

The World Turned Upside Down?
Matthew 28:1-10

On Easter, the world is turned upside down. The living guards are like dead men and the dead man they are guarding is alive. Violent earthquakes and angels looking like lightning would seem to bring fear, but instead, the angels say to the women, be not afraid.

World turned upside down. The tomb was to seal Jesus and his teaching forever, but the tomb is empty. The women had come to anoint a dead body, but instead they encounter the living Christ.

World turned upside down. From the beginning of creation God had carved out Saturday as a special day of remembrance and worship, but now it is a new day, Sunday, that stands at the center. For today, Jesus is alive. God had rested from his work on Saturday, but the empty tomb tells us God is working today as decisively as he did in creation.

World turned upside down.

That's the theology of Easter. That to God belongs the victory. Death is conquered and even the most vivid sign of humanity's sin, the cross upon which God's son was hung, is made into the sign and surety of reconciliation.

Jesus is alive. And because He lives we also shall live, for as in one man Adam came death now in one man, Jesus comes life, abundant and eternal.

That's the message. That's the promise. That's the power. That's why we gather in droves. To hear this message again. To proclaim this message again.

But to tell the truth, I wondered a little about Easter this year. Not as one called to proclaim the truth of Scripture and Church, but as one who has been more than a little battered and bruised during the past year. Does the message hold up?

Could I proclaim Easter in a time of economic turmoil and unemployment over 10%? Could I promise hope in a world in which from the Holy Land comes word only of more massacres and more violence? And Pirates act with impunity and tornadoes and earthquakes unleash their destructive fury?

Has the world really been turned upside down? Or is the futile world of the disciples standing far off as the Lord is crucified, the world in which nothing is certain but death and taxes, still standing as grim and determined as ever?

What about you? How has your world been turning? Have there been those dark times? Marriage not working out... Separations. Family problems. Problems with children? Each of us comes with our own special pain.

And we wonder. At Easter was the world turned upside down just for a day and just for Jesus or is the world turned upside down, from despair to joy, from defeat to victory, from death to life, for all of us?

Is Easter just a day to celebrate Jesus' victory or does it involve you and me? That's what I was wondering about as I looked at the calendar and anticipated this day.

I need to tell you the story of Chippie once again.

Years ago there appeared a story in the newspaper in Galveston, Texas. It was about a woman and her parakeet, whose name was Chippie. It seems that the woman was cleaning Chippie's bird cage with a canister vacuum cleaner, the kind with a long metal tube, on which you can put attachments at the end. Only to clean his cage, she took the attachments off.

She was cleaning the bottom of the bird cage when the phone rang. She reached over to get the phone, and as she did, she heard the unmistakable sound of Chippie being sucked up into the vacuum. Immediately she put down the phone and rushed over to the vacuum, pulled out the vacuum bag and ripped it open. She found Chippie sitting there stunned, but still alive.

Since the bird was now covered with soot and dirt, she grabbed him and ran into the bathroom, held him under the faucet and washed him to get all the soot and dirt off. When she finished she saw the hair dryer sitting on the sink. She turned it on, held Chippie up in front of the blast of hot air to dry him off.

It so happened that the newspaper in Galveston sent a reporter out to talk to the woman about this incident. He concluded the questioning by asking her, "How's Chippie doing now?" The woman said, "Well Chippie doesn't sing much anymore. He just sort of sits and stares."

That happens to a lot of people too. Life treats them rough, and they don't feel like singing anymore. They just kind of sit and stare. You can pick them out. They have the unmistakable look of the survivor, or the victim.

The vacant stare, the empty face, drawn of any emotion.

Yes, to be sure, there is still a darkness and a sadness to life. Sin, death, violence, terror are still all too real. No getting around that truth. Get sucked into a vacuum cleaner and you don't want to sing anymore. Lose a loved one to death and it hurts. It hurts. Worry about a job or lose a job, and it hurts. We can't help it. Easter hasn't changed that.

But you know what? Because of Easter I believe that anguish and sorrow and loss, though with great power to bend and bruise our lives no longer have the power to defeat our lives. Easter tells us we can still sing. Jesus is alive. He is victorious. And that victory speaks not only to His life but to my life and to your life.

That's what Jesus was trying to say, I think to the women when he said, "Don't be afraid." He wasn't just talking about "don't be afraid because you have seen an angel and an earthquake and me alive when I should be dead." He is saying, don't be afraid to go forth and live your life, because ultimately, and the deepest level God is with you and God will lead you to victory in your life.

Don't be afraid to trust God, because God will be there, even when it doesn't seem possible. Don't be afraid, because God is turning the world of darkness upside down.

"Don't be afraid." That's what Joseph heard when he found out Mary was expecting. Don't be afraid to take her as your wife. Don't be afraid. That's what Jesus said as the disciples were rowing futilely in the storm on a dark night when it seemed as if all creation were against them. Don't be afraid.

And to a people who sometimes felt as if they were unimportant and doomed to live their lives without God's grace, Jesus told them, "Don't be afraid, for you are of more value than many sparrows, sparrows whom God also loves."

"Don't be afraid." That's what the angel told the women. Dare to come to the tomb. Dare to face the harassment of the Roman guards. Dare to look into the tomb in which you think is sealed the dead body of your dead Lord. Don't be afraid to look. Because if you look, you will see that Jesus is free from the tomb. He is alive. The promises of God are still alive.

And then, the often overlooked but maybe the most important words of the Risen Lord on this Easter morning. He tells the women concerning the disciples, "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they will see me."

He calls them brothers. Brothers. After they have denied him, betrayed him, and run away. Yet they are brothers whom Jesus loves. If you have run from God, lived a life you of which he cannot possibly approve, he still claims you as brother or sister. And their lives are turned upside down, from the darkness of their sin to the brightness of Jesus' forgiving, victorious love.

And then, Go back to Galilee. That's where they were from. That's their everyday life. Their normal routine sort of place. And in the ordinary, in the everyday, that's where Jesus will encounter them.

And that's where God's power and promise can encounter you and me as well. It's not just on Easter that we will see Jesus. See Jesus' love and power and promise. It's in the everyday. As you send the kids off to school as you do the dishes as you fix an airplane as you go into surgery as you face each new day, you face it with a different attitude.

In other words, as Christians we do not deny the reality of setback, difficulty, and even death. But then we affirm in faith a new reality: that because of Easter the world is indeed turned upside down, and God's final word prevails: a word of victory, hope, power, life.

Because of Easter, the world has been turned upside down. Your world and my world are included. No matter what happens to us, God is there, to bring forth blessing from disaster, hope from despair, and light even from the deepest darkness.

Because of Easter we dare to believe broken marriages can be fixed; because of Easter we do not give up on our children when they go the wrong path; because of Easter we can face every illness, because we trust in the in God there is healing; and we trust that if healing is not to be, that the cross and Easter have opened to us the wonder of eternity.

Because of Easter we believe that in every crisis there is an opportunity.

Because at Easter the world is turned upside down and ultimate victory belongs not to the darkness but to

God's risen son.

That's the good news of Easter. And the better news is this: Easter is not just an event that belongs to a certain city and a certain time long long ago; Easter is an event that happens here. Now.

Today, and every day, the Risen Lord breaks into the darkness of your life and my life, claims us again as brother or sister, and again turns our darkened worlds right side up, and fills our lives again with promise and hope and song. Amen.