"Get Out of Your Tomb!"

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
based on the theme, "GET OUT OF YOUR TOMB!"
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
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Mark 16:1-8 NRSV

[1]When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. [2]And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. [3]They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" [4]When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. [5]As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

[6]But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. [7]But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

[8]So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Easter proclaims that Christ has escaped the tomb. We declare, "Christ is risen!" and we respond, "Christ is risen indeed." Death is not more powerful than God, and that is the message of Easter.

But all that would have very little meaning for us if it was a one-time event. What would it matter to us if the resurrection of the Christ was a unique experience? No, the power of Easter, the importance of proclaiming Christ risen is dependent upon whether or not we too can beat death and get out of our own tombs. This morning I want to proclaim to you that it is time to get out of your tomb!

The truth is that we often get locked into tombs before we die. Every day people are living entombed by spiritual forces as powerful than death. We are stuck in tombs of fear that keep us from living. We let tombs alienate and separate us from life as God means for us to live. There are a lot of walking dead people. They are still moving and breathing but there is no spirit at work there. There is no power of God coursing through their souls. They have no sense of being blessed. They are existing and their existence is just a burden to them and perhaps to others, and it is certainly a loss to God.

Easter proclaims the power of God to set you free from your tomb. Easter proclaims the power of God to raise you up and reconnect you with those you love, to call you into a community of life, to set you free from sin, which separates

you from others and steals the life-giving energy from your soul.

Easter is God's invitation back to the living. The resurrection is God's power to liberate you from the spiritual death of loneliness, bitterness, anger, and hatred. The risen Christ calls out to you to come to him and find new life and new possibilities where you thought there was none. Easter is God's invitation to get out of your tomb.

I don't want to shock you too badly but this morning I want to talk to you about something you almost never hear me talk about: hell! But don't get to squirming too badly, just listen. Some people are living in a tomb marked "forsaken," or a tomb of "suffering." They feel abandoned by God. I would say that as many as 90% of those who have left churches or who claim not to believe in God do so because they have felt forsaken by God or entombed by suffering. They are living in a tomb we could just as easily call "hell."

Martin Copenhaver writes about the words of Jesus on the cross – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words are from Psalm 22 but we remember that Jesus spoke them on the cross. For many people this is hard to understand. How could God have abandoned or forsaken Jesus? How could Jesus have felt forsaken by God if he was God's son? Copenhaver says, "Jesus came to live among us, not as God in a human costume that can be shed whenever things get hard and rough. Rather, in Jesus, God came as human to the bone, which means human enough to experience bone-deep despair and even the perceived absence of God. If Jesus never experienced these emotions, that would mean that he never experienced the kind of life we live, which is filled with such things."

Copenhaver goes on to remind us that the Apostle's Creed proclaims: "Jesus Christ was crucified, dead and buried. He descended to hell." He says, "The last part of that statement always used to trouble me, until one day someone told me that, for her, it was the most treasured part of the creed. When I asked why, she answered: 'Because hell is where I spend much of my life.' Hell—a sense of being forsaken, a place of despair. We have been there. And Jesus has been there. He has been with us. And, having been there, Jesus transforms it by his presence. And he still has the power to transform the experience of any and all who have been in the darkest regions. So this word of despair ends up being good news, indeed." In other words, there is no hell that God cannot rescue us from. Jesus knows what it is like for us when we are in a tomb, because he has been there too. There isn't any tomb, real or metaphorical that God can't get us out of, and isn't willing to be with us in until we get out. If you are living in a tomb of forsakeness or fear of death it is time to get out of your tomb!

Now I want to talk about hell in the sense of the way many people live in a hell of their own making, for no reason. These are tombs that can isolate us from the very people who love us most. If you are living in that kind of tomb, it is time to get out of your tomb! Ron Buford, in another Still Speaking Devotional, tells

the story of a friend of his whose mother was always complaining. She was a wealthy woman who wanted for nothing but was "miserable." Whenever the smallest thing went wrong, she would shake her head and mumble "It's a living hell!" Her son had a hard time with this and it made their relationship difficult.

Then one night Ron and his friend were "dressed up and driving to a fabulous party." They caught every green light just right, "sailing as if on a magic carpet." Finally, they caught a red light. Ron turned, looked at his friend "and with mocking tone … said, 'It's a living hell.'"

Ron says they doubled over with laughter, pulled over and rolled out of the car. From that day forward, when minor things went wrong, in unison, we'd say, 'it's a living hell,' . . . and laugh. The phrase helped us see the relative ridiculousness of our angst, swimming on lakes of privilege." It also helped his friend deal with his mom. When something would happen that he knew would cause her to react, he would laugh and say it for her, 'I know mom, it's a living hell.'

"And then one day, instead of saying it, his mom actually laughed at herself." The power of God had liberated them from the tomb of their old relationship and freed them both to new life and a new relationship! Sometimes we need to give ourselves permission to get out of our tombs. Sometimes we need to be able to laugh at how ridiculous the tombs we have built for ourselves are. Get out of that tomb!

The tombs that we live in are sometimes greater than just personal issues. Certainly our personal attitudes can entomb us in fear and even in a living hell or a walking death, but there is a reality that we live in the midst of greater forces that affect us too. The societies and cultures that shape us are powerful. They can entomb us in ways we may think determine our destiny and steal our hope. Pastor Kenneth Samuel talks about how Roosevelt's "New Deal," Johnson's "Great Society," King's "Beloved Community" – even Reagan's "Morning in America" – none can compare with what God intends by the promise of his reign. The dominant culture is marked by tombs labeled 'rampant greed' and 'obsessive materialism.' Tombs of poverty, hunger and disease envelop the globe while the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Tombs of racism must be broken open by the power of the resurrection to liberate both the racist and the oppressed; the tomb of militarism must be broken open by the Easter power of diplomacy; the tombs of "sexism and hetero-sexism must not be allowed to continue to divide us;" the attempt to entomb the environment must be overcome by the resurrection power of God at work in all of us. "The great hope of the Christian faith is that these issues will not forever be denied or unresolved. God will rectify every wrong, adjudicate every controversy, and establish a reign of love, peace and justice for all. Hallelujah!" That is Easter – now and in the fullness of God's time to come.

The Scripture this morning tells us those women went to the tomb

wondering. They were wondering who would roll away the stone for them that closed the tomb. They entered the tomb, but they did not find the Living Christ. They ran from the tomb filled with "terror and amazement… and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That isn't the most encouraging way to end the story of Christ's resurrection, yet that was the way the earliest manuscripts that we have ended. It was so disturbing that later copies included another 8 verses. God ultimately set those first witnesses free from their own tombs of fear and grief. God filled them with the power to proclaim to everyone that God had raised Christ to new life and would do the same for them and us.

The living witness of our faith is that the tombs of death cannot hold us. God has the power and the love to get us out of our tombs. If you are an Easter Sunday Christian this means you can be an Easter Sunday Christian every Sunday. You can be an Easter Christian every day. God has set us free from the tomb of sin that alienates you from others and even from God. God has opened the tomb of death the world tries to hold us in. Easter proclaims that you and I are too blessed to be in a tomb. It is time to get out of our tombs and claim our blessings. In the bulletin today there is an insert that I want you to read out loud with me today. It declares the blessing of God on our lives and in our hearts. It proclaims that we will not let sin and death and fear keep us in a tomb any longer. Turn to that insert and read it with me:

- I declare that I am blessed with God's supernatural wisdom, and I have clear direction for my life.
- I declare that I am blessed with creativity, with courage, with ability and with abundance.
- I declare that I am blessed with a strong will and with self-control and self-discipline.
- I declare that I am blessed with a great family, with good friends, with good health, and with faith, favor and fulfillment.
- I declare that I am blessed with success, with supernatural strength, with promotion and with divine protection.
- I declare that I am blessed with an obedient heart and with a positive outlook on life.
- I declare that any curse that has ever been spoken over me, any negative evil word that has ever come against me, is broken right now!
- I declare that I am blessed in the city, I am blessed in the country, I am blessed when I go in, I am blessed when I go out.
- I declare that everything I put in my hands to do is going to prosper and succeed.
- I declare that I am blessed.[1]

You ARE blessed! Now go on, and get out of that tomb! AMEN.

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[1] "Your Best Life Now: 7 steps to living at your full potential" by Joel Osteen (Warner Faith, 2004).