

**HOPE ON A RAMPAGE – An Easter Sunday,
A Year A Sermon, 3-23-08, Dan Stern, BCUC**

I want to start today just recollecting some Easter memories – maybe mine will bring to mind similar or different ones of your own – which you'll have an opportunity to tell about – and then I'd like to take a shot at saying what Resurrection means to me and invite you to say what it means for you.

It's the Saturday before Easter, and I'm 4 years old. I'm standing behind the starting line for the town Easter-egg free-for-all, as-of-yet unfilled Easter basket in my hand. My older brother, who's 14, is pointing out the nearby gold and silver eggs I'm told to go for, which, if gotten to before anyone else, will win me additional prize loot. But gotten to before anyone else, will win me additional prize loot. But there are quite a few baby boomer kids under 12 years of age in my home town, and I'm competing against all of them, all at once. In the instant the whistle blows, I barely make it across the starting line before what had just seconds earlier looked like 1,000's of bright colored Easter eggs littered all over the school yard lawn, are already grabbed and gone. All those pretty eggs offered up as a sacrifice to the idol of dog-eat-dog, kid-get-egg competition. It was one of my first loss of innocence experiences, my own toddler "Good Friday".

But Easter was yet to be. The very next morning, in pre-dawn darkness, I was gently roused from my bed, and along with my 3 siblings, got into the back seat of my dad and mom's dark green '55 Chevy 4-door sedan. We met up with whole other families in our country church parking lot, as if rendezvousing for a secret midnight mission of great importance. We added our own to a meandering caravan of headlights circling up the steep jeep trail that was the only access route to the summit of Picken's Mountain. Wayne Verbeck's pickup truck was easily distinguished as the caravan's lead vehicle because it was carrying one of those old fashioned foot pump organs that used to be so common place.

Once we got to the top of the mountain, all we could see on the ground was a simple wooden cross. Facing East in a semicircle around it, we gathered our folding chairs and blankets. Once settled in under the stars, and huddling together to keep warm, we maintained a collective silence. All we could hear at first was each other's breathing, and an occasional whisper or cry of an infant. Then gradually, as the stars disappeared and the sky began to lighten, the increasingly glad sound of singing birds. When the sun began to peak through the heavily-forested edge of earth and pastel-colored sky, we all stood up as if on cue, and with Adria Weddle pumping away at the pump organ on the back of Wayne Verbeck's truck, we sang our praises too, knowing the words by heart, and in four-part harmony: "Christ the Lord is risen today, alleluia!" And it was so tangible, so obvious to me that it was true. Christ had risen, just as had my family, and all our neighbor families, just as had the birds, just as had the bright ball of glory, the sun itself. By the end of the service, that bright ball was out in its fullest glory, thoroughly warming us from the night chill. And the spring wildflowers were out too, the grandeur of sky pinks and blues brought up close; since we were literally sitting in a vast mountain-top meadow of phlox and lupin, miniature pinks and whites and purples all around us. Then: back down the mountain to the country church for a big country breakfast. And everything got nosier as the hour approached for another Easter egg hunt – this time, on and around the church yard, where the older youth had the night before hidden Easter eggs for the younger ones. I ran back to my favorite spot adjacent to the church property fence line. There was an old Indian cemetery on that spot, it's crooked, crumbling headstones all that remained of the worshippers that came before us, who sang and danced on this same cite. To me, the Native American spirits always seemed kind and gentle; it didn't seem as if they minded me searching for signs of resurrection near their long-neglected headstones. Suddenly, I saw a

jackrabbit staring back at me, almost close enough to touch, next to a clump of dry grass. A big red Easter egg had been placed inside that clump of grass at the base of one of the gravestones. The rabbit wiggled his nose, just a little bit menacingly, I thought, as if guarding that bright red egg from me. I decided to respect his stewardship of said egg, and went searching elsewhere. But I was glad to have paid my respects that Easter morning, both to the Native American as well as to the animal spirit world. Soon I was being called back inside for the late morning worship service, which was followed, in turn, by a big extended family dinner at my grandma's house.

It's your turn now: have any similar or different Easter memory's been stirred, and are you willing to briefly tell us of them?

(Thank you. Those are wonderful stories.) There are always some among us who have their happy memories, but are shy when it comes to telling of them. Others simply don't have them to tell. Some of you may yet be aching in midst of your own Good Friday agonies. Please do at least know this: you're not alone, and what you're experiencing is part of the whole story of our lives together as the body of Christ. (Your part in the story about rising from despair will also get told.)

Easter, of course, is not only about memories anyway. And Resurrection was never mainly about some dead man walking that happened ages and ages ago. We don't have to only wait for resurrection power and glory in some far-in-the-future lifetime to come either. Resurrection is a here and now living presence, an already-reality. We have only to reorient our minds and hearts on this core truth!

THE CORE TRUTH, THE ESSENTIAL BELIEF ABOUT RESURRECTION IS THIS: LOVE OUTLASTS DEATH; HOPE OUTLIVES DISPAIR.

We come to church to make this affirmation together because we need to build one another up in it. This is grander truth than we can handle all alone.

It's not that here-and-now, every day Resurrection is, in fact, the kind of truth Emily Dickenson had in mind when she wrote: "Truth must dazzle gradually, or every (one) be blind." I've tended to prefer everyday truth and everyday hope anyway, hope spread around far and wide. But thanks be to God hope does outlive despair in a thousand everyday ways. I think of the great apostle of Christian non-violence Cesar Chavez who said again and again until his dying day – si se puedes si se puedes – it can be done! Hope on a rampage! And isn't that Easter, right there in a nutshell? That God is making blessings out of curses, resurrections out of crucifixions, in you and me all the time? That God is making a way where there would seem to be none?

This morning, I want to ask you: What does resurrection mean for you? Do you believe that hope outlives despair? Do you believe that love outlasts even death? And if you do, what are you doing with that core belief of yours? How are you experiencing and proclaiming that good news? What really different in your life and in our world because of it?

(If you are ready and willing to share now, I welcome your own hope out of despair stories...)

That which broke upon the disciples when they saw Jesus was this certainty: they knew they had seen the victor, and in his risen body they saw the goodness and the gladness of God. That's why they could leave that room and shout across the centuries that "Christ is risen," that evil shall have no more dominion, that death is swallowed up in victory. Hope is

on a rampage, all things brand new, and we have only started to live it and proclaim it –
Alleluia and Amen!