

A Sermon for Easter Sunday, Year A
March 23, 2008
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~~*Easter and the Fear of Death.*~~
Easter and the Death of Fear.

What would it be like if we were no longer afraid to die? Eugene O'Neill – who became famous for writing Broadway plays like *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman Cometh*, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* – gives us a glimpse of what that scenario just might look like in one of his lesser-known plays, *Lazarus Laughed*. And even though it was not a commercial success, I still think O'Neill was right on target when he gave the audience his take on the essential significance of the Easter event.

The play begins where the story about Lazarus in the Bible leaves off. If you recall, Lazarus was a very good friend of Jesus, and lived in the village of Bethany with his two sisters, Mary and Martha. One day, Lazarus becomes very ill, so Mary and Martha send word to Jesus to come quickly. But Jesus tarries, and by the time he arrives at Bethany, Lazarus has died and has been entombed for four days. The Bible's version of this story ends with Jesus ordering the dead Lazarus to "come forth," and the people amazed to see the man, still wrapped for burial, staggering from his tomb.

As the curtain goes up on O'Neill's play, Lazarus is seen stumbling out of the dark, his eyes blinking because of the sunlight. And after the grave clothes are taken off of him, Lazarus looks around and begins to laugh. It's a gentle laugh, a soft laugh; nothing bitter or derisive about it. In fact, it's an astonishing laugh, and a welcoming laugh. And the first thing Lazarus does, is to embrace Jesus with gratitude. Then he begins to embrace his sisters, and the other people who were gathered there. It's clear from looking at him, that Lazarus is in full possession of his faculties. And as he looks around, his eyes are clear, and it's as if he's seeing the world for the first. And then he utters his first word: "Yes. Yes, yes!"

Well, eventually Lazarus makes it back to his home, and the whole village is full of wonder and awe. Finally, someone finds the courage to ask the question on everybody's mind: "Lazarus, tell us what it's like to die." Lazarus begins to laugh even more, and then he says, "There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God, and this incredible joy. Death is not the way it appears from this side; it's not an abyss into which we fall. Rather, it's a portal through which we pass into everlasting life and growth." And then he says, "And the One that meets us there is the same Generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the One who gave us our birth. Not because we deserved it, but because that generous One wanted us to be. And so, I tell you, there is nothing to fear in the next realm. The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty, and our task in this life is to learn to accept it, to learn to trust it. But while we are here, we are to learn to love more fully." And with that, his laughter began to fill his whole house.

Well, Lazarus goes back to his normal daily tasks, and yet there is something different about him. He's no longer anxious about things. And the house where he lives becomes known as the "House of Laughter," and night after night, you can hear, coming from within it, the

sounds of singing and dancing. And the spirit of Lazarus – the spirit of him who had come back from the grave, with the message that there is nothing to fear – begins to spread throughout his village, and things began to change. The quality of work begins to rise all over Bethany. People begin to live more humanely, and more generously with each other. There don't seem to be as many conflicts as there had used to be. In fact, a feeling of joy settles over the whole community, and all because someone has come back from the dead, saying that, in the end, there is really nothing to fear.

However, not everyone in Bethany was pleased with this turn of events. The Roman authorities there are quick to see that Lazarus, a man who has lost his fear of death, was a threat to the kind of control they liked to maintain. You see, the Romans had learned that an effective way to rule people is through intimidation, and that one of the keys to intimidation is fear, and especially the fear and threat of death. So the Romans became masters at intimidation, but Lazarus, who no longer feared death, represented a real threat to their ability to control people. So, the Roman authorities move in on Lazarus. They tell him to quit laughing. They tell him that his house can no longer be the location for all those parties. But all that Lazarus does in response, is laugh even more. "The truth is," Lazarus says to them, "there is nothing you can do to me. Because I now know that there is no death. There is only life." Well, the Romans are so frustrated by all this, that they arrest him, and take him to Caesarea, where he appears before an even higher Roman official. But even he's not able to do anything with Lazarus, and so, in the play, Lazarus is taken all the way to Rome.

The play ends, with Lazarus standing face to face with the Roman emperor, the man who is the most powerful person on earth. And the emperor says to Lazarus, "You have a choice. You'll either stop this infernal laughter right now, or else I'm going to have you put to death." And what does Lazarus do? He continues to laugh, and says to the emperor, "Go ahead and do what you will. But I know that there is no death; that there's only life." And the curtain goes down on this play, with Lazarus, who is no longer afraid of death, actually being more powerful than the man who rules the entire civilized world.

As I said before, it seems to me that, with this play, Eugene O'Neill has put his finger on the significance of the Easter event. Because, when Jesus came back from the grave, he had the same essential message as the Lazarus in O'Neill's play: "Do not fear. There is only life and there is only laughter beyond the grave; there is only the joy, and the mercy, and the love of God." And even St. Paul, the author of so many of the books that appears in our New Testament, would later proclaim that Jesus came to abolish death, and to give to us the hope of everlasting life. And so, it's in that sense that we're no longer to be afraid of what comes after this life. However, it turns out that this is something easier said than done.

I'm fairly certain that many people don't realize the extent to which the fear of death is at the root of so many of the problems that nag us throughout our lives. People who have done studies of the phenomenon of fear, and particularly in children, seem to think that fear comes in three basic forms – the fear of falling or failing, the fear of loud noises or catastrophe, and the fear of abandonment – but, when they look at the root cause of all three, what they so often find

is the fear of death. It is the fear that, what awaits us at the end of our earthly journey will be chaos, or nothing, or judgement and punishment. And it can be a terrible thing, this fear of death. The ancient Greek poet, Homer, put it rather succinctly, when he said, “Death is that thing that destroys what we call life and who can remove the terror of it?” Well, as it turns out, the Easter event proclaims the answer to Homer’s question: “Jesus can.” When Jesus came back from the grave, it was with the message that there is nothing we can do to make God love us any more than he already does, and there’s nothing we can do to make God stop loving us. In fact, if you think about it, if the killing of God’s own Son could not break his bonds of affection for us, then we can be fairly certain that God’s goodness and mercy is greater than anything we have ever done, or failed to do.

The good news of Easter is that, one day, like Lazarus in O’Neill’s play, we, too, will discover that the grave is empty, just like a doorway is empty; that it’s simply a portal to the next chapter of God’s grand adventure and plan for our lives. And the great message of Easter is that, in death, there is nothing, ultimately, to fear.

Now, like many of you, my e-mail inbox is daily filled with ads and opportunities that are simply trash, or with stories that are pure kitsch. But I recently came across one story that caught my eye, and I thought it worth repeating here this morning:

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, and the doctors had given her a short time to live. And so, as she was getting her affairs in order, she requested a meeting with her pastor to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes. They talked about the usual things, like which hymns would be sung at her funeral, which Bible verses would be read, and so forth. “But there’s one more thing,” she said earnestly to her pastor. “And what’s that?” came his reply. “This is very important,” the woman said, “I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand.” The pastor looked honestly puzzled, and not a little bit skeptical, so the woman explained. “During my life, I’ve been to more dinners and socials than I can count. But what I’ve always like best about those times, was when the dishes of the main course were being cleared away, and someone would lean over and say, ‘You’ll want to keep your fork.’ I liked those time best, because I knew then that something really nice was coming ... like dessert. So, at my funeral, I want people to see me in the casket with a fork in my hand, and they’ll wonder, ‘What’s with the fork?’ And then, in your homily, I want you to tell them: ‘Keep your fork; the best is yet to come.’”

May this Easter celebration be, for you all, a reminder of how great is God’s love for us, and that what lies beyond the gate and grave of death is infinitely better than what comes before. May this day give you the assurance that eternal life is not something we merely hope for, but rather that it is something which God promises to each of us. And, finally, may you not only conquer your fear of death, but, like Lazarus, may you always have the last laugh.