

Something To Die For
Easter Sunday
April 1, 2018
Rev. Steven M. Conger

Last year, in early March I found myself in the hospital.

Nancy and I were on our way to the grocery store and I began to have severe chest pains. I kept telling her that everything was alright; that I had been having them off and on for a while and that they usually go away after a few minutes. For whatever reason, she insisted that we go to the hospital rather than the grocery store.

It is amazing how fast you get looked at in an emergency room when you show up with chest pain . . .

Eventually I found myself admitted, a ton of tests given and a very uncomfortable room for the night.

They next day I was allowed to go home and assured that I was not having a heart attack.

But then the fun began . . .

A week or so later, I got this letter in the mail.

It was addressed to the Family and Friends of Steven Conger,

Dear Family and Friends of Steven Conger,

On behalf of the (name of hospital) team, I want to express our sympathy for your loss of Steven Conger.

We consider you to be an important part of the care team, and wanted to reach out to you to express our condolences during this difficult time. . . .

With deepest sympathy
Your Care Team at . . . Hospital

What made it fun is my bills were then sent to a collection agency.

I called the hospital to express my concern about my passing, and they asked me who was calling --- I told them --- the late Steven Conger

They didn't seem amused

Have you ever tried to convince somebody that you were still alive?

It took months to get it straightened out.

It was almost enough to give me a heart attack!

So I want you to know --- that I feel exceptionally qualified to speak about resurrection since I have already experienced it!

I wish I could say that this story is just an April Fool's joke, but I can't

As I prepared this sermon, with this being not only Easter, but also April Fool's Day, I kept being drawn to a poem written by Emily Dickenson.

This poem seems exceptionally appropriate for a day like today.

How does one tell the reality of the resurrection in a fashion that we can understand?

The poem is: ***Tell all the truth but tell it slant***

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

Dickinson says that we should tell the truth – the whole truth – but tell it indirectly, in a circuitous fashion.

The truth, she suggests, is too bright and dazzling for us to be able to cope with it in one go.
We can be overwhelmed by it.

The second stanza introduces the one simile of the poem: the way that lightning and thunderstorms are explained to children in kinder terms "eased", so as not to frighten them.

Dickinson concludes by saying that the truth, if shown too directly, has the power to blind us.

In other words, Dickenson is arguing that we humans cannot handle too much truth.
Borrowing the words of T. S. Eliot: we cannot bear too much reality.

Right after Jesus was crucified; the religious leaders swooped down on Pontius Pilate, the local governor, and said,

"Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore, command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead'" (Matthew 27:63-64).

But Pilate, who was just about fed up with this whole mess, told those troublemakers to use their own guards to secure the tomb.

So they did, hoping that sealing Jesus in a hand-hewn tomb would bring to a close a tumultuous period in Jewish history.

But that didn't happen.

From that very first Easter morning, people expected Jesus to remain in the tomb.

When Mary Magdalene discovered that the stone door had been removed from the grave, she never dreamed that Jesus had walked away.

She came to the only logical conclusion:

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (John 20:2).

We too often want to keep Jesus in the tomb.

Jesus in the tomb is much easier to handle than a risen Lord who makes demands upon our lives.

We are attracted to:

- A Jesus who taught about love, but not a Lord who commands us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44).
- A Jesus who helped the unfortunate, but not a Lord who challenges us to sell what we own and give the money to the poor (Mark 10:21).
- A Jesus who paid visits to the temple, but not a Lord who cleanses and reforms
- A Jesus who was a friend of tax collectors and sinners, but not a Lord who encourages us to embrace the very people we feel are beneath us (Matthew 11:19).
- A Jesus who supported family values, but not a Lord who predicts that he will cause divisions in families, father against son and daughter against mother (Luke 12:52-53).
- A Jesus who accepted people as his disciples, but not a Lord who challenges us to walk the way of the cross, to lose our lives for his sake, and to find new life through sacrifice (Mark 8:35).

We feel much better about ourselves when Jesus stays put in the tomb, only coming out to give support to the ideas and practices and lifestyle patterns that fit us most comfortably.

And while we may be content with a Jesus in the tomb, it really doesn't matter what we want. The good news is Jesus is RISEN!

Isn't it time we let Jesus fully live in our lives?

Why is it that while we affirm that Jesus is risen, too often we behave as though he were still in the grave?

The glory of Easter is that Jesus is alive, bursting the bounds of death and running wild and free through human life.

When we try to preserve Jesus as a nice reminder of what a good person looks like, he rips through those limitations as though they were flimsy linen grave clothes.

On the day of resurrection, Jesus laughs at our attempts to limit him in any way, and he leads us into a future that only he can control.

When Peter and the other disciple run to the tomb to see what Mary is talking about, Jesus confounds their expectations by being conspicuously absent (John 20:3-10).

When Jesus stands before Mary, he appears in a form that she does not recognize — she believes him to be the gardener (vv. 14-15).

When Jesus speaks to her by name, and she realizes he is the risen Lord, he forbids her to hold on to him.

He knows that he must move on, always onward, and eventually on to God in heaven.

But before Jesus leaves Mary, he gives her a mission:

“Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (vv. 16-17).

What an amazing and unexpected assignment this is.

The command of Jesus to “go” is significant here, since it is related to the word apostle, which means “one sent forth.”

On a very literal level, Mary Magdalene could be considered the very first apostle, the first one “sent forth” by Jesus to spread the good news of the resurrection!

It is in just such surprising ways that our risen and living Lord moves among us on Easter morning. This Lord:

- is not one who proclaims a gospel of success and offers himself as a better business partner.
- is not one who fosters intolerance and small-mindedness.
- is not one who encourages a focus on the self and a neglect of the world's needy.

He is, instead, a Jesus who truly challenges our age . . . and every age.

The good news of Easter is that Jesus is not in the tomb.

Never has been.

Never will be.

We do not serve a dead Jesus ---- We serve a living Christ!.

Jesus is alive and well and moving among us,
calling us to follow him on new adventures in faith
and to replicate his presence in the world.

He is risen!

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

Thanks be to God!