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Colorado Springs, Colorado
May 4, 2014
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“Wrought in God’: An Easter Reflection”

(Romans 8:35, 37-39 NRSV) "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

(John 3:16-17 and 20-21) "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him..... 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been wrought in God."

Someone once said, "Time is a sneak," and it's true. Time does have this habit of creeping up on us sometimes before we're ready. We wake up one day and we realize oh-so-viscerally that we're growing older. I think I've quoted my mother before who used to say that when she got up in the morning, she looked in the mirror, and said "*Who is that old lady and when did that happen?!?*" One of the current things on Facebook is people posting pictures each week on what has come to be called "Thowback Thursday," and the person posting an old picture will often comment that he or she can't believe how quickly the time has gone by and that it seems like only yesterday when the photo was taken. A friend once said to me, on his fortieth birthday, that it was rather sobering to realizing that there was a pretty good chance that there was now more of his life behind him than ahead of him. Indeed, it's not something we may enjoy dwelling on but nonetheless all of us in various ways and at various times find ourselves face to face with time and change and mortality – and that can make us anxious. We wonder what lies on the other side of earthly life. And, of course, we are not the first ones to wonder these things; one of the Apostle Paul's churches must have

been feeling those same things when he wrote to them, in Second Corinthians, that *“while we are still in this [earthly] tent, we sigh with anxiety”* (2 Corinthians 5:4).

But, particularly in this season of the church’s life, why would we be anxious in the face of Easter message? Those of you who were here on Easter Sunday may recall, t, that the “big idea,” as my preaching professor in seminary used to put it, of my sermon was this: God’s love is a love that does not, cannot die or be defeated – even by death. God’s love is more powerful than every evil force. God is always at work in the world patiently, persistently, passionately, powerfully to bring good out of evil. Easter is the assurance that even when, in the short run, it seems that evil or deathliness is winning out, finally and ultimately God has promised that evil and deathliness will not have the last word. And Easter is also therefore the assurance that our lives – our blessed, sometimes ornery, wonderful, complex, messy, beautiful lives – are safe forever with God, that God’s defeat of death is also the defeat of our deaths in a real and important sense: earthly death is not the end of your life or my life.

So, in the face of such an affirmation, in the face of that good news, why would both we and those earliest Christians – whom Paul was writing to and who were indeed “sighing with anxiety” – be anxious? Well, I think it is because we sometimes want to know how it all works. We want to know not just the **what** but the **how**, the **mechanics**, the **details**. Human beings, in fact, since that moment when we became conscious have speculated and wondered about the details, the mechanics, of what lies on the other side of earthly life. Those of the Hindu faith talk about a person’s being absorbed into the Great All, the Great One. Buddhists talk about reincarnation, that death is an exit that brings you round again to another entrance where you are given the chance to live a better life than you were able to before. Christians, too, have speculated about those details, those mechanics. And there is, in fact, more than one understanding in the New Testament of what happens at death. There are, in fact, two

main ideas, both of which have carried on down to this day, both of which you can find the hymns we sing and the prayers we pray.

The first of these ideas is that one has a “soul” and that it is that soul that is immortal, so that at death your soul, the very essence of who you are, leaves the body and journeys to be with God. In one passage in the New Testament, for example, it says that the “ body [is to be] destroyed” and that what goes to God is the soul. But the second idea is that of the resurrection of the body. Paul talks about that idea this way in another letter to the Corinthians: *“The body... is meant... for the Lord”* and *“God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power”* (1 Corinthians 6:13b-14). Let’s talk about this one first. This language about the resurrection of the body reminds us of something very true: our bodies are important; they are not something accidental to who we somehow “really” are. Yet, sometimes Christians have acted as if having a physical body was some sort of unfortunate and embarrassing accident. You can find too much theology down through the ages that dismisses, denigrates, even denies the importance of human life being really and truly embodied. But that is wrong. For think about it: it is indeed our bodily relationships that make us who we are. To be touched, to be seen, to be heard, to hold and to love and to embrace – none of this is possible without a body. Moreover, our experience of a sunset, our ability to put something into beautiful words, our ability to grasp what is wrong with the car and visualize how to fix it, our ability to see wrong and want to right it – and a thousand other examples – are possible because we brains, an incredible part of our bodies. And so here’s the point: This notion of the “resurrection of the body” is an attempt to say that for both this life and the next all of these things – the relationships, love, beauty that are made possible by our being embodied beings -- will continue to matter and will be preserved.

But the ***anxiety*** comes at exactly the point where we begin to **literalize** this language, as it were, when we began to ask about the exact mechanics. And when this

notion of the “resurrection of the body” is read too literally it actually does indeed make for anxiety. For you and I know what happens, physiologically and biologically at death, and we wonder how in the world any body that has been dead any amount of time can possibly be restored. And there are some who – in their anxiety about the mechanics – have said that no one should be an organ donor at death because their bodies will not be able to be resurrected, restored, in a complete state. But, again, that is to take far too literally this notion – and it denies the wonderful gift of new or restored life that a person can make possible for another person at death through the donation of organs. Now, that’s a deeply personal decision, of course, but please hear this: the notion of the resurrection of the body does not mean that you cannot use your earthly body when it is finished to help others whose bodies are failing them. In fact, God takes joy, I believe, when we are able to do that, when good can come out of bodies that are no longer needed by their “owner.” For the God Who was able to give us this amazing body in this life will not be held back in offering us eternal life because we have donated a heart or corneas or kidneys to someone in need.

