

Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church
Rev. Bob Undercuffler

April 5, 2015
Newark, Delaware

Easter

Psalm 118:1-2,14-24
John 20:1-18

“Born in a Grave”

My Easter sermon honors two German theologians from the 20th century: Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. Both stood fast in their faith and were leaders in the church while foundations were shaken by despots, tyrants and dictators. Tillich and Barth’s understanding of God’s will, the enduring power of Jesus Christ, and steadfast faith in the resurrection continue to resonate in these days.

Paul Tillich tells the grim story of a witness at the Nuremberg war crime trials following World War II. At the trials, a witness appeared who had found refuge for a time in a grave in a Jewish grave-yard, in Wilna, Poland. It was the only place he, and many others, could live, for they had escaped the gas chamber and were in hiding.

During those months the witness wrote poetry, and one of the poems described a birth. In a nearby grave a young woman gave birth to a boy. The eighty-year-old gravedigger, assisted. As the newborn child breathed his first cry, the old man prayed:

**"Great God, hast Thou finally sent the Messiah to us?
For who else than the Messiah Himself can be born in
a grave?"**

But after three days the poet saw the child sucking his mother's tears because she had no milk.

That story, goes beyond anything that can be imagined or invented. And it carries not only awesome emotional value, but also tremendous symbolic power. When I first heard the story, it reminded me more forcefully than ever before how our Christian symbols, rooted in the gospel, have become threadbare. They have lost so much of their power because they have been repeated so often, and used too casually.

For example, it has faded from memory that the Christmas manger is the reminder of utter poverty and loneliness before it became the place where the angels appeared and to which the star pointed.

And it has faded from memory that the tomb of Jesus marked the end of His life and of His work before it became the place of Jesus' decisive triumph.

We have become blasé to the tension expressed in the words of the Apostles' Creed: "He suffered . . . was crucified, dead, and buried... **He rose again from the dead.**" We already know, when we hear the first words, what the ending will be: "**rose again;**" and for many that is no more than the predictable "happy ending". I suppose it's that familiarity that has caused the creed to seldom appear in our Head of Christiana worship.

The old Jewish grave digger knew better. For him, the awesome tension imbedded in the expectation of the Messiah was a reality, and that became clear in the contrast between the war-torn devastation and the sense of futility that surrounded him and his nation, and the hope he carried within.

The depth of this tension is underlined by the last part of the story. After three days the child was not raised up to glory; rather, he drank his mother's tears. There was nothing else to drink. Probably the child died and the hope of the old Jew was frustrated once more.

There is no comfort in this story; no happy ending -- **and that is the exact truth about our lives.** Karl Barth writes about the word "buried" in the Apostles' Creed: Barth wrote, "By a person being buried it is clearly confirmed and sealed – that a person has become pure past. Accessible only to memory, and even that only so long as those who are able and willing to remember are not themselves buried."

And that's the future toward which we all are running: **to be buried.** Those words describe exactly the situation in which the pious old Jew prayed: "Great God, hast Thou finally sent the Messiah to us?"

We try to avoid the seriousness of the "buried" in the Creed, (we kind of skip over it) not only for the Christ buried, but also for ourselves buried. We imagine that **we** shall not be buried, but only a comparatively unimportant part of us, for example, our physical body.

But that is not what the Creed states. Jesus Christ, **He suffered ...He was buried, He -- His whole personality -- was removed from the earth.** The same is true of us. We shall die, **we** -- our personality, our heart and soul, strength and mind which cannot be separated from our body – **All** shall be buried.

Only as we take the "buried" in the gospel stories as seriously as this, are we able to comprehend the power of Easter and so understand the words of the grave-digger, "Who else than the Messiah can be born in a grave?"

His question has two facets. **Only the Messiah can bring life out of death.** "Life out of death" is not a natural event. It does not happen every day, but it happens on the day of the Messiah. On the day God reigns in all fullness. It happens when God accomplishes a new act of creation. It is the most surprising, the most profound, and the most paradoxical mystery of existence. **Life born out of a grave.**

Arguments for the immortality of an assumed better part of us cannot bring life out of the grave. Eternal life is brought about only with the coming of the "new creation", the eternity of the Messiah, which, according to our faith, has already appeared in Jesus, the Christ.

But there is another side to the assertion that nobody other than the Messiah Himself can be born in a grave, a side which, perhaps, was less conscious to the pious Jew. The Christ must be buried in order to be the Christ. Exactly, the one who has conquered death.

The gospel story that I read and which we all heard assures us of the real and permanent death and burial of Jesus. The women, the high priests, the soldiers, the sealed stone -- they all witness to the **reality of the end. Jesus is dead!** We best listen most carefully to these witnesses, to the ones who tell us with triumph or cynicism that He has been buried, that He is

removed forever from the earth, that no real traces of Him are left in our world.

And we ought also to listen to others who say, in doubt and despair, "But we trusted that He had been the one should have redeemed Israel." It is not hard to hear both these voices today, in a world where there are so many places like the Jewish cemetery in Wilna. It is even possible to hear them within ourselves.

And, if we hear them, what can we answer? Let us be clear about this. The answer of Easter is not a necessity. In reality, there is no inevitable happy ending as happens in so many movies, books and TV shows. But the answer of Easter has become possible precisely because the Christ has been buried. The new life would not really be new life if it did not come from the complete end of the old life. Otherwise, it would have to be buried again. But if the new life has come out of the grave, then the Messiah Himself has appeared.

Human tragedy is never ultimate. Resolve often springs out of chaos and light from the darkness. In Paul Tillich's story, that 80-year-old gravedigger, said in awe: "Great God, hast thou finally sent the Messiah to us? For who else but the Messiah could be born in a grave?"

The old man was wrong as to the **identity of the child** because the emaciated mother had no milk and very soon the child died. No Messiah there. No living Lord.

But he was correct in another sense, for only God can do something as incredible as cause life to be born in a grave. This is exactly what did happen on Easter morning and is the greatest of all testimonies to God's creative ingenuity. Out of that awful environment of death and tragedy, healing, new life began to flow.

Isn't it God-awful the vicious killing of 147 students last week in Kenya. Sadly, tragically, followers of Christ were targeted. But I read one testimony that caught my attention ...and kindled my hope. A Kenyan church leader affirmed, "Though shaken and overwhelmed with grief, we live with faith, hope and love.

For we are Easter people.

And God's people under siege in any situation will affirm, we live with faith, hope and love.
FOR WE ARE EASTER PEOPLE.

And followers suffering, grieving and wounded will affirm, we live with faith, hope and love. **WE ARE EASTER PEOPLE.**

And followers frustrated and fearful for the future – for the future of their children and grandchildren, will affirm, we live with faith, hope and love. **WE ARE EASTER PEOPLE.**

And followers, appalled by the widespread use of drugs to limit the pain – to avoid the pain, Too many addicted, will affirm, with faith, hope and love.
WE ARE EASTER PEOPLE.

And followers, fearful for their church, so many challenges, too few people, diminishing resources, dwindling energy, will affirm, with faith, hope and love. **WE ARE EASTER PEOPLE.**

**Yes. We are Easter People. Life born in a Grave.
Halleluiah, Amen.**