

I have always really enjoyed Easter. It is full of life right up to the brim in so many ways. Churches are fuller than usual, there are beautiful flowers and joyful music, people just seem a little happier, and Spring is in the air. It is a good celebration, and I am very glad that we are here together this morning to experience it.

But, it is a dangerous time as well. There is a word of caution to be noticed in the midst of all of the fullness. Even after all of these centuries, there is still a very powerful message that can be missed. There are forces in Easter that have not been lessened by this familiarity. If we allow ourselves to get too close to that power, if we pause too long in front of that empty tomb, that power can mess up our minds, cause us to question some of our priorities, and generally knock us off center a bit. Maybe there ought to be a notice in the bulletin: Warning: Easter can be hazardous to our sense of well-being and how we determine what is most important in life.

But if we don't pay too much attention, then maybe we can enjoy the delight and fullness of this day without running into any troubling surprises. If we are careful, there is a good chance that we can just ignore any potential problems that the Easter event might cause. But if you have a spirit of adventure, then I can suggest some ways to truly embrace its power. In either case, I would like to talk with you this morning about the possible dangerous qualities of this day.

If you haven't seen the movie "Oppenheimer," I highly recommend it. Once the atomic bomb was developed, he was afraid that this incredible new power had revealed a startling new truth about the universe. He was worried that we human beings were not ready nor able to grasp all of the implications of this new reality, to be unaware of its amazing power. Easter is a similar kind of revelation with a similar lack of serious thought about its implications. If the Easter story is true, really true, it does not just mean that we have to grapple with miracles. The questions it poses are much closer to home. If the Easter story is true, then Jesus really is who the Bible says he is, the Son of God and, therefore, also the Voice of God. That means that his teachings are true. His way is the way of life, even when it does not fit into our world very comfortably. It means that his words are the truth about life, no matter how foreign they may seem to our culture.

We can forget about trying to analyze the details of the Resurrection as described in the Bible. What matters is that the teachings of this risen Lord lead us to consider some very ordinary situations, such as how we will respond to that jerk we know who tries to cause us trouble or the way we deal with that high-maintenance friend we have, or the critical in-law who knows how to push our buttons, or how we judge those who are different from ourselves. The Easter story is not just about what gets out of the tomb; it is about how anger, fear, and frustration get out of you and me. It means that building authentic and honest relationships is more important than building empires. It means that what you and I give is a better measure of our success as human beings than what we are able to get. It means that the business of love and caring for others is more important than the business of business. It means that we do not spend every waking minute and every dollar on what we want without looking to the needs of others. It means that looking out for Number One is still important, except that you and I are not Number One, but we are loved by the One who is, and that changes everything.

If the Easter story is true, really true, and we think about that truth, then it can be hazardous to our priorities. In addition, it is not just these day-to-day things. There are big issues that get turned around as well. Consider this: if the Easter story is true, really true, then the way we have been

dealing with life and death is not just wrong; it is completely backward. Most of us in this world live with the assumption that life is short and death is forever. We tell ourselves that life goes by so fast that we want to really live it up while we can, that life is over so quickly. But if the Easter story is true, really true, then it is not life that is short, and death is forever. It is that death is short, and life is forever. That is what the Resurrection is saying to us. We have it backward. Death is not an eternal state. It is an event, a thing that happens, and it is life that goes on.

This explains what God has been trying to tell us for eons. We have been taking death way too seriously, and we have not taken life seriously enough. It also explains why God does not seem to worry very much about death. It is left lying all around creation in various forms, like laundry on the floor in a dorm room. God rarely intervenes to protect us from it, and even when he does, it does not last very long. Jesus says almost nothing about the ways we die, but he goes on and on about the ways we live. You and I take death very seriously. In doing so, we miss great chunks of life by working far too much, by hanging on to events in our past, by always preparing for and worrying about something that is going to happen instead of fully participating in the thing that is happening. We miss it by fussing around with unimportant bits and pieces. We have been sweating the small stuff and missing the point.

Think about that for a moment. If death is a one short event and life is forever, then what Jesus said about laying up treasure in heaven makes more sense than any other long-term investment advice we have been given. Jesus' invitation to "follow me" is more compelling than the endless list of self-help books out there. It is simple to go along with the basic assumptions about life that disconnect us from the reality of Easter, and that is certainly the easiest way to go. It just might be in our best (self) interest to take the well-worn path around that empty tomb, to perhaps glance that way as we glance at cherry blossoms, Easter hats, and mint on the lamb roast. It is dangerous to pause and consider what Easter might really mean. Maybe it is better to keep our priorities the way the world encourages us to and not risk them with exposure to a disconcerting risen Lord. Besides, you know as well as I do that the Easter story cannot be proven.....any more than it can be disproven.

There is one fact about life that we have to accept, and that is that all of us live our lives with an "as-if." You have some, I have some, we all do. "As-if" means that we all have to live as if something were true about life. We have to live as if Easter is true or not. We can live as if death is a doorway into life no matter when we get it as if death is nothing more than the limit of our sight. As I said, maybe it is better, certainly easier, to live as if there were no disturbing whispers in our hearts that we are somehow missing some truth about life that is incredibly important.

But, maybe it is better, certainly easier, to live as if life is short and death is eternal. That would be to live as if the point of life is to put ourselves first, stay out of trouble, make lots of money, get everyone to like us, and postpone death as long as possible. The choice is for each of us to decide which "as-if" determines how we live. Maybe the Easter story is true, really true. Not just is "Happy Easter" true, but change-our-lives true. If it is, we can live as if what we give is more important than what we get. We can live as if we are not Number One but as if the One who loves us completely, just as we are at this moment. We can live as if following Jesus might get us into trouble sometimes, but the trouble is worth it.

What if we decided to try and live as if we were created in the image and likeness of God, as the Bible says? That means that we put the needs of others ahead of our own, that we do not spend our lives trying to please ourselves, that we forgive those who have hurt us, that we give sacrificially of our money and, time, and talent to help those in need, that we live thankful lives each day. The first thing we will notice is how good we feel about ourselves, and we notice a peace in our hearts that wasn't there before. That is simply because we are living life the way our Creator intended as opposed to the way of this world. Is this easy? Absolutely not. Is it worth the struggle? It is if we are to discover what life is like when we are being ourselves. If the Easter story is true, really true, then what Jesus showed us in his life, his teachings, his death, and the Resurrection, is the Way to live lives that are joyful, meaningful, authentic, and loving. The Bible tells us that the first thing the risen Lord said when he appeared to his disciples after the Resurrection was, "Peace be with you." Notice that those are the last words we hear at the end of every Holy Eucharist.

My friends, we all live as if something were true. If the Easter story is true, really true, we can live as if we are loved totally just as we are, warts and all, as if what we say and do is of great importance to the One who created us, as if the risen Lord can lead us to lives filled with love, gratitude, happiness, and peace. Life will still have its challenges, disappointments, and heartaches, but we will live each day as if the Easter assurance that the best is yet to come is true.

If you have been living as if life is short and death is long, as if there were no eternal issues folding into everyday life, the best decision is not to pause too long by that empty tomb. Do not pay too much attention to the words of the risen Lord. Do not spend too much time pondering the meaning of Easter. Do not get too near its power, as that could be hazardous to your priorities. So, you have had a fair warning. Happy Easter!