

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
April 4, 2010 Easter
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: And the Winner is

Isaiah 65: 17-25, I Corinthians 15: 19-26, Luke 24: 1-12

We love contests, especially where someone wins and someone loses. We get excited over lotteries, a zillion sporting events, games we play at home, elections of all types, and we like to bet on them, too. Unfortunately, humanity is too often inclined to join in competitions we call, wars. Contests must be a part of our DNA.

We may not be fully aware that a competition we could call a war was also part of God's resurrection of Jesus on that Sunday morning two thousand years ago. There are threads of it laid bare in the scripture lessons read today. It was foreshadowed in the reading of Isaiah where the people of God were set free from the clutches of the warring Babylonians in 538 B.C. to return to their promised homeland. In Luke, at the empty tomb, the angels reminded the women that Jesus spoke of this war when he said, "the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified and on the third day rise again." Paul wrote of it in I Corinthians, "Then comes the end, when Jesus hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Yes, a competition we call war was also a part of God's resurrection of Jesus on that Sunday morning two thousand years ago.

When the sinners or enemies of Jesus crucified him, pierced his body with a sword and sealed him in a tomb; it appeared at first that the sinners, and their partners, sin and eternal death had won the war. And...the rest of creation had lost in a rout. Even the followers of Jesus believed this at first. The women who followed Jesus had come that Sunday morning to anoint Jesus' dead body, as was the custom. But they were stunned beyond belief when they found the tomb empty. When they told the other disciples about the empty tomb they did not believe it either. Jesus' promise to rise from the dead on the third day was either forgotten or seemed to be an impossible dream. It appeared at first to all of Jesus' followers that the sinners, and their partners, sin and eternal death had won the war.

But this was not true. The first inkling of this came to those terrified women at the tomb when the angels addressed them with a question of faith. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" With this question the angels were challenging these women to think about their experiences with Jesus. As followers of Jesus they had heard his teachings; had seen him perform miracles, even raise people from the dead. They had confessed him as God's messiah; witnessed him willingly go to the cross for humanity's sins, and heard him promise to be raised from the dead on the third day, so why did they look for the living among the dead?

"Why indeed do some of us spend Easter," and maybe our whole lives "looking for Jesus in the wrong places? The religious establishment of that day shunted Jesus aside and thought it was safe to go on with religion" as usual—services that excluded

Jewish women and children, and Gentiles in the sanctuary, sacrifices of animals, debates over the law, and limited alms for the poor. “No longer would they have to contend with Jesus and his followers who looked forward to the coming of a kingdom whose rules for admission” were based solely on God’s grace and the boundaries of whose fellowship included all human beings. “No longer would they have to debate what to do about an out of control prophet who ate with tax collectors and rebuked those who gave fine dinners for their respectable friends”. [TNIBC](#), Vol. IX ,Page 472

That religious establishment and maybe some of us needed and need to realize that “the crucified and risen Jesus can never be confined to human traditions, to the safe, and to the predictable. Inherent in the expectation of God’s kingdom” on earth as described in the passage from Isaiah “is the continual discovery of new aspects of what Jesus requires of those who follow him. The women were dutifully serving Jesus in the best way they knew. They had prepared spices to anoint his body and had gone to the tomb early to finish the burial, only to be met with the challenge, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’ In what ways do we continue to look for the living Lord among the dead? Jesus was not in the tomb. He would be found, instead, out among his grieving disciples, and later in a Samaritan village” serving communion to two men who finally recognized him in the breaking of the bread. Eventually, he would appear to five hundred witnesses, among them the apostle Paul; then millenniums later, in Spirit to you and me. So why do any of us look for the living among the dead?”

