

**Good GRAY!**  
**Sermon, April 24, 2011**  
**Easter Sunday**  
**Texts: Matthew 28:1-10; Colossians 3:1-4**

Do you know why we decorate Easter eggs? The reasons are many and varied, but one is particularly significant and meaningful. In Jewish tradition hardboiled eggs are a symbol of mourning, a symbol of sadness. The "Baytzah" in the Passover meal is a hard-boiled egg, and it symbolizes mourning for the loss of the two Temples, the first of which was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and the second of which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. In Jewish tradition, hard boiled eggs were traditionally the food of mourners, hence an appropriate symbol in the Passover meal commemorating the loss of these sacred sites. Hard boiled eggs are also traditionally the first thing served to Jewish mourners after a funeral. An egg is a potential life, but once boiled in roiling hot water, it is no longer a potential life. Thus, the hard boiled egg is a symbol of a tomb that encloses unfulfilled life, a symbol of life cut short, life that does not come to its fullest. But you know, we don't have Good Friday eggs. No, we decorate **Easter** eggs. We decorate boiled eggs on Easter to remind ourselves that because of Jesus' resurrection the tomb has been *transformed* ... transformed from a tomb into a birthing room in which we are given the gift of life eternal! Because of Jesus' resurrection, we know the tomb is not the final enclosure, the final stop; it is a *portal* to life eternal.

Two days ago Christians around the world celebrated Good Friday, the day Jesus died on the cross. To many it seems a misnamed holiday. That first Good Friday seemed anything but good. Jesus was betrayed by one of His own disciples; He was forcibly arrested, falsely accused, grossly mistreated, illegally tried, and unjustly sentenced to death. His followers deserted Him and fled. Furthermore, Jesus was innocent. He had done no wrong to deserve such punishment. Even Pilate, the Roman Governor, testified, *"I find no basis for a charge against this man."* And so on Good Friday we celebrated the execution of an innocent man who was abandoned by his friends and sent to His death on trumped-up charges? What's so good about that? Why label a day marked by such sadness and tragedy as a good day?

Because despite its sadness, Good Friday is truly good. It is something of an unhappy celebration. Yes, Good Friday was the day when the Living Water said "I thirst." It was the day when the Bread of Life hungered, it was the day when the Resurrection and the Life died, it was the day when the Priest became the Sacrifice, it was the day the King was executed like a common criminal. But the sorrow of Good Friday is a good sorrow. Good Friday reminds us salvation, wholeness, redemption comes through the sorrow of a loving Father Who was profoundly moved by the plight of His children. It recalls for us sorrow, yes, but it recalls for us the greatness and wonder of God's love ... that He should submit to death for us in His incarnation in order to make it possible for us to be "good" in His sight. The observance of Good Friday is not primarily designed to induce guilt. You and I may have a lot of guilt to deal with ... and dealing with guilt can be a very redemptive and even productive thing. But make no mistake: we gathered on Good Friday not to wallow in our guilt, but to celebrate that our sin and guilt have been atoned for, dealt with, paid for once and for all on the cross!

I told the story Good Friday about a woman in Tennessee who was getting swamped with telephone calls from strangers. The reason? A medical billing service had launched an 800 number, but the last seven digits were identical to her home number, and people who failed to dial the 800 part were calling her home. When she called the medical billing service to complain, she was told to get a new number. *"I've had my number for twenty years,"* she pleaded. *"Couldn't you change yours?"* The company refused, so the woman said, *"Fine. From now on, I'm going to tell everyone who calls that their bill is paid in full."* The company got a new number the next day. Good Friday is the day we celebrate the good news that *our* bill is paid in full! Christ died for our sins. He paid it all. Yes, the story is filled with sorrow and sadness and agony. But we also know how the story turns out. The sad story we remember Good Friday is an important act, but it is not the *final* act in the great drama of our redemption.

I also told the story on Good Friday of a prisoner who had been sentenced to death, and the hour for his execution had come. He was asked if he had any last requests. He said he loved to sing and asked permission to sing his favorite song one more time before he had to walk the mile. *"That sounds like a reasonable request,"* the warden said. *"What is your favorite song?"* The condemned man replied, *"One Billion Bottles of Beer on the Wall."* Now, how long would it take to sing all the choruses to "One Billion Bottles of Beer on the Wall?" If you could sing a chorus a *second*, it would take you thirty-one years! Assuming just five seconds per chorus, which is still pretty fast, it would take 155 years! If you sang *One Trillion* Bottles of Beer on the Wall at a chorus a second? It would take you nearly 31,689 years! Gives you a whole new perspective on our federal deficit, doesn't it? But

that's another sermon. Like all of us, this man wasn't eager to face his death. Unlike our condemned would-be soloist, though, Jesus willingly embraced death; He knew this was a necessary and vital part of the divine script in the drama of redemption. But let's be very clear: *He also knew it was not the final act!* He was going forth to die, but He was also going forth to live. Many of you have attended funeral services I've led, and you know I always pray at these services: *"Help us to live as those who are prepared to die; and when our days here are ended, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our lives may be in Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen."*