But there is also that other notion in the New Testament of what it means to have eternal life in God – that one’s immortal soul goes to be with God. Now, just as there is truth in the notion of the resurrection of the body if we don’t read it too literally, so too is there truth about this notion of the immortal soul; it too is a image that seeks to remind us of some important things. For, after all, what is most important about you or me is finally not the accidents of our bodies – as wonderful as they can be – but the fact that we are unique, individual, particular creations of God. Human beings want to affirm that in some way each of us is indeed unique and that that uniqueness will be carried on and preserved at death. And so the notion of the immortality of the soul is an attempt to say that you and I in all our uniqueness will live on somehow. But with this notion,

too, we can sometimes get too literal about it – and then it also can make not for assurance but for anxiety. For example, there have been some in Christian history who take this notion in the wrong direction and have said that because it is our soul that is finally what is important and imperishable we should neglect or even hurt the body. There are those who have been ashamed of their bodies and seen them simply and only as temptations to sully their souls. But surely that is not right either. Surely the God who gave us bodies with taste buds and the ears to hear gorgeous music and the capacity to smile and hug and laugh and cry and feel does not want us abusing those bodies under the impression that we are somehow thereby honoring and uplifting the soul instead.

But here is what I want to say this morning: both of these images – and **any other concrete image** that you might want to offer for what eternal life means – are finally *metaphors*; they are not cookbook descriptions, they are not meant to be read woodenly. If you or I want to know the exact mechanics, the details, the “how,” of eternal life and safety with God, then I am afraid we shall be disappointed. And yet that does not dispirit me and I hope it does not dispirit you. Because even though we can’t know the details, the mechanics, the “how,” what we can know is what is at the very center of the gospel. It is found in that simple and eloquent affirmation from Paul: that there is nothing, nothing in all creation – neither life nor death, nor bodies that fail, not minds that get cloudy, nor hearts that are harder than they should be, nor hurts nor disappointments, nor sin – nothing, nothing that will separate you or me from the love of God through Jesus Christ. Nothing shall separate us from God. If you want six words that sum up the Gospel, that sum up Easter, there they are: ***Nothing shall separate us from God.*** By what mechanics, I don’t know. Through what details, I can’t say. But what I believe we *can* say is enough, it is enough.

With that affirmation in our ears, let me offer a final image for life that is indeed eternally safe with God. It's found in a scripture that we often read at Christmas, although we often remember only the first part of it – *“For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son that everyone who believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life”* – but its conclusion a few verses later is also about Easter's affirmation; did you hear it? *“[The one] who does what is true comes to the light, that it may clearly be seen that his [or her] deeds have been wrought in God” (John 3:21). “Wrought in God.”* I love that little phrase; it's so suggestive and it's such a lovely image. For think with me, for a moment, about, for example, *wrought* iron. Iron starts out red hot, plain, cylindrical. But then it is formed, it is **wrought**. It is worked and nudged and persuaded into all sorts of beautiful and even delicate shapes. Our bulletin this morning has a picture of one such lovely creation in process. You might say that the iron remembers that which shapes it; it shows the marks of that which brought it into being; in its very appearance it carries a record of how it was wrought, how it was formed.

And so what John is telling us that our lives are also wrought, wrought in God. For God, like that iron and yet **un**-rusting and **un**breakable, also retains everything and everyone. The infinite and loving life of God retains and is enriched by each and every moment of creation, each and every creature. Our lives are “wrought in God”: think of how those who have loved you and who you have loved have helped to make you who you are. Their lives have *wrought* you. It is the same with our lives and God – God eternally treasures and retains each and every event of creation, each and every detail of your life and my life; they are there, wrought into God's very own life for God to cherish again and again. As one philosopher put it, each moment and each person *“is cherished forevermore by One who knows how to do justice to all [their] beauty and value.”*¹ That is a great comfort in a world where temporariness and transience seem

¹Charles Hartshorne, from The Logic of Perfection.

the only order of the day sometimes. To be wrought in God is to know that God does not do any different at death than God does in life – which is to create, sustain, and nurture you and me, nudging us onwards to create ever higher reaches of beauty, celebrating with us our lives, and sheerly enjoying them – and keeping us safe forever, eternally, always. Christians have – from the pages of the New Testament onward – argued and speculated about the “mechanics” of eternal life but in the end they are impossible to know and focusing on them only raises anxiety. But even if we don’t know the mechanics, even if we are not privy to the divine workmanship in this regard, what we can say on this day in the light of Easter is what we can say every morning: because **Christ** lives we know that **our** lives are lived under the care of God, who shall provide for us and bless us in this life and always. And that is enough, isn’t it? That is enough. Thanks be to God!