

“LEADING CAUSES OF LIFE”
Matthew 28: 1-10

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Easter Sunday

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As they walked that rutted road in the early morning darkness, they were, no doubt, preparing themselves for the inevitable of what they would find, once they stepped inside the tomb. Certainly, any hope that they might have been holding onto, was dashed by the harsh and brutal death of Jesus on the cross. There was no room now, for wishful thinking...no room to entertain the fantasies and dreams that life could somehow be the same. The agony of Jesus' crucifixion had seen to that.

Now, as they walked in the silence of deep sadness, they were steeling themselves for the task at hand—that of anointing the body in preparation for burial. It was a job that had to be done and they would do it as quickly and as efficiently as they could before their emotions got the better of them. Then, they could return home to mourn with the others.

Yet, as the narrative of Matthew's Gospel continues, these loving, faithful followers of Jesus who had prepared themselves for death, discovered to their amazement that it was not death that they found, but life...not fear and anguish, but hope and joy!

In Matthew's account of the resurrection, these faithful women learn from the angel at the tomb that Jesus is not there, that he has been raised. The angel then instructs them to **“go quickly and tell the others: “He has been raised from the dead and indeed, is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”**

You know the rest: The joy, the excitement, the stunned celebration among the faithful as they exulted over this “good news from a graveyard.” Suddenly—unexpectedly, their mourning turned to dancing, their deep despair to the firm resolve of hope.

This, of course, is the same story that commands our attention each year at Easter. There are, to be sure, some slight variations in the accounts of the other gospel writers, but it is essentially the same story—one whose outcome and implication remains steadfastly the same. The stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. He is not here. He is risen and goes on ahead of you to Galilee.

I would suspect that most of us—even those who do not attend worship on a regular basis—are familiar with that much of the story. It is, after all, a story that has, at least to some extent, become embedded in culture and the Easter gatherings and celebrations that we observe. And all of that, of course is well and good. But this morning, I would like to suggest that, in spite of our best intentions, we sometimes miss the essential message of this story.

So often, our focus is limited to Jesus and his witness of courage and faithfulness in overcoming death. Now, that's fine, but the story of Easter is not just about Jesus. The story of Easter is, ultimately, about you and me and our own willingness to face and

overcome the forces of death. Yes, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! But what about you...and you...and me? Where is the evidence of our own resurrection? What about our own choices to live in death defying, death defeating ways? Are we dealing with the subjects of resurrection in theory—or in actual practice?

The women who came to anoint the body of Jesus that early Easter morning had prepared themselves for the reality of death. They brought spices to anoint the body. Death is what they expected. Death is what they anticipated. And who could possibly blame them?!

They knew what we all know—namely that death is an inescapable reality of life. “No one gets out of here alive!” as the saying goes. So why not simply incorporate this reality into our thinking, our planning, and our living? It would only seem to make sense. **The only problem is that our acknowledgment of death’s reality can, in fact, preclude the possibility of new life.**

I recently came across a website that offered a rather detailed description of what it termed, “the leading causes of death.” In addition to the statistical data that it offered in regards to geographical, racial and age related matters, it listed the fifteen leading causes of death in the United States—ranging from heart disease to cancer to a number of other familiar diseases and causes. It was very informative and certainly very sobering to read over the list.

But what if we were to create another list this morning? What if we were to create a list of the leading causes of life? What would that look like?

Gary Gunderson is the Vice President of Faith and Health at the Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center and is the author of several books, including one that is entitled, “The Leading Causes of Life.” That title got my attention! After growing accustomed to the usual reference to “leading causes of death,” this new twist on an old tale captured my imagination. What a perfect title for an Easter sermon!

Every year at Easter in nearly every congregation across America and around the world, preachers preach about “new life in Christ.” Certainly I have done that over my many years of preaching Easter sermons. But what does that really mean? If we were to take the story of Easter and dissect its meaning and its message, what are the vital components of this “new life” and how does the resurrection of Jesus make this “new life” possible? With the assistance of Gary Gunderson, I would like to try to answer this question—at least, in part.

Although there isn’t time to touch upon all five of Gunderson’s leading causes of life, I would like to reference three of those leading causes this morning.

First of all, Gunderson suggests that CONNECTION is a leading cause of life. By connection, he is referring to the ways in which we, as human beings, are connected to each other. We are “wired,” he says, for social interaction and complexity. Our brains make it possible for us to recognize up to 25,000 different faces! Although we often take it for

granted, the connections of family, faith, culture, neighborhood and work bring meaning, energy and possibility to our lives.

One small example of the energy and simple joy of this gift of connection was made tangible to me last fall when the Giants surprised us all and won the World Series. As I have reflected upon that experience, the true joy that I felt—and that many Giants fans felt—was in the experience of sharing the victory in community. The barriers that normally exist between people suddenly came down as people watched the game in the Civic Center Plaza. When that last pop-up was caught—by some player who used to play for the Giants—the walls came down and people exploded in a celebration of high fives, hugs and leaps for joy.

