

“Waking Up”
Rev. Dr. Dale Skinner
Easter Sunday
March 31, 2013
John 20:1-10

Years ago I watched a television interview with an elderly couple who described their experience of a major hurricane that had just plowed through their area. The husband spoke of how it was the howling wind that first woke him. He said, “Well, I listen to the forecasts, I knew it was coming, and I just hopped right out of bed to see what was going on.” “It sounded like there was a freight train coming down the street. The rain was almost sideways and pounded against the vinyl siding like a drum.” He said that as he looked into the darkness, he was sure he could see large branches of trees blow by and even some patio furniture. He couldn’t sleep for the rest of the night. He and the cat sat out in a chair by the living room window. When the reporter asked this gentleman’s wife to describe her experience, she said, “Well, I went to bed the night before and when I got up in the morning, I went out to the living room and saw (my husband) sitting there with the cat and he looked at me and said, “I can’t believe you slept through the whole thing!”

I suppose the fact of the matter is that some of us are more sound sleepers than others. Some of us can sleep through just about anything while others are up with the dawn anticipating what the day may bring. People like Mary that first Easter described for us in John’s gospel. Mary arrived at the tomb while it was still dark following the storm of events that had included the arrest, trial and death of Jesus. As one of his most devoted followers it was as if she was anticipating something. She heard the forecasts. She knew that Jesus had talked about how on the third day he would rise again, but what exactly did he mean? She was up early, even while others slept.

Let’s consider the ones who likely slept through that first Easter morning. How about the crowds who stood around and let Jesus stay in prison and then watched him be crucified? They had already given up on what they believed Jesus could have done for them, especially now that he was dead. Given it was the celebration of The Passover, a lot of them were

probably still in bed “sleeping it off” when Jesus made his first appearance on that resurrection morning.

And then there were the political authorities and the soldiers who arrested Jesus. These were the “guardians of the state” and “the keepers of the peace.” As far as they were concerned, crucifying Jesus was a job well done. They managed to get rid of another trouble maker who wanted to challenge the authority of the emperor. As far as they were concerned, the death of the “Jesus” allowed them to sleep better.

We might say the same for the socio-religious and cultural authorities of Jesus’ day. They were glad to get rid of Jesus and didn’t really believe anything he had to say to begin with. The last thing they wanted was to have their authority questioned. After all, they were the so-called experts when it came to the law and teaching the established way of doing things. They were going to control what it meant to be God’s people and not some self-proclaimed Messiah like Jesus. Now that Jesus was dead they could finally get some sleep. Even some of Jesus own disciples were apparently still sleeping. All of them weren’t present at the tomb that morning -Only a few who expected him to be dead. Obviously they hadn’t been paying attention to what Jesus had said, or really didn’t understand to the point that they too, were still asleep, or still waking up.

Well, unlike any of those people I mentioned, none of you are still in bed this morning -although maybe you’re asleep- if not now maybe in a few more minutes! I hope not though! You’re here this morning because you heard a call to wake up. Maybe it was a voice inside you or maybe it was your clock radio or maybe it was someone else telling you it was time to get up. Maybe you hit the snooze button a few times before it finally sunk in, but here you are!

Sometimes I think people would be more apt to get the message of Jesus if we were to call this “Wake Up” Sunday instead of Easter Sunday. At least then people might ask themselves the question, “What do you mean by wake up? I’m already awake aren’t I?” That is the question after all isn’t it? Are you really awake? Are you truly alive? This is at the heart of what it means to be resurrected.

When Jesus arose from the dead on that third day, he wasn’t asleep as we might think of sleep. He was truly thought to have been dead. That’s why we have creeds that say Jesus was

“crucified, dead and buried.” It’s like saying he was dead, dead, dead -just in case there was any question. But then he rose again to new life. It wasn’t the same life that he experienced before either. According to the scriptures, resurrection life is different. That’s where we get confused sometimes. We believe the resurrection means something more like resuscitation, like what happens when someone gets CPR and is brought back. But this is not the case with Jesus.

You see the resurrection of Jesus on the third day ushers in a new reality, a new kingdom, a new dimension, a new creation. All of these terms of reference are valid. Jesus spoke of this possibility throughout his ministry. It wasn’t the Kingdom of this world, it was the Kingdom of Heaven. So it’s not like falling asleep and waking up in the same place. It’s about waking up in a different world. A world where things have changed, like the way we look at death and what God is capable of doing just when we think we’ve got God all figured out.

Up until the time of Christianity, most people were buried in grave yards and mausoleums on the edge of town. It wasn’t until the message of Jesus began to spread that people started to view death differently. Instead of graveyards, people were being placed in things called cemeteries usually situated right next to where people worshipped. There is a difference between a graveyard and a cemetery. The word cemetery comes from a Greek word *koimeterion* that literally means sleeping place or dormitory. The belief in those worshipping communities was that even though people still died, death was no longer the end of all things. The belief was that in his resurrection Jesus awakened a new and different way of living. A way of living we would all hopefully awaken to one day. It was still a bodily life (Jesus resurrection was a bodily one) but it wasn’t the same as before.

Notice how in our gospel reading Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener? There is something different about Jesus. There is a new creation that needs to be comprehended here. A new creation that begins with Jesus. And not unlike the first story of creation in the Bible that begins in a garden, this new creation begins in a garden too. But the promise of this new creation, unlike the old creation, is that in this new creation life would reign supreme. Not death...but life. This is the reality that Mary and the other disciples have been awakened to.

Yet there are others who still sleep -ones who dwell in that Kingdom where death is allowed to have the last word. The reality where God is dead or there is no God. As a kind of

theological counterpoint to Easter, I recently spent time reading some of the so-called new-Atheists like Richard Dawkins. Dawkins believes the universe has "precisely the properties we should expect *if* (notice he says *if*) there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference." That's a grim view of things isn't it?

There are many people in our world these days who don't believe in the power of good and evil. What seems to define the actions and experiences of more and more people is whether or not something is "fun or boring" -whether it might be "good or bad" has little to do with it. It's also the reason, I think, that as soon as something is given the label as being "boring" it receives the kiss of death. The reality for a lot of folks is that the fear of death will motivate and control how we live more so than the pursuit of goodness.

But to that I say, "Thank God" there is one who is interested in the pursuit of goodness. Thank God we have a Christ who was willing to go the way of the cross to show us another way. The message of the resurrection is simple, death is not meant to be feared. When you awake to this reality you can never go back into the darkness. If you do, you know that all isn't right with the darkness. Deep down you know that the dimension where life reigns supreme -that new creation where Christ is risen is a far more beautiful place. It is the place where tragedy can be overcome. Faith can be strengthened. Life begins anew.

It is good news that we are not the random byproducts of a meaningless universe, but rather creations of a loving God who wants to live with us forever. That "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" in order to reconcile with his rebellious creation that so often chooses death instead of life.

Our world is one that is filled with far too much death and far too much evil. The fact that newspapers continue to dwell on tragedy and that we continue to buy into them affirms that we are still sleeping -That that we have yet to awaken ourselves to a different reality. Yes, tragedies will call our faith and our God into question, but they affirm our faith as well.

Philip Yancey, who wrote the now famous book, "Where Is God When It Hurts" was recently asked to go to Newtown to spend some time with the people there who were dealing with the aftermath of the Sandy Hook tragedy. Yancey arrived long after the mainstream media left, when there was "no more story." What Yancey encountered were people who were able to

overcome the hurts and the loss because of their faith. Even though they were numb and most of the town had felt like all the oxygen had been sucked out of it after what happened, Yancey saw people who were not willing to let death define who they were. Instead he met people who sought ways to embrace life and celebrate and give thanks for the lives of loved ones who were taken all too soon. Rather than letting the death and the tragedy define them, they are awakening to how choosing life enables them to continue.

Their attitude echoes the sentiment behind these words of Bishop Desmond Tutu who once said, "For us who are Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is proof positive that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death, that light is stronger than darkness, that laughter and joy, and compassion and gentleness and truth, all these are so much stronger than their counterparts." -Stronger than death.

I discovered this classified ad from a newspaper that reads: "Tombstone: Standard Gray. A good buy for someone named Grady. Call..." Now I know, the image of a used tombstone may at first seem morbid and depressing. But think again: a "used" tombstone means that its previous owner has no longer any use for it. It has become a castoff, an unnecessary item. The Easter tidings of Christ's resurrection convey exactly the same message: the tomb is empty! Death has been cast off and Jesus Christ is risen!

For us the time has come when we look at those places in our lives where death would have held us back, places where we would have erected a tombstone. Instead we hear the call to rise again, to leave death behind and awaken our souls to God's promise of Spring again. Thanks be to God!