

## SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

March 27, 2005

Texts: Acts 10: 34-43; and Matthew 28:1-10

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### DO NOT BE AFRAID: EASTER IS ON THE WAY!

A charismatic healer and revolutionary teacher; a political propaganda spin against him; a sudden drop in public opinion; the flight of the insiders; a mock trial; torture during imprisonment; a gruesome public execution; a few grieving women; and a police cover-up. The last week of Jesus' life could be torn from the headlines of our newspapers.

Yesterday's Chronicle sported two photos above the fold. The largest photo showed Civic Center Plaza in front of City Hall lined with the empty boots of slain U. S. service members killed in the Iraq war. 1,525 pairs of military boots formed silent rows, each pair accompanied by a small flag, a photo and a brief biography. Hundreds of civilian shoes crowded the edges of the Plaza with a wall of names, representing the 100,000 Iraqis killed in the war. The images force us to ponder the outcome of our pre-emptive military strike two years ago as military and social stability allude us and as anti-American hatred rises among the families of the scattered empty shoes. Our ground troops and any humanitarian efforts seem doomed if we stay and equally doomed if we leave. We see the fickle gains of political maneuvering as good will is lost and human life is squandered.

The other photo was a small inset of Terri Schiavo, her mouth gaping open, her eyes dull. Our hearts go out to her and her entire family. End of life decisions can be haunting. There are no clear answers. Our prayerful, best intentions must lead us to difficult actions that we finally entrust to God, who will work for good in any ways possible. This week we witnessed the distortion of humanitarian and religious ideals for the sake of dubious political gain at great cost to this family. The media frenzy and the fever-pitched demonstrations are dying away as Terri's family urges calm and searches for a more peaceful end. We heard the frightening echo of the crowd mentality of that first agonizing Holy Week, when the worth of one life was debated for the sake of managing a public relations firestorm.

Jesus' untimely, violent death reveals the disillusionment of his followers who looked for a political coup against the occupying military forces of Rome. His death triggers the theological "dark night of the soul" for those who recognized God in Jesus' face. Where was God now? Hadn't Jesus himself voiced this bankrupt spiritual reality in his cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

If that had been the end of the story it would have been a dramatic, tragic tale, told by a few and, eventually, remembered by none. As it is, we gather this morning with millions across the earth to give honor to the name of this humble Palestinian healer and teacher some 2,000 years later. Today we celebrate the incredible news that God raised this Jesus from the dead.

St. Matthew tells the Easter story with some attitude. The soldiers that guard the grave and the grieving women are in a face-off outside the tomb with the sealed entrance. The soldiers were sent out of fear and spite to prevent Jesus' followers from stealing his body from the grave. The women came in grief and shock to honor Jesus, whose life had been stolen by other soldiers a few sad days ago. But now a mighty angelic messenger shakes the huge stone loose from the grave's entrance by shaking the earth itself. The wits of the soldiers and the hearts of the women are simultaneously shaken. The electric energy and the vibrant life force pulsing through the angel make the petty soldiers appear lifeless and

numb in contrast. The angel seems to relish this thunderous moment, perching atop the tumbled gravestone. The angel is content to completely ignore the wooden soldiers. The angel addresses the women with the same greeting that another angel offered to the man who would be honored as Jesus' earthly father, "Fear not!" Years ago, an angel had assured Joseph, "*Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save the people from their sins. ... 'They shall call him Emmanuel' – which means "God with us."*"

Now the astonished women listen as the angel tells them, "*Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.'* This is my message for you." It is too good to be true yet somehow they claim its truth. With fear and great joy, they run to tell the disciples. Suddenly, Jesus meets and greets them. They hug him, hold onto him by the feet and worship him. He tells them not to be afraid but the moment of reunion is not meant to last. They are to go and tell the brothers and other sisters to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus.

What's so special about dusty, rural, plain old Galilee? Why not reveal his resurrected glory at the pinnacle of the grand temple where everyone can see him? Jesus has already resisted this temptation. His followers will see him back in the everyday places where Jesus walked with them and worked with them - healing the sick, eating with outcasts and inviting people to cross social and religious barriers. And there the disciples do see Jesus, who instructs them to live the dream, to embody the lessons he taught, to keep the movement alive. They are to become dedicated mentors, molding serious graduate-level student-interns, disciples, practitioners of Jesus' radical vision of justice-love at work in the world. They need to enact social equality, open hospitality, free healing, direct and prayerful access to God and non-violent resistance to oppression.

How are they expected to do all of this? Through one simple yet profound promise that, for St. Matthew's version of the good news, summarizes why Easter trumps everything and lingers perpetually. Matthew has no need to tell of Jesus' ascension into heaven or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. There is only one reason we celebrate the resurrection at all – because somehow Jesus' presence in the world continues after his death. Jesus promises, "*Remember, I am with you always to the culmination of the age.*" "*I am with you always!*" The abiding presence of Jesus Christ cannot be fully explained. Like a worthy question, it can only be lived into its meaning.

