

Easter, April 4, 2010
Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski
“Find Your Courage”

PRAYER – Startle us on this Easter morning with the truth of your love so amazing that we find the courage to live and love boldly. An Easter tradition of mine is to share the promise of Easter through the words of my all-time favorite theologian, Dr. Seuss. One of Dr. Seuss’s less well-known books is entitled “On Beyond Zebra” which deals with the serious problem and dilemma that occurs when you think life is confined within the limits of the 26 letters of the alphabet. Here’s how it begins:

Said Conrad Cornelius O’Donnell O’Dell
My very young friend who was learning to spell
The A is for Ape, the B is for Bear
The C is for Camel, the H is for Hare.
On to Z is for Zebra, I know them all well,
Said Conrad Cornelius O’Donnell O’Dell.

From beginning to end, from the start to the close
For Z is as far as the alphabet goes.
Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor
When I took up the chalk and drew one letter more. A letter he’s
never dreamed of before!
In the places I go, and the things that I see,
I could never survive if I stopped with Z.
So on beyond Zebra – It’s high time you were shown
That you really don’t know ALL there is to be known.

The promise of Easter...perhaps we really don’t know ALL there is to be known. What we thought was the end proved to be just the beginning. When all seemed lost, hopeless, finished, God was

picking up the chalk drawing one letter more...a letter we'd never dreamed of before!

I love the story of Desmond Tutu who was leading a peaceful protest in a church right before the end of apartheid. The police outnumbered the protesters 5 to 1 and they lined the church with weapons in hand. Desmond Tutu smiled and said to the police, "You might as well put down your guns and join the dance. Love has already won this victory. You just don't know it yet."

That's Easter – Love has won the victory even though the evidence around us may suggest otherwise. How you see the future determines the spirit and courage you live each day. If you see a future where darkness, despair and death have the upper hand, then your goal is survival. If you see a future where love has won the victory, then you choose to participate in that love today.

Dale Carnegie once said, "Nothing great has ever been accomplished except by those people who refused to give up...refused to give in...kept hoping even when things seemed hopeless and kept loving even when it seemed foolish to do so."

The Easter message we come to hear this morning against the backdrop of so much suffering and fear in our world and in our lives is that death and suffering do not have the final word – GOD DOES and God's word is a word of love that never ends – a love that never fails – a love that casts out fear – a love that will never forsake us!

The women in our Bible reading arrived at the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid...expecting death...assuming it was the end of the story...all was lost.

We need to remember that before we sang Jesus Christ is risen today celebrating the triumph of Easter, we gathered in this

sanctuary last Friday to remember unspeakable tragedy. We can't get to Easter except through Good Friday.

An extraordinarily good man, a man who embodied the fullness of God's love a lover of the downtrodden, a healer of the wounded, a man who brought with him the hope of a new day, a new life, a new world, was executed.

There we have it. We can't avoid it. Bad things happen to good people. Evil and unspeakable suffering are a dimension of the human story and we've all tasted it in one form or another.

And we're here today, at least in part, I suspect on Easter because deep down we hope against hope that tragedy and meaninglessness are not the defining characteristics of life... that suffering and death do not have the final word. We want to believe deep down there's a larger story than the story of suffering...that there's a stronger reality than the reality of death.

If not, how do we find the courage to carry on, the courage to love...how do we find the courage to try and make a difference in this world?

We come today with the women in our Bible story to the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid to tend the best we can to our deep fears.

Life isn't fair. In fact, life can be downright cruel. Jesus was crucified.

The crucifixion stands for every indignity and injustice and everything in this world that brings us face to face with hopelessness.

The crucifixion stands for the fear that can take hold of our lives and refuse to let go.

The crucifixion stands for shattered dreams and lost hopes.

The crucifixion stands for the very worst that life can do. We come today daring to trust that against the very worst that life can do is the best that God can do...daring to trust there is a love stronger than any other reality in the world...stronger than even death itself. Just when you think it's the end of the story...every one knows that Z is as far as the alphabet goes...God takes the chalk and draws one letter more...a letter we never dreamed of before.

In our Bible reading today, the women arrive at the tomb with their embalming spices in hand to anoint the body of Jesus and in the words of poet Emily Dickinson, ‘...sweep up after death.’

They came expecting death and instead they were startled by life. I love Mark's original version of the resurrection story. There are actually two endings. The original – which we heard this morning – and a second ending that scholars believe the early church added later because the original ending was too open-ended.

In the first ending we read today, no one actually sees the risen Jesus. Did you notice that? The women are simply told they are looking for Jesus in the wrong place. “He has been raised”. They are told to go to Galilee...Galilee...the place where they live their everyday, ordinary lives. What an extraordinary idea that you will find the Risen Christ...the reality of hope that triumphs over despair, life that triumphs over death, light that triumphs over darkness, love that triumphs over the worst kind of evil...not in the temple but in the places you live.

In the second version, added later, an editor adds witnesses.

The original version seems to be more comfortable with the mystery of resurrection. It is hard to know what in fact happened and what in faith happened.

I'll be honest – my faith doesn't hinge on a belief in “the” physical resurrection of the body of Jesus.

I know that's a stumbling block for many when it comes to Easter. I do know the more I know the more I don't know. I do know that what I know and understand of the mysteries of God and the vastness of God's love is but a grain of sand and God is the whole beach.

What I do know, not just in my head but in my heart of hearts, and what is central to my faith is the reality of resurrection – a life that is stronger than death... a love that is stronger than hate, a goodness stronger than evil. And this Easter presence is alive and present in each one of us here this morning.

What I do know is that death and suffering do not have the final word – God does. Of this, I am deeply convinced, “Nothing” the Bible says, “Nothing, in life or death, can ever separate us from the love of God, which was in Christ Jesus”.

When I just got out of seminary, I was a chaplain in a children's cancer unit. My world turned upside down when I held the hand of a little boy, 5 years-old, I grew to love as he took his last breath. At that moment, life could not have been more cruel or unfair.

Everything I believed in and trusted collapsed. I was lost in a despair and grief I had never experienced before. I didn't know how I could carry on.

I then literally felt this presence near me. It sounds weird but I could feel its breath and it was strangely comforting. I don't know how I knew but I knew it was Christ's presence. These arms wrapped themselves around me...it still hurt but I knew that I was

going to be OK...I knew somehow those arms that wrapped themselves around me would never let me go. You hear me say a lot, “You are loved with a love that will never let you go..in this life or in the life that is to come.” That is how I knew that to be true.

There was a love stronger than death in that room. I knew it wasn't the end of the story for precious little Ryan as it wasn't the end of the story for me.

It took me many years before I found the courage to share that story assuming people would just think I was crazy.

So, I really appreciate Mark's original ending to the Easter story. It ends with the women in a state of terror and amazement when they went expecting death and were startled with life and they said “Nothing to any one...for they were afraid.”

The word translated as fear here is more like AWE.

It's awesome to know that against the very worst life can do is the best that God can do...to know that the worst thing that can happen in life is never the last thing...death and suffering do not have the last word – God does! God picks up the chalk to draw one letter more... a letter we've never dreamed possible before!

The Easter story in Mark is left open-ended because the Easter story continues to be told in and through our lives...as we give witness to a life stronger than death, a love stronger than hate, a goodness stronger than evil, a light no amount of darkness can extinguish.

We have an Easter gift for you – a stone with the word courage –
to carry with you – to remind you of the promise of this day –
There lives a love that will raise you up –
A love that never ends – a love that never fails –

A love that casts out all fear – a love that restores life...creates hope and gives you the courage to live boldly and love passionately continuing to tell the resurrection story!