[TNIBC](#), Vol. IX, pg. 472

Ah, but the angels were not done speaking to the women at the empty tomb. They then went on to declare a victory cry in seven words that still echo through the universe. “He is not here; he is risen!” In this declaration, we learn the whole truth that the victory in the war with sinners, their partners sin and eternal death, belonged to God and Jesus on that Sunday morning when God raised Jesus bodily from the dead. In the battle through Jesus’ death on the cross and in his resurrection, God defeated the enemies, “somewhat vaguely identified by Paul as the ‘rulers of this age’ and ‘every rule, every authority and power’. But twice Paul identified ‘the last enemy’ as yet-to-be-destroyed death. As Paul clearly says, sin, understood as a power, is death’s sting; put differently, sin leads to death. Death is effective because it is sin’s work. And sin, were it not for God’s grace in Jesus Christ, would indeed have the last word. Sin’s power was broken in Christ’s death and resurrection, though it still stalks about seeking to make a beachhead, an offensive landing point from which it can achieve control of one’s life by whatever means possible. But believers, having been freed from the lordship of sin and having come under a new Lord, Jesus Christ, are free from the power of sin. And, in Paul’s picture most fully elaborated in I Corinthians 15, at the end time when every competing rule and authority and power is finally destroyed, then death also will be destroyed. Then believers will share in Christ’s resurrection, death will be no more, and ‘we shall all be changed.’” [TNIBC](#), Vol. X, pg.984

“Any of us who has lost a dear one knows what Paul means when he speaks of the finality of death as an enemy. The utter irretrievability of the lost one sends shock waves of grief. Similarly, those who have faced a terrifying medical diagnosis know death as an ultimate threat. Paul’s message, as simple as it is profound, is that death will not have the last word; God will. For Paul, the two claims—that Christ has been

raised and that others will be raised—are inseparable. The one leads only to the other. So the future resurrection of the dead is a consequence of Christ's having been raised. God's faithfulness assures that." TNIBC, Vol. X, pg.984.

"It is no exaggeration then, however, to claim that that women's discovery of the empty tomb is the heart of the matter for the Christian faith. Paul's words echo somewhere on the edge of our consciousness: 'If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain . . . we are of all people most to be pitied' (1 Corinthians 15:14, 19) . The New Testament never suggests that the death of Jesus would have been adequate for salvation apart from Jesus' resurrection. The two are fused so that neither can be considered apart from the other." Christ's resurrection was not some unusual small event, "it was the transformative event that marked the turn of history," God's intervention in history. It is not just that 'someone' was raised from the dead but that God raised 'Jesus' from the dead, and it is not just that 'someone' was crucified but that the 'one; who was crucified had proclaimed the kingdom of God and that his death redeemed us. The resurrection of Jesus is God's response to Jesus' death, God's vindication of Jesus, and God's validation of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom to the poor, the outcast, and the penitent. The angels of the Lord summed it up well in seven words: "He is not here; he is risen." TNIBC, Vol. IX, pg. 472 and Vol. X pg.981

So my friends, "The defining conviction of the Christian hope is that because Jesus was raised from the dead, the grave is not the final reality of human experience." In the war between sinners, sin, eternal death and God, the winners are God in Jesus Christ and the world, including you and me. TNIBC Vol. IX, pg. 473

I will close with a story that demonstrates this winning resurrection attitude. Rev. Gary Thompson writes: "I heard a story once about a cemetery in Georgia for African Americans. There was one white person buried here. This man's mother had died when he was still a baby. His father hired a black woman named Mandy to take care of his son. This woman was a fine Christian lady who loved the child like her own. Through the years this loving surrogate mother would come into the child's room and wake him with the same words, "Wake up. God's mornin' is come." Even when he would come home from college for brief visits she would still wake him in the same way.

Years later, after he had become a successful statesman, word came that Mandy had died. He set out immediately to attend her funeral. Standing by her grave in this cemetery he indicated to a friend that he wanted to be buried beside this kind, loving woman who behaved in every way like his real mother. "I'd like to think," he said, "that on that Resurrection Day she would say to me again, 'Wakeup, my boy, God's mornin' is come!' " Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed. "Emphasis," March/ April 2010

