

1 Sermon, April 8, 2012 - Easter

Texts: Song of Solomon 8:6-7, Mark 16:1-8

Title: "Easter Courage"

1. Terry Waite
2. Song of Songs
3. Easter is about What is next, for those who love Jesus
4. Facing death takes courage
5. Facing life takes greater courage
6. The women at the resurrection
7. David Vetter
8. The disciples and Easter

Do you remember the story Terry Waite, a British negotiator who travelled to Lebanon and was held captive for over four years? It was in 1987 that, on a meeting supposedly to negotiate with Hezbollah, that he was kidnapped. He endured torture, being whipped on the soles of his feet, so that he couldn't walk for a week. He endured solitary confinement with faith. He wrote: "Because of faith, I could say in the face of my captives, 'You have the power to break my body and you've tried, the power to bend my mind and you've tried, but my soul isn't yours to possess,'"

His imprisonment was hard to bear, and when he fell ill with a lung infection, he began to wish he would die.

But then he was let go, and his life after getting out was tough, too. He said, "I suppose in the first year, particularly in the first months of release, I was in a daze. Initially, when I came [home], I really couldn't sit down and have a meal with my family. I used to eat totally alone in the middle of the night ... because they just couldn't bear the emotional exchange. It was too much."

He came back from death, and you might think that everything was OK in his freedom, but his new life took incredible courage. Terry Waite took advantage of counseling right away, and it was a lifesaver.

Today, Waite is 72, and deeply involved in the cause of the homeless in England. He says, "We together have a responsibility for the elderly, for the sick, for children, and for those who are casualties of society. Waite's life is now rich with many opportunities, and he has written books and visits prisons.

2. Song of Songs

2 Sermon, April 8, 2012 - Easter

Terry Waite's imprisonment can be related to today's reading from the Song of Songs, often called the Song of Solomon:

"Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave." Song of Solomon 8:6, NRSV.

Love is strong as death.

Love is an indestructible connection stronger than life itself. It is imprinted upon us like a watermark, a tattoo. When the Song of Songs talks about a seal upon the heart, it's referring to the impression made by a stone cylinder with a carved inscription that is rolled over wet clay to impress upon it the seal of the house. Anything marked with that seal was known to be the property of that family.

Love is like that, an indelible marking upon the heart that cannot be erased. God's love is like that – unconditional, forever.

The Old Testament tells us that God's love is as strong as death. It will last as long as life does.

3. Easter is about What is next, for those who love Jesus

But today – Easter Day – we see that God's love goes further. With the resurrection of Jesus, we see that God's love is *stronger* than death. It surpasses the grave. Love does not leave us stuck with death, but brings us beyond it.

Easter is a thing that stretches our imagination. It was a common thing in those days for people to be put to death by crucifixion. But to rise again –

— And *how* exactly did Jesus rise again? The Bible doesn't tell us. We are just told that Jesus *did* rise again, and appeared to a number of people.

And it wasn't simply that God breathed life again into Jesus' dead body. No, the resurrected Jesus was *different*. Mary did not recognize him at first. The disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize him until hours after they met him. Even Peter did not recognize Jesus at first, when Jesus stood at the shore and called out to Peter in the boat. No, it wasn't until the fishermen had a miraculous catch of fish that they knew it was Jesus.

3 Sermon, April 8, 2012 - Easter

Jesus was in some way profoundly changed by the resurrection. The Apostle Paul, speaking of resurrection, wrote:

Some of you have asked, "How will the dead be raised to life? What kind of bodies will they have?" Don't be foolish... These bodies will die, but the bodies that are raised will live forever. These ugly and weak bodies will become beautiful and strong. As surely as there are physical bodies, there are spiritual bodies. And our physical bodies will be changed into spiritual bodies... The bodies we now have are weak and can die. But they will be changed into bodies that are eternal.

Jesus was changed. And change can be scary.

Easter is about what happens next, after death – for those who love Jesus.

That's what Terry Waite found out. New life can be scary. Faith takes a lot of courage.

4. Facing death takes courage

To simplify the idea, the Old Testament tells us that love is as strong as death. That in itself is powerful.

The Old Testament tells us that when Moses came and saw the people of Israel suffering, he was moved, and God was moved, too.

Slavery in Egypt was a living death. Moses, with God's help, stood up to the oppression of Pharaoh, and God's power was as strong as Pharaoh's armies of death.

That took courage on Moses' part. To stand up to the greatest ruler of the world was a courageous act. Pharaoh could have easily had Moses killed.

Whenever we look in the face of death, it takes great courage. When a soldier goes to Afghanistan, and goes around the countryside knowing that there are explosive devices and snipers and other hazards all over, that is great courage.

When an AIDS patient, or a cancer patient is told that the end is near, it takes courage – not only for the patient but for all those who love the patient.

When a firefighter rushes into a burning building, it takes tremendous courage, and it's done in the hope of saving lives.

4 Sermon, April 8, 2012 - Easter

5. Facing New Life may take even more courage

But the New Testament tells us that love is *stronger* than death. Love overcomes death. Love *overpowers* death.

The New Testament speaks to those soldiers who return home from serving in Afghanistan when some of their best buddies have been killed. They have to go on with life. The New Testament speaks to the survivors who mourn the loss of a loved one to cancer or AIDS or an overdose or a car accident. The New Testament is for the fire chief whose firefighter died in the blaze.

The New Testament is *not* about the courage to cope with death. The New Testament is about the greater courage to cope with *life*.

The New Testament is about how to deal with a scary future instead of a painful past. It's about what comes *next* for those who love Jesus.

The New Testament is about the courage to face Life, changed.

6. The Women at the Resurrection

The original ending of Mark leaves us in an unfinished place. The angel has spoken to the women at the tomb, and they are afraid. Mark reads:

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.

I think the women who went to anoint Jesus' body were prepared for the bad news. They were prepared to deal with Jesus' death. But when the good news came, they were so surprised that they didn't know what to make of it.

We can be that way, too. Like pessimists, we are often prepared for the bad news. But when the good news takes us by surprise, we may not know what to do next.

It's the same in the Old Testament story of Moses and the Exodus. The Israelites knew how to cