

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

The story doesn't end with death.

The hope and reality of the resurrection is central to our faith; it has become part of our culture as a major theme in art and literature, and as Pastor David said on Easter Sunday, there's something inside us that *knows* there's more than just this world. We are *created* to know that the story, our story, doesn't end with death. This is most certainly true.

And yet ... I still remember how I felt about this when I was 10 years old. That was the year I read the classic fantasy trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time. I was completely devastated when Gandalf, my favorite character, died. My dad found me weeping with the book thrown across the room.

"It's been a long time since I've read it," he said, "But I'm pretty sure Gandalf comes back in the next book." I told my dad he was wrong: I'd just now read it myself and there was no hope. Gandalf was definitely really very dead. I continued to believe Gandalf would not come back until he did ... in the next book.

A few years later, the science fiction movie *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn* was on TV. I watched in horror and disbelief as my favorite character died. The movie was 14 years old; I was probably the last person in the United States to be shocked by the death of Spock. But obviously that didn't lessen the impact, and once again, my dad found me, weeping uncontrollably over the fate of my favorite character.

"Spock comes back sweetie. You *know* he comes back. You saw him last year in *Star Trek V*." This tells you a lot about my stubbornness, or maybe my denseness,

but I still didn't believe him. After all, I'd seen Spock die and say goodbye to his best friend; I'd seen his funeral.

That night my dad made a special trip to the video store and rented Star Trek: III, the Search for Spock, so I could see Spock come back to life; I saw it for myself. I can still remember how surprised and happy I was; surprised, even though it should have been so obvious.

It is a surprising joy when the story doesn't end with death.

Imagine Thomas' surprise. Imagine Thomas' joy. Jesus makes a special trip, just for him, so Thomas can see for himself. Jesus entered the room even though every entrance was locked, but that's not the most impressive barrier Jesus broke through that day. The most impressive barrier was Thomas' grief: grief that made him stubborn, dense, and unwilling to have hope in the crazy stories his friends were telling—grief that kept taking him back to the physical reality of a death he'd seen himself. Jesus meets Thomas in the middle of his grief and need and says: "I'm here. Really. Just for you." Jesus breaks through every barrier, even our own grief and doubt, to show us: the story doesn't end with death.

We know that Jonah's story doesn't end with death, even though our first lesson today left him in the belly of a large fish. As a kid I imagined Jonah riding in style: somehow, the 3-day journey in the whale's belly would be comfortable, cozy, and give Jonah time to rest and reflect on ...his career as a prophet.

Theologian Martin Luther imagined it differently. He writes:

"In order that the terror of death might be all the greater, not only was Jonah thrown into the sea, where there was no hope for help either from God or man, but when he thought that he must surely die, he was also swallowed alive by a fish, a fish the Lord provided for this very purpose."

One lesson that Jonah learns from this terrifying incident is that God saves us in the midst of death, just when things seem most hopeless. Just as Jesus makes a special trip to meet Thomas' need for proof of the resurrection, God makes a special trip to prove to Jonah that God is going to stay with Jonah no matter what—sailing in the opposite direction of Nineveh, hiding in the lower decks of a ship, even jumping into the ocean is not going to separate Jonah from God.

As we learned on Good Friday, we can never be alone. *Nothing* can separate us from the love of God. This is a remarkable promise made to us, and to Jonah, in remarkable ways. Luther writes that it would be natural for Jonah, in the midst of his amazement and gratitude, to think, “Is this giant fish really here to save me? Am I going to die entombed in here?” Three days later Jonah is deposited on the shore, maybe thinking something like, “Thanks be to God! But am I really safe? Will God still be with me in Nineveh?” It is amazing that the story doesn't end with death. And for humans, amazing things are often unbelievable.

This very human reaction to amazing news is what Paul is writing about in the second lesson we heard this morning. Paul is writing to people who are denying the resurrection of the dead and the resurrection of Jesus. Many Corinthians accepted Christianity but believed that death was the end of the story. How could they think otherwise, when the evidence of death's dominion—illness, suffering, violence, poverty and hunger—was all around them, or rather, is all around *us*, today.

Some of us have seen death; most of us have experienced it in some way: it is real, it is always significant. Death may not be the end of the story, but it *feels* like the end of the story.

The reality and the power of death makes Christ's resurrection truly *Good News*. Paul writes: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” It is the last great

reversal, one of the many ways Christ did, does and will turn the world upside down: by “destroying every ruler and every authority,” by tearing tyrants from their thrones, by lifting up the poor and the hungry, and finally by swallowing up death itself.

Like the giant fish that swallowed Jonah, Paul writes that, through Christ, “Victory has swallowed death!” *That* is the good news: that death is powerful, but God is more powerful. Even in our most terrifying moments, even in the belly of a giant fish, God is with us. And, even when we can't believe it, even when we miss the obvious, Easter resurrection comes to us with surprising, energizing, and comforting joy.

We have not seen, and yet we believe.

We believe, and yet Lord, help our unbelief.

I know part of me is still that 10 year old, heartbroken, stubborn and sure that death is the end of the story. But it doesn't matter that our reason can't figure it out or that, as Luther puts it, “our faith isn't as firm as it should be.” Easter *is* so amazing that it's unbelievable—which means that we can't believe in it on our own. We can't believe it without God's help.

*God is with you to help.*

God didn't give up on Jonah. God met Thomas in his grief and strengthened his faith. God won't give up on us and God will meet us where we are. Our faith comes, not from what we've seen, what we've figured out for ourselves, or all the good works we've done; our faith comes from the Holy Spirit at work in God's Word and in our hearts. Because of this, with Thomas, we rejoice and cry: “My Lord and My God!” Alleluia! Death is not the end of the story. Amen.