If you haven't guessed by now, I love Easter. I enjoy the fuss about this holiday. The church is full today, we've all come dressed in our best outfits, the bell and chancel choirs are at their very best, we've more flowers here than in the greenhouse across the street. This is our big day. This is the day we get to proclaim the best news that we have: *Jesus Christ is Risen!* Now, I think most if not all of you believe that, or at least you want to, or you never would've tolerated the parking problems and the pollen-filled sanctuary threatening to choke off the breathing of those with allergies. But let me be very clear about what it is we are proclaiming today. We are *not* saying the teachings of Jesus continue to live on in His disciples even after He died. Nor are we saying the spirit of Jesus lives on today in our hearts, much like the spirit of other dead heroes. Nor are we saying Easter is a wonderful metaphor like spring for new life and hope that always comes after the winter of our hard times. If that's all this event is about, then we have essentially shoved Jesus back into the tomb and rolled the stone back over it. No! When the main character comes out of the hole to proclaim springtime, and then goes back in, that's Groundhog Day, not Easter!

In June 1989 a man by the name of Douglas Reinard wrote in **The Christian Herald** magazine that in his family, it was a custom to have a sing-along while traveling by car. It helped keep their boys out of trouble and in a good mood. On one trip their eldest son, Aaron, asked if they could sing the "Gravy Song." The rest of the family asked, "The Gravy Song? What's that? Why don't you teach it to us, Aaron?" With all innocence Aaron began singing, "Up from the gravy arose!" (*"Low in the gravy lay, Jesus my savior ..."*) This is that glorious day of the year we get to sing the Gravy Song! And "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." And "Thine Is the Glory!" This is Easter Sunday, and we celebrate that Jesus indeed rose from the grave ... er, grave! Today we are proclaiming an audacious thing. We are proclaiming an historical reality: that the tomb really was empty, that Jesus really, physically, personally came back from the dead. That's the message of Easter. Please don't slide into some vague sentimental notion about springtime or the human spirit's ability to persevere. If that's all Easter is about, then we may as well join Pilate in washing our hands of the whole thing. Easter is not just about springtime, new growth, sap rising in the trees, renewal and love being stronger than death. Really, can any of that change your life? It wasn't the message of springtime and love being stronger than death and pretty flowers that empowered a small band of frightened, doubting disciples to shake the very foundations of the mighty Roman Empire. No! It was the proclamation Jesus has risen from the dead. It made them fearless! It literally took away their fear of death. Easter is about the reality of life beyond the grave, and it is about the very real hope of heaven permeating our life today. This is truly a day of happy celebration.

Father Richard Carton of New Jersey was speaking to a group of second graders about the resurrection of Christ. One student asked, "What did Jesus say after He came out of the grave?" Before the priest could answer, the hand of one little girl shot up. "I know what He said, Father!" she insisted. "What was that?" asked Father Carton. And the girl exclaimed, "**Tah-Dah!**"

That little girl gets it! Good gravy, this is good news! Up from the grave He arose!

From 1967 to 1975, Dan Heflin Kuykendall was a Republican U.S. Representative from Tennessee. He was known for being a little long-winded, and as a consequence was given the nickname "The Tennessee Talking Horse". In 1964 he had run against incumbent Democrat Albert Gore, Sr., and lost by a very slim margin. Kuykendall had run a surprisingly competitive race, especially given the size of the landslide by Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson over Republican Barry Goldwater that year. Three years later, in 1967, Kuykendall narrowly defeated Democrat Congressman George Grider, thus becoming the first Republican congressman from Tennessee since 1883. On election night, a man walked up to Kuykendall, slapped him on the back, pumped his hand vigorously and said sincerely: *"If I'd know'd you was going to win, I'd of voted for ya!"* Now, those are the kind of supporters every politician needs, aren't they? *"If I'd know'd you was going to win, I'd of voted for ya."*

You know, on the last day, there will probably be people approaching the throne of grace with the plaintive cry, "If we'd known you was going to win, we would have given our lives to You." Well, let me remind you, just in case you didn't know. Jesus *did* win. Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph over His foes!

He is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED. Amen.