

Date: April 8, 2007

**SUNDAY:** Easter

**SERMON: Vital Signs**

Text(s): Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12

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I went to the doctor a few weeks ago for a routine physical, and of course, as doctors always do, she checked my vital signs. She took my pulse, checked my blood pressure, and listened to my heart and lungs with her stethoscope. We all know the routine, don't we?

Have you ever gone to a doctor trained in the Chinese medical tradition? If you have, then you know that the checking of vital signs is a little different. You get not only the pulse taken in your wrist, but several pulses in different parts of your wrist and forearm and even perhaps in your neck or leg as well. The doctor will also ask you to stick your tongue out, and then for a couple of minutes, will peer closely at your tongue, asking you a variety of questions and making notes about your general vitality that he or she can discern from the appearance of your tongue.

Modern hospitals use electronic monitors that keep track of these vital signs with little glowing green lines and electronic beeps, though they don't seem to have come up with an electronic device to examine your tongue yet.

These very basic medical routines are referred to as checking the vital signs, not because they tell the doctor everything he or she needs to know about your condition, but because they are important indicators of vitality, of life. The absence of a pulse or blood pressure is a sign of death; the presence of a pulse is a sign of life, as anyone learns who watches *Grey's Anatomy* on TV. (Of course, you'll learn other things by watching *Grey's Anatomy*, that have little or nothing to do with medicine but that's another story.) Knowing where to look for vital signs, and how to interpret them is fundamental to the training of physicians.

Learning where and how to look for signs

of life, for vital signs, is really what Easter is all about as well. As St. Luke's story of the women's discovery at Jesus' burial place makes clear, knowing where to look for signs of life is not something that is just automatic. The women who came to Jesus' tomb at dawn on the day after the Sabbath, did not come looking for life. They came to grieve the loss of life. They weren't looking for vital signs, but were trying to cope with the hard fact of death of the leader they had loved and trusted.

So these women didn't come to the tomb that morning full of hope, full of expectation that a miracle would happen. They came the same way we come to the cemetery where we've just laid to rest a loved one. They came, not looking for vital signs, but looking for a way to console themselves by performing those touching services for the dead that we all do, like putting flowers on the grave, even though it is really for ourselves, for our own comfort and healing that we do them.

Imagine their surprise, then, when they are confronted by an empty tomb and two men in shining white clothes who ask them, "*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*" It's a good question, isn't it? Why look for signs of life in a cemetery? Cemeteries bear witness to the power of death; they do not testify to the triumph of life. Luke says when the women came running back to where the rest of Jesus' followers were gathered to grieve together, and told them what they had experienced in the cemetery, the other disciples dismissed the women's story as "*an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*" We could hardly blame them. They weren't prepared to find vital signs in a cemetery either. To find signs of life, we have to look for the living among the living, not among the dead.

Those of us who have lived through great losses, who have lived through a battle with death, whether it be our own struggle with a life-threatening disease or the death of a spouse or a beloved parent or friend, know how hard it is to believe in the triumph of life. Death in all its forms causes us a great deal of personal pain,

particularly the death of someone we love. It feels like the end of the world and the end of us. We don't get over our losses or forget those we have lost; we are all of us the walking wounded.

And yet, we do walk. We go on in the hope and even the conviction that death, while fearsome does not get to have the last word. Life does. There are some, no doubt, who believe, even strongly, that death is the last word, but from all apparent evidence, the vast majority of people think otherwise. A friend of mine once termed it "the resurrection conspiracy." We don't talk about it much, but it's there, just under the surface, and it surfaces in surprising ways that let us know it's more than just "whistling in the dark" to keep the bogeymen at bay.

While we were serving the American Church in Paris, I got a call one day from a young woman, an American woman, who was going to med school in France. She was specializing in head, neck, and throat surgery, and was doing her residency under the number one surgeon in that field in the country, and one of the top three or so in the world. As these things happen, they fell in love, and she began bringing him with her to church. After several months, she called to say that her fiancé and mentor had expressed a desire to become a Christian and be baptized, even though at age 46, he'd never had any religious upbringing at all. He'd come from a completely secular home.

Over the next year that I met with him to prepare him for this step, I asked him why he wanted to become a Christian. He told me that it was because of his medical practice, particularly with terminal cancer patients. When I asked what he meant, he said, "Well, Larry, I'm a scientist. Which means I observe and draw conclusions. And I observed that those of my patients who had a strong faith, faced death with much more courage and hope and with less fear for themselves and their families than those without such faith. So I concluded that I'd better investigate this further for myself."

A few months later, he called me and said, "I'm ready. I've become convinced that this business you've been preaching about the resurrection of Jesus being the source of our hope and meaning in life must be true. It's become true for me. So I'm ready." And the next week, this world-class surgeon stood before the congregation and publicly professed his faith in baptism.

What we celebrate at Easter, however, is not merely our individual or personal hope that somehow, mysteriously, death will not be the last word for us personally. That's where most of us engage the issue, because it's where we experience the threat that death represents. But in fact, our personal hope of life that conquers death is really a byproduct of what Easter is all about—a very important byproduct, to be sure, but one that grows out of a larger truth, a larger reality, that we can here and now only grasp by faith and hope.

That larger reality is that the resurrection of Jesus from the death is a vital sign of the future, not only for us or our departed loved ones, but for the whole creation. In the vision of the prophet we heard earlier, God says, "*I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth. . . No more shall there be an infant who lives but a few days and one who dies at a hundred shall be considered a mere youth. . . The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the LORD.*" That's what resurrection is all about; it is about the future of the whole human community and all of creation made whole—a future where the powers of death will play no part, have no ability to hurt or destroy. From the perspective of biblical religion, the fundamental fact of human existence is that we are created for community. Life achieves its highest meaning in loving relationships with others—not only personal relationships, but social and economic and political relationships as well. Those relationships

embrace both other people, and the non-human world as well— wolves and lambs, lions and cattle. This peaceable kingdom is described by the Hebrew word *shalom*— which we often translate simply “peace,” but which is a much bigger notion of peace among human beings and peace among the non-human creation, as all creatures find their unity and final home in God the Creator, who is Love Itself.

If the resurrection of Jesus is not a sign of this larger meaning of life, then our human situation is just a cosmic joke. Not only are we doomed, but there is no hope for the next generation of Israelis and Palestinians, for the slaughtered children of Darfur, or for the innocent victims of the murderous sectarian violence in Iraq. If Christ is not raised, there’s no reason why we should prefer honest government instead of corrupt government, why we should care anything at all about caring for the poor or providing more accessible health care or why we should be concerned about global warming.

So, given the many ways all around us where the powers of death seem to be all-powerful, where do we look for some vital signs, where do we feel that pulse of eternal life, of God’s *shalom* for the whole world?

In 1996, our international pastors’ conference was in Jerusalem, and one of the speakers was an Israeli educator named Yehezkel Landau. He was married to the daughter of a rabbi, and they were a religious family. They lived in a house in Ramle that they had inherited from his wife’s parents. One day, while eating dinner, there was a knock at their door. When they opened it, a Palestinian man and a little boy about ten years old stood there. The man spoke some Hebrew, and he apologized for arriving unannounced at their door. But he told them that this house and the land around it had belonged to his grandfather, and in the wars that the Israelis and Palestinians fought in the late 1940’s, his family had been forced from their home and land and had become refugees. He wanted to know if

he might have permission to show his son where their family used to live, and then he would leave and go back to where they were living in one of the camps on the West Bank.

Yehezkel Landau said that this was a revelatory moment for him and his wife Dalia. She had never known that the house her family owned and that she inherited had been previously owned by a Palestinian family who had been dispossessed.

That revelatory moment became a transformational moment as well. As they wrestled with this new knowledge, they decided that they needed to do something that would offer hope to future generations of Palestinians and Israelis. So they started a pre-school and kindergarten in their home. They called it the Open House. They invited Palestinian and Israeli families who wanted their children to learn how to live together and play together in peace to send their children there. They would grow up together, not being schooled in the remembrance of past enmities and grievances, but learning to appreciate and love each other, so that the next generation of people might have a chance to move beyond the divisive and violent past.

Is it a vital sign when enemies become friends, when old animosities and injuries give way to understanding and reconciliation? I think so. Yehezkel and Dalia Landau also thought so.

It is that future to which the resurrection of Jesus bears witness. It is a vital sign, a sign that can only be interpreted by faith and hope. We have to look for such vital signs, not as proofs, but as indicators, signs, glimpses of what, in God’s time, in God’s universe, may yet come to pass.

Perhaps, just perhaps, this business of Christ’s resurrection is not simply an “idle tale” told by a group of grief-stricken women. Perhaps, just perhaps, as the old folk song puts it, it’s a sign that we are on a train that is bound for glory.