There is, you see, joy, energy, passion and meaning in our shared connection as human beings. I trust that you, in some way, sense that joy in our connection this morning because we are bound together by something far more significant and powerful than a World Series celebration. We are bound together by the announcement that the grace stands empty...that truth cannot be killed...that the love that God has for us and for our world will not be denied by even the forces of death.

When we are at our best as the community of faith, we not only know this intellectually, but we live it out experientially. Someone once described this Easter joy as a “collective effervescence.” I love that idea and trust that in who we are and how we live, we will demonstrate a “**collective effervescence.**”

Another leading cause of life, says Gunderson, is that of what he calls, **AGENCY**. By agency, he means, “**The human capacity to choose and do, to move towards life.**” He points out that there is so much in our lives that tends to overwhelm us. Were we to name the things on our “overwhelm list” this morning, it would likely take quite a while. And if we were to do that, we would certainly be directing our focus to some of the “leading causes of death.”

But, there is this quality of “agency” that serves to remind us of the human capacity to seek and discover life—even in the midst of, even in the face of death. We have the capability to “choose life” even when the odds are stacked against us.

Why is it that we are often so inspired and even moved to tears by the examples of those who “choose life” even when cancer is ravaging their body? Why do we feel a surge of human pride and human potential when someone courageously chooses to oppose the forces that would deny or limit or shackle the rights and dignity of others? I am grateful, this morning, for those who chose to stand in opposition to the so-called, “religious freedom” laws in Indiana. They were not fooled by the deceptive language. They could see the fingerprints of prejudice and were unafraid to speak their truth to power.

That is, of course, precisely what Jesus did. He spoke God’s truth to those who were so intent in limiting or reinventing that truth to suit their own designs and desires. Jesus chose life—even though it would lead to his death. Yet, as we are affirming this morning, his death would not be the period to complete the sentence and end the story, but merely, a semi-colon that would be followed by the unfolding witness to the death defying power of

God's love. The story of Easter, you see, is really a testimony to the power of human agency—our ability to choose to do and move toward life.

A third “leading cause of life,” says Gunderson, is **GENERATIVITY**. By this, he means the human awareness that we are here on this earth to do something more than merely eat and sleep and used up the world's resources in the self-centered pursuit of comfort and pleasure. As he suggests, this is the most “grow up” of the leading causes of life because it demands the ability to look beyond ourselves as we consider the difference that we can make in our living and the legacy we will leave in our dying.

Carl Jung has theorized that, often, the first half of one's life is focused on primal family responsibilities. It is the second half of life—after the children are raised—that invites us to consider the larger question of why we are here and how we can leave a legacy that makes our world better because we have lived.

I believe that Jung is correct. The problem is that some people never graduate from the first half of life agenda to the second half of life agenda. Their focus and their concern remain primarily with themselves and their own comforts and desires—even though those comforts and desires rarely fail to provide the meaning and purpose that they inwardly long for.

The choice to be **GENERATIVE** is the choice to graduate, the choice to recognize that real joy, real happiness and real meaning in life will never be found by keeping our focus turned inward. As Jesus' life, death and resurrection illustrates so powerfully, the meaning that we seek will only be found when we are willing to turn our focus outward, to consider our responsibilities—better yet, our opportunities to invest our gifts and to use our lives for the greater good of all. It was, of course, George Bernard Shaw who wrote, “**I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, and for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake.**”

There is, you see, joy and life in the choice to be **GENERATIVE**, to be thoroughly used up in the cause of investing ourselves in the greater good of all.

If the idea of “new life” is to be more than merely an Easter buzz word, if it is to amount to more than merely being a part of the jargon of faith, it is important that we begin to put some flesh on the bones of what “new life” actually looks like.

The promise of Easter is not a magic potion. It is not fairy dust that we sprinkle upon ourselves one a year in the mandatory pilgrimage to church. Let's be done with that sort of nonsense! It is simply not helpful.

The promise of new life that the resurrected Christ offers to us was embodied in his living, in his dying and in his living again. It is in relationship with him—with his ancient witness and his living spirit—that we learn of the importance of our **connection** with each other as we are bound together—connected by the power of God's love. It is through him that we experience the energy and purpose of **agency**—the choice to live and act in ways that lead to life. And it is through the risen Christ that we discover the life giving power of **generativity**—the choice

to use ourselves up for the greater good of all—to leave a legacy that will make this world a better place.

I conclude with a reference to the 1996 edition of the AME Church’s Book of Discipline. For those of you who may not be familiar with the Book of Discipline, it is, essentially, the “rule book” of the church. In this particular edition, there is one of the most notable typographical errors of all time. In section dealing with chargeable offences for clergy, the number one offense listed is... **“Immortal Conduct.”** What they had meant to list, of course, was “Immoral Conduct.”

I don’t know about you, but I can’t think of better charge to be guilty of than that of **“Immortal Conduct,”** the conduct that chooses life in the face of death, the conduct that is not bound by a cross or a grave, but is unleashed by an empty tomb to invest itself in the leading causes of life.

May this be a charge brought against us all! Amen.