

Tom Coop
John 20:1-18
April 1, 2018

The Death Defying Power of the Resurrection!

I want to begin this morning by telling you a story about a piece of string.

There was once a piece of string who decided that he would treat himself to the very best dinner he could find.

So, he went to the fanciest restaurant in town and walked up to the host and asked to be seated at their finest table for one.

The host looked down his nose at the little string and sneered, "We do not serve your type here. Now leave before I call the authorities."

The string turned and walked sadly out of the restaurant.

But once outside he was determined to get his fancy meal and he struck upon a plan.

The little string bent himself over in half and made a loop. Then he twisted around and poked his head up through the loop.

Reaching up, he untwisted his top. Then did the same to his feet and walked back into the restaurant.

Once again he approached the host and asked for the finest table for one. The host squinted at the little string and said:

"Aren't you that string that was just in here a moment ago?"

The string responded, "No, I'm a frayed knot."

You might be wondering why I would tell such a silly story on Easter. And it's simple:

It's because this is the central message of Easter. This is the gospel message. This is the point of the resurrection.

Be not afraid: Be a frayed knot (afraid not).

In a sermon years ago, the great Episcopal preacher, John Claypool talked about a little-known play by Eugene O'Neill entitled, "Lazarus Laughed."

In this play, O'Neill gives us a glimpse of the power of life without fear.

The play begins, where the Biblical story of Lazarus leaves off, presuming that the audience is very familiar with the biblical story.

To refresh your memory, Lazarus was dead and buried for four whole days when Jesus came to the village of Bethany, had the stone rolled back from the tomb, and gave Lazarus back the gift of life.

Well, as the curtain goes up, Lazarus is seen stumbling out of the dark, blinking into the sunlight.

After his grave clothes are removed, Lazarus begins to laugh a gentle, soft laugh.

Nothing bitter, nothing derisive, just an embracing, astonishing, welcoming sound.

Now, the very first thing Lazarus does is to embrace Jesus with gratitude.

Then Lazarus begins to embrace his sisters Martha and Mary. And then the other people who are gathered about in astonishment.

Lazarus has a very clear look in his eye, nothing far away. It's as if he's seeing the world about him for the very first time.

And the very first words Lazarus utters are the words, "Yes, yes, yes," as if to embrace reality as it is being discovered all over again.

In the play, Lazarus makes his way back to his house and the whole village of Bethany is awash with wonder.

Finally, somebody gets the courage to ask what was on everybody's mind. "Lazarus, tell us what it's like to die. What lies on the other side of this boundary that none of us have crossed?"

At that point, Lazarus begins to laugh even more intensely and then he says, "There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy.

"Death is not the way it appears from this side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos.

"Death is a portal through which we move into everlasting growth and everlasting life."

Then Lazarus says, "The One that meets us there is the same generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the One who gave us our birth.

“Not because we deserved it, but because that generous One wanted us to be, and therefore there is nothing to fear in the next realm.

“The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. It is a portal through which we move into greater and finer life.

“Therefore, there is nothing to fear. Our great agenda in this part of life is to learn to accept, to learn to trust.

“We are here to learn to love more fully. There is only life. There is no death.”

And with that Lazarus’ laughter began to fill the whole house in which he was staying.

Then, Lazarus goes back to his daily tasks, but there is something different.

He is calm and not anxious anymore. He is no longer vulnerable to that fear that diminishes the vitality of life.

The house where he lives becomes known as the “house of laughter” and night after night, you could hear singing and dancing.

And the spirit of this one who had come back with this message that there is nothing to fear began to spread.

People began to live in harmony and more generously with one another.

Joy settled over this whole little community because someone had come back saying that there was finally nothing to fear.

But, not everyone in Bethany was pleased with this turn of events.

The Roman authorities were quick to sense that this one who had lost his fear of death was, in fact, a great threat to the kind of control that they liked to maintain.

You see, the way a tyrant holds someone down is by always suggesting that if they don't obey then something terrible, like death, would be used against them.

So, to the Romans who were past masters at intimidation, Lazarus represented a real threat.

I mean, how do you intimidate someone who is no longer afraid of death?

In the play, the Roman authorities tell Lazarus to quit laughing.

They tell him his house can no longer be the place for parties. To which, he laughs all the more.

He says clearly, "The truth is, there is nothing you can do to me. There is no death. There is only life."

The Romans were so frustrated, that they arrest him. They take him to Caesarea where he appears before a higher official, but he's not able to do anything with Lazarus.

And so, Lazarus is taken all the way to Rome.

The play ends as Lazarus stands face to face with the Roman emperor. Here is the man who is allegedly the most powerful of all on the earth.

He says to Lazarus, "You have a choice. You will either stop this infernal laughter right this minute, or I'm going to have you put to death."

And Lazarus continues to laugh says to the emperor, "Go ahead and do what you will. There is no death. There is only life."

The play ends with a man who is no longer afraid of death actually being more powerful than the one who ruled all of the Roman empire.

Unfortunately, for many of us, death is the mystery that drives us to believe that there's not enough time, to gather enough love, enough money, or enough power.

And so we jealously grab all we can so that jealousy, greed, and hatred lead us down the pathway to poverty, violence and war.

Death is that thing that can destroy life.

But through the resurrection, we know that death is not the final answer.

There is a parable that captures this notion of eternal life. It goes something like this:

Once upon a time, twin boys were conceived in the same womb. Seconds and minutes and hours passed by as the two dormant lives developed.

Soon began the formation of their embryonic brains. And with their simple brains came feeling, and with feeling came perception.

A perception of surroundings, of each other, and of self.

When they perceived the life of the other and their own life, they knew that life was good. And the fetuses laughed and rejoiced.

Each grew tiny arms and fingers, lean legs, and stubby toes. They stretched their lungs. They explored their new world, and in it found the life cord.

A life cord that gave them life from the precious mother. And they were pleased and they were satisfied with their lot.

Weeks passed into months, and with the advent of each new month, they noticed that they were ... changing. They noticed that they were ... growing older.

And as they began to see a change in themselves, one said: "We are changing. We are growing. What can this mean?"

"It means," replied the other, "that we are drawing near to our ... to our ... birth. Yes, we are drawing near to our birth."

Then a chill crept over the two, and they were both afraid. For they knew that birth meant leaving behind their secure world.

They knew that birth meant going beyond what they knew.

Said one to the other, "Were it up to me, I would live here forever. I would stay in this womb forever, because I know it's safe here."

"We must be born," said the other. "It has happened to others who were here before us."

For indeed, there was evidence of life there before, evidence that the mother had born others.

“Anyway, might not there be life after birth?” asked one to the other.

“Well, how can there be life after birth?” cried the other. “Have you ever talked to anyone who has been born? Has anyone ever re-entered the womb after birth? No!!!”

He fell into despair and in despair, he moaned, “If the purpose of conception and all growth is that it is to be ended in birth, then truly, this life is pointless.

Resigned to despair, the one stabbed the darkness with his unseeing eyes and he clutched the precious life cord to his chest and said:

“If this is so, if I must be born, there must be no mother after all.”

“But there is a mother,” protested the other. “Who else gave us nourishment in our world?”

“Oh, we get our own nourishment from the womb and our world has always been here, if we look hard enough we will be able to figure out how the womb came to be.

“Besides if there is a mother, where is she? Have you ever seen her? Does she ever talk to you?”

“No. We just invented the mother because it satisfied a need in us. It made us feel secure and happy.”

Thus, while one raved and despaired, the other prepared himself for birth. He placed his hands and his heart in the trust of the mother.

Well, hours passed into days and days fell into weeks, and it came time. It came time for them to ... be born. And both feared what they did not know.

Then one was born, followed by the other. And they cried as they were born out into the light. They coughed up fluid, and they gasped the dry air

And when they were sure that they had been born, they opened up their eyes, and they found themselves cradled in the warm love of the mother.

And ... they lay open mouthed, awestruck at the beauty of the mother that they had never seen before.”

In Christ, God has promised to each of us the gift of eternal life. All of us have managed to survive the trip out of the womb.

And today, we can be confident that each of us will also survive the trip out of the tomb.

Just as Jesus lived and died and was raised, we too shall be raised, for life is eternal.

You see, the resurrected Jesus is not bound to time the same way we are. Jesus is in the past, in the present, and in the future, all at the same time.

He's out there in your future getting things ready for when you arrived. He is preparing. He will meet you there as you go.

Now I'm not just talking about after you die.

I'm talking about later today at Easter dinner when you find yourself in the awkward and disagreeable conversation with that one relative you swore you were not going to get into this conversation with.

Jesus is already there. With you.

I'm talking about later this week when you hear rumors that there will be another round of layoffs at work or when you get bad news from the doctor's office.

I'm talking about later this year. Jesus is out there preparing for that time when you can be the grace and love and forgiveness of God to someone who is hurting or dying or despairing. Just as he is for you.

And, Jesus is there getting ready to be with you when there are no words to say, but only a hand to hold on to. Now and forever.

Whatever brought you to church this morning, whether you are here every Sunday or for the first time in a great, great while, your presence here brings you into that central story of resurrection.

Perhaps at some time in your life you have found yourself in the cold, silent tomb.

Or, maybe you are waiting for the stone to be rolled away and you or someone you love to be raised to new life.

Or you have emerged from the tomb and are standing among the graves, eyes watering as you adjust to the sunlight, wondering what happens now that you have received new life.

Wherever you are, whatever brought you here this morning, the story of resurrection belongs to you.

It is your story, my story, our story of God at work in our lives. It makes us a resurrection people, proclaiming new life to all those who lie in the tombs of this world.

And when you come to your last breath, Jesus is already there. Jesus goes ahead of us into death so that we do not have to go there alone.

And if we think that death has the last word in our lives we will be surprised because something else will happen instead.

Jesus will be there to lead us to new life: Resurrection Life.

So, no matter what we face in the future in this world or the future beyond ... know that we can be a frayed knot (afraid not).

For, the Lord is risen and we are risen with him.

“Alleluia! Christ is risen!” (Christ is risen indeed!)

Amen!