The abiding presence of Christ is a powerful, mysterious experience that gives us the strength to face our mortality with the serenity of knowing we are in the company of One who has traveled past death and yet claimed life. Christ's abiding presence helps us look past our own self-interest and invest in justice, even if we will not see the immediate pay-off. Christ's abiding presence helps us claim hope when despair surrounds us. Christ's abiding presence helps us rise to generosity and kindness, to release bitterness or shame, to forgive and be forgiven, to be whole, to be claimed as beloved.

We get to see others and ourselves with resurrection vision, seeing possibilities for worth and contribution that usually get overlooked. We can glimpse the very presence of Christ in an act of kindness to someone in need and of low social position. In Matthew we hear the vision of Christ as the ultimate judge saying, "*When you did [an act of compassion] to one of the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you did it to me.*" We move past good deeds done out of obligation to taking responsibility through honoring relationships. Our own patron saint, Francis, said it well, "Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; ... where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; ... where there is sadness, joy."

We do it, not because we have to but, because we can. We are loved – infinitely. Let’s act like it. Let’s honor our bodies and value the worth of all others. We are forgiven – completely. Let’s act like it. Let’s get past the blame game and try to make the world a better place. We are accepted and claimed – forever. Let’s stop dividing into groups and get connected as one big human family across the world.

When the Easter-in-action plan really hit home for St. Peter, he said, “*(I get it now. God doesn’t have favorites.) I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who reveres God and does what is right is acceptable to God.*” Our faith stories must lead the way to peace, acceptance and dignity for all people and respect for all the faiths of the world. We will not participate in a holy crusade in the name of Christ. Our experience of faith can make us more open – not more closed. We are not given a corner on God’s truth. We live the truth we know – that God loves all people and that we experience the ongoing presence of Jesus even after his death. It frees us from fear and opens us to love. That’s it.

The abiding presence of Jesus Christ is available in the here and now only. In the past, this holy companionship serves us as a grateful mercy and in the future as an inspiring promise. We experience the miracle of Easter’s resurrection as we claim the gift, as we live the dream, as we walk the journey of faith. Resurrection is not an observable event that we could have staked out at the entrance to the tomb to verify it. The resurrection is a revelatory encounter and a call to faith. The appearance on Easter happened to the women as they were on their way to proclaim the good news of the angel’s message. They didn’t set a course to meet Jesus but Jesus met them as they were already on the path of living out their faith.

We too experience the miracle of Jesus’ abiding presence – not in advance of putting our faith into action – but as we go our way, as we do the work of justice-love. We may hear the melody ringing in our minds but it only comes to life when we dare to raise our voices and sing God’s praises out loud. The fiery angel shoved the stone out of the way and then sat on it, just to nail it and to make the resurrection’s effects clear. No more business as usual. No more fears, no worries.

But, of course, the world is a harsh place for no fears and no worries. Dr. Rachel Remen, one of my favorite spiritual mentors, told of a dream that unlocked a crippling episode of pain brought on by stress. In her longstanding dream, a daffodil bulb was planted in the earth, covered by a large, heavy rock, which prevented the daffodil from blooming. The rock was lodged there simply trying to protect the precious, beautiful daffodil from a dangerous world. But the flower needed to bloom in order to live. The rock was managing survival and risk reduction while the daffodil was called to the passion of living out loud and serving its deeper purpose. During an acupuncture session, she witnessed the rock transform into a tall, thin, translucent greenhouse that allowed the bulb to put out a spike and bloom into an extraordinary, radiant, light-pouring, magnificent flower. Through her tears, Remen realized that “the reason the rock had given the bulb for not blooming was the very reason it was important to bloom. It was a dangerous world, a world of suffering, loneliness and loss. Daffodils were needed.” (*My Grandfather’s Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging*; Rachel Naomi Remen, Riverhead Books, New York, 2000)

As unrealistic and simplistic as it sounds, there are no more impossible situations, no more internal turmoil that points us to suicide, no more deathbed hysterics, no more senseless bloodshed – because the resurrection says that the gift and risks of life trump the power and fear of death. Love does not die. We hold on to all of those we have ever loved and give them to God with the trust that God will find

the way to bring us all home. The blessings of Christ's forgiveness, peace and loving embrace are not time limited. We can't hold on forever – but Christ promises to meet us in life and in death and into always. That's as good as it gets. That's good news.

For now, here in earthquake country, we should sit on the tombstone that the angelic quaking dislodged just long enough to know the story's real. What are the forces that keep you from claiming new life? Gather it up, pack it all together, put it into the gravestone – and sit on it by the power of the resurrection. Then let's move on to make the Easter vision come alive in our everyday lives so Jesus can meet us on the way. And just maybe, we'll bring along a daffodil to say thanks. † Amen.

**Sermons from St. Francis are published weekly**

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