ourselves die, the love we have given to others during our own brief span of days is the one thing death can't kill. Jesus taught that the opposite of love is not hate, it is fear. Because we and our loved ones manage to devise so many ways for fear to bind our hearts – fear of intimacy, fear of disappointment, fear of embarrassment, fear of confrontation – because our fear of pain or possible pain manifests itself in so many guises, we often hurt one another without really meaning to. We hurt one another and ourselves by learning, over the practice of a lifetime, how to protect ourselves from pain. Add to this all the mistakes we make, and all the mistakes others make, and only one solvent can loose our hearts from self-protective captivity. Only love. And only a forgiving heart, one capable both of accepting and bestowing forgiveness, is open both to give and receive the saving power of love.

Every Easter is the same, only the company changes. Children go on to become parents. Parents, grandparents. We are in large measure heedless, both of the passing of time and of the diseases or accidents hidden from our sight yet present in prospect in time's frame. In a haunting poem, "Easter Sunday, 1955," Elizabeth Spires looks at an old photograph.

*No one has died yet.  
No vows have been broken. No words spoken  
that can never be taken back, never forgotten.  
I have a basket of eggs my mother and I dyed yesterday.  
I ask my grandmother to choose one, just one,  
and she takes me up—O hold me close—  
her cancer not yet diagnosed.  
I bury my face in soft flesh, the soft folds of her Easter dress,  
breathing her in, wanting to stay forever where I am.*

But we can't stay forever where we are. We don't even know where we are, until after we have been there, until we look back to see what happened, ten, twenty, thirty, Easters later.

*Now my daughter steps  
into the light, her basket of eggs bright, so bright.  
One, choose one, I hear her say, her face upturned  
to mine, innocent of outcome. Beautiful child,  
how thoughtlessly we enter the world!  
How free we are, how bound, put here in love's name  
death's too— to be happy if we can.*

“Where were we?” we ask ourselves. “What have we become? Will anything we do or feel today remain?”

Only love remains, only the love we give away.

Which brings us full circle, back to the very first Easter. Most Christians certify their faith by professing belief in the Apostle’s Creed. Cast in its present form centuries after Jesus’ lifetime, the Apostle’s Creed posits saving power in four things: Jesus’ birth from a virgin; resurrection; harrowing of hell; and heavenly investment on the right hand of God, whence he will judge the quick and the dead. It teaches that Jesus was born in a miraculous way and died in a miraculous way, not that he lived in a miraculous way, even as we, too, can. This is not my credo. I do not believe with Biblical literalists in the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus. Neither do I believe, as do some liberal Christians, simply in his teachings. Jesus’ teachings are in many ways wonderful, but, as is true of all human teachings, they are also flawed, limited by cultural and personal experience. So where do I ground my Easter faith? Purely and simply in the saving gift of Jesus’ love, transcending the power of death.

I am quite certain that Jesus suffered, thirsted, and felt forsaken in the anguish of his dying hours. I am equally certain that his followers were devastated when he died. They expected for him to live and save them. But then a miracle took place. Jesus did not live to save them. He died and saved them, which is all the more powerful, however you choose to interpret it. Jesus suffered, wept, forgave, and died. His followers failed, scattered, wept, found forgiveness, and lived, reborn of his death, children of his undying love. For him and for them, even after death, in his love Jesus lived on. In his disciples’ hearts he reigned as never before. Everything that mattered about him was theirs now. The way he cast out fear with faith. His love of God and neighbor. His astonishing humility. His disdain for pretense and cant. His courage and his passion. Each was more present now than ever before because Jesus lived within them, not simply among them. That is the essence of the Easter experience. A transformation occurred. Jesus was reborn in the hearts of his followers. Death was the occasion, love the medium, and forgiveness the catalyst.

This, my dear friends, is the essence of Jesus’ gospel. We all are children of God. We all are sinners. We all can be forgiven if we will refrain from harsh judgment. Love casts out fear. God is love. And only love remains. Only the love we give away.

Amen. I love. Happy Easter. And may God bless us all.