

“FROM TOMB TO WOMB”

Mark 16:1-8

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet

April 1, 2018 - Easter Day

I exited through the front doors of the church one day this week to make a quick trip to Strawberry Square to pick up a lunch. Standing in front of the church sign on Blackberry Street, a man motioned me over. Pointing to the sermon title and the name of the preacher, he asked, “Do you know this ‘Sweet’ guy?” Not sure where the conversation might be heading, I said, “I’ve met him.” The man, with no little disgust, gave me some instructions. “If you see him, tell him the title’s backward. It’s ‘womb to tomb,’ not ‘tomb to womb.’” I told him I’d be sure to let “this Sweet guy” know. And then I pumped my fist because this “angel unawares” just had given me my sermon introduction! The man was right, of course, if he was talking about birth to death. That is womb to tomb. But it’s Easter, and so today I’m right! It’s death to life! From tomb to womb!

Tombs - whether literal or figurative - are where we put things when they die: a body, a dream, a job, a marriage, a relationship, a friendship, a life, or life as we had known it before the dire diagnosis, the financial distress, the debilitating accident. Tombs are repositories of death and endings. Tombs are places of sadness and sorrow.

So it was for the followers of Jesus when “they laid him in the tomb.”¹ His ignominious death upended a burgeoning movement for justice, liberation, hospitality, and hope. Searing anguish burned in those who had been convinced that Jesus was the Messiah of God who would lead the charge to set things right in the world. Instead, his lifeless body was placed in a tomb.

Except, the tomb was not, is not, and is never the end of the story. Christ is risen! He who was dead is alive! That which died is raised up to life! From tomb to womb! *“Unless a grain of*

¹ From the text of the African-American spiritual, “Were You There?” Hymn #228 in Glory to God hymnal.

*wheat falls into the ground and dies,” Jesus said, “it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*² Tomb to womb!

The resurrection of Christ from the dead is God’s great vindication of the life and ministry of Jesus. It is God’s way of declaring to humanity that what Jesus was about in his life and teaching is what life is all about. It is God’s way of saying that life, and not death, is God’s first, last, and enduring word. From tomb to womb!

“What Are the Dead Doing?” was the question my high school pastor asked one year in his Easter sermon. Answering his own query, he proclaimed, “They’re living, in Jesus Christ our Lord!”³ It’s what gets enacted in our baptism. From St. Paul comes our liturgical affirmation, “*Therefore, we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, so, too, may we walk in newness of life!*”⁴ From tomb to womb!

Resurrection is not resuscitation. It is not restoration, refurbishment, or renewal. It is not a coming out of hibernation. Celebrating Easter in the northern hemisphere as we do, we sometimes get it confused with the “blooming garb of spring.”⁵ Trees pouring forth their leaves after their winter nakedness is not resurrection. That is simply the life-cycle, albeit marvelous and wonderful, of trees. Lilies arising out of dormant bulbs is not resurrection. It is simply the life-cycle, albeit marvelous and wonderful, of lilies. Caterpillars emerging from their cocoons as butterflies is not resurrection. It is simply the life-cycle, albeit marvelous and wonderful, of butterflies. Eventually every leafing tree will die, every blooming lily, every butterfly. That is womb to tomb.

But Easter is “tomb to womb.” Resurrection is the archetypal way God works in the world. What is dead is raised to life. When freedom had died for the ancient Israelites at the hands of cruel Egyptian taskmasters, God raised the people up and led them forth from their deathly bondage to a Promised Land of hope.⁶ When the prodigal’s life had run out and he was as good as dead in a far country of ruinous and rancorous living, God raised him up into a life of grace and blessing.⁷ When the woman at the well was deemed dead to the rest of the women in her community and so was forced to come alone in the heat of the noonday sun to draw her water, God raised her up into dignity and new life.⁸ From tomb to womb.

² John 12:24

³ The Reverend John T. Galloway, Jr.

⁴ Romans 6:4

⁵ Lyrics from “Fairest Lord Jesus,” Hymn # 630 Glory to God hymnal.

⁶ The story of the Exodus from Egypt told in the Book of Exodus.

⁷ Luke 15:11-24

⁸ John 4:1-41

When school shooters cause the death of innocents, God raises up a student movement to bend the moral arc in the direction of justice and life. Even as violence erupts again between Palestinians and Israelis, God is raising up peacemakers on both sides to continue the long work of reversing centuries of enmity and death in favor of amity and life. When inhospitality to refugees, immigrants, and persons who are called “the other” because of race or religion seeks to become official policy, God raises up a collective resistance from those who know there is “*a still more excellent way*.”⁹ From the tombs to which everything immoral and unjust belong, God raises up new ways of living, being, and relating in the world.

And never forget that at the same time God raised Jesus from the dead, God also made it possible for the Spirit of Christ to flow into the lives of his followers just as Jesus had promised¹⁰ so that God’s resurrection power is active in us, too. How else can people who are dead in our sin, as St. Paul says all of us are,¹¹ be made alive to light and life? From tomb to womb.

Pay close attention to the hymn¹² that follows the sermon today to hear some of the glorious ways in which the tomb yields to the resurrection of life and hope in us. Oh, my, those lyrics: “*Because you live, O Christ, the spirit bird of hope is freed for flying; our cages of despair no longer keep us closed and life-denying.*” “*Because you live, O Christ, the rainbow of your peace will span creation; the colors of your love will draw all humankind to adoration.*” The tomb is only penultimate. It is the womb of God bearing the risen life that is ultimate.

For those who came today to hear that your loved ones have been raised up - “Eastered,” I like to say - and are safe and well with God, hear it clearly for St. Paul assures: “*Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have died.*”¹³ Translated: If Christ has been raised from death to life, so, too, shall we be raised. From tomb to womb.

Let me get personal: Last fall, my family buried my father. He had been ill for a couple of months and we knew his death was imminent. I was crestfallen at the thought of being without my father as I was heartbroken fifteen years ago when my daughter, Katy, died. But the reality I have experienced is that I have not felt even for a single day as if they are not with me. They are with me in the Spirit as surely as they once were here in the body. Their presence is different but no less real and, sometimes, their presence seems even deeper now. Should I be surprised? Do not church and scripture affirm “the communion of the saints”¹⁴? Doesn’t St. Paul insist that

⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:31

¹⁰ John 14:26-31

¹¹ Romans 6:23

¹² “Because You Live, O Christ,” text by Shirley Erena Murray, Hymn # 249 in Glory to God hymnal.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 15:20

¹⁴ This phrase is one of the tenets of “The Apostles’ Creed.”

“love never ends”?¹⁵ which I take to be a ratification of resurrection since love only can occur between living beings. By the grace of God, the stones are rolled back from our tombs and the tombs becomes the wombs of the “glorious resurrection life.”

Listen, church, to the good news of the gospel! It’s Easter! Because Christ was raised from the dead, this is now an Easter world! Not death, but life. Not the tomb, but the womb! Whatever is of God does not stay in the tomb anymore than Christ did but is raised into the everlasting peace, purpose, and love of our Lord.

*Do not ever lose heart*¹⁶ for against any manner of death, deceit, decay, or dismay in the world, Easter is the triumph of God.

Amen.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:8

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:16