

The Tomb as Womb
Easter Sunday – April 8, 2012
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: John 20:1-18, Romans 6:3-11

Greetings again to each of you on this glorious Easter morning, especially to those visiting. Grace and peace in the name of our risen Lord. What a blessing to greet this Easter, this 101st Easter in the life of this church.

In 1968, a kidnapping case captured the attention of the nation. The daughter of a wealthy Florida businessman was buried alive. The kidnapers, who wanted a half-million dollars in ransom, had planned carefully. The wooden box where the college student would be held had been rigged with an air vent, a ventilating fan, food and water.

She lay there, underground, for three nights and four days before the FBI and local police caught the kidnapers and rescued the young woman. She was alive and physically fine. But, in her own words, she would never be quite the same.

What if I told you – on this Easter morning - that all of us have had the same experience – spiritually speaking, that is? What if I told you that all those who have been baptized into Jesus Christ have been, in effect, buried alive ... our lives changed forever?

Now ... I know that when you come to church on Easter, death and burial are not what you come to hear about. After all, we have decorated the old, wooden cross with fresh-cut flowers this morning to celebrate new life. We rang the church bell 100 times this morning to announce to the world that we, Caldwell Presbyterian Church, are alive and well, very well indeed, as we step into our second century.

So, why spend time this morning on death and burial? That's behind us, you might be thinking, that was the point of the vigil and the darkness of the Maundy Thursday Tenebrae service. It's time to move on, some might say. Well, have you ever heard that phrase, "To know where you're going, you have to know where you've been?" That, friends, is what I'm talking about and it's what the Apostle Paul was writing about in a portion of his letter to the early church at Rome.

Those believers and seekers had come together within only a couple of decades of Christ's death and resurrection. In many ways, they were not all that different from us. They sought to sort out the true meaning of Christ, his life, death and resurrection. Their questions might be ours: How powerful was this force in the world called sin? More

important, how powerful was the love of God? And, how far did that love go in Jesus the Christ?

We can sympathize with the Romans. Paul thought deeply and expressed himself through complex writing and rhetoric. His contributions to Christianity have stood the test of time. But his letters require time and effort to understand fully. Take for example the passage we heard a moment ago from the 20th chapter of Romans.

“Therefore, we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so too we might walk in newness of life.”

Paul probably knew that the eager, sparkly new Christians in Rome weren't any more prone to talk about death and burial than we might be this morning. What does baptism have to do with death, anyway?

It is, says Paul, a package deal. To be “in Christ” is to be ALL in. There is a risk of considering Christ's agony, death and resurrection from afar, as something God in Christ did for us. That's true – but it's not the whole truth. The rest of the truth that forms us as followers of Christ is that through our baptism we participate in Christ's death and burial. We must die to what separates us from God. That, brothers and sisters, is how we are buried alive, if you will.

We want to live one way. But, too often, that way separates us from God. The good news is that, in our baptism, we die to those ways of wrong living. We are dug up, uncovered. In baptism, we are not inoculated from wrongdoing. But in baptism we escape our enslavement to those ways. We no longer receive just enough air to live through a narrow pipe, as with the kidnapped young woman. We breathe the abundant fresh air of Easter morning.

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I wouldn't say that the Cleghorn household is one of particularly high culture. We don't sit around and discuss art or listen to fine music. We don't attend the symphony. But we do like a good musical – and our shared favorite is *Les Miserables*, the Broadway hit treatment of Victor Hugo's account of the French revolution

Thanks to my mother, I had the chance to see it with her and some friends, the original London cast in New York in the mid 1980s. And through long car trips with the CD playing on the stereo, the infection has spread to the rest of my family. Pop the CD in and, before long, one or more of us is sure to start singing in nothing flat ... even if some of our voices are flat.

Early on in the story, the protagonist, Jean Valjean, is released from prison, where he served 19 years of hard labor for stealing a loaf of bread for his starving nephew. Once a good man, prison time makes Valjean cold and bitter toward the world. Almost immediately after his release from prison, he is offered a gracious and hospitable welcome into the home of a bishop, who offers him a night's room and board. But when the bishop leaves him alone for a moment, the dark side of Valjean's hardened heart takes over. He makes off with the bishop's valuable silver set. He doesn't get far, though and soon he is back at the bishop's door in custody of the law, under arrest for the theft, pending the bishop's pressing charges.

But the bishop doesn't press charges. He tells the constable that the silver was a gift to his friend. Valjean is set free ... in more ways than one. Stunned by the bishop's unexpected, unmerited grace, Valjean is speechless. The bishop, however, is not. Valjean now has a new life, one that is not his own. As the clear Christ figure in the story, the bishop says, "I've bought your soul for God." Valjean is never the same. He is not sinless, to be sure. But the Bishop's grace, God's grace, has claimed him forever. From that moment on, he is a force for good and justice and a defender of the oppressed.

Friends, on this Easter morning, hear the good news: We have been given the same gift. Our lives are claimed by the same grace.

Paul writes in Romans:

"We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once, for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Paul means that, as those who have participated in Christ's death, burial and resurrection, the darkness in our world and in our hearts is just as real as it always was. But it does not *have* to have power over us. Drugs and alcohol, hate and prejudice ... they are just as real, but do not have to have power over us. Enslavement to anxiety, depression and dark thoughts ... they are just as real, but do not have to have power over us. Our hunger to judge others and our distaste for being honest with ourselves ... they are just as real, but do not have to have power over us. Doubt and fear that undercut our faith and hope ... they are just as real, but do not have to have power over us. Hopeless and bitterness ... they are just as real, but do not have to have power over us

That is the Easter message, and we are, through baptism, in Christ, Easter people.

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So, brothers and sisters, what better day to remember our baptism?

What better day than Easter to give thanks that in our baptism we have been grafted into the church, the body of Christ. What better day than Easter to embrace words that probably make no sense to the forces of the world – that we have been willingly buried alive. That we have died to whatever separates us from the love of God, and that through that death are we raised to live with and for Christ.

Sometimes, God sends us a clear reminder that cannot be mistaken. It's been a while since we've had a baptism here at Caldwell. A few months ago, Joan Kleinmann told me she wanted her new son Elijah to be baptized on Easter, and I was filled with joy as this will be a third generation of that family to become part of this church. Then, in just the last two weeks, the opportunity to baptize three others have presented themselves.

Two of this morning's baptisms are infant baptisms. These infants do not yet know God. They cannot respond to God's love. Their baptisms remind us that we love God because God first loved us. For the rest of their lives, they will know what it means to be raised in the body of Christ.

Another baptism this morning is the marvelous chance we all share to participate with an adult, who today actively chooses to engraft his life to the body of Christ and to serve as Christ's arms and legs in the world. His baptism inspires all of us who seek to practice intentional faith.

And yet another baptism this morning is the active decision of a girl who is fast on her way to becoming a young woman. She is old enough to have experienced the embrace of Christ's body through tragedy, through love and, yes, through joy.

These individuals follow the tradition of being baptized on Easter that dates to the earliest years of the church. And ours is not a passive role. We pledge to walk with these disciples, who will be "learning" for the rest of their lives along with the rest of us. We pledge to raise them and walk with them toward God in Christ.

And in this celebration of one of the two sacraments in our Reformed tradition, we are given the privilege on this Easter Sunday to carry out the great commission that Christ gave his disciples after his resurrection.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19)

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In all of these ways and more, my friends, we are particularly blessed on this bright, beautiful, hopeful Easter morning. We are given the chance to reconsider the tomb. On

the cover of today's bulletin, we see an image of Mary Magdalene in that brief moment before she knows the risen Christ is standing behind her. She faces the tomb as an empty, dark and lifeless place. For that one moment, she falls to her knees and weeps, her hope about to go out.

But on this Easter morning, we can see the glow of the risen Christ behind her. For us, the tomb is redefined. It is no longer just a tomb. It is the womb out of which springs new life in the risen Christ, who lives and reigns forever and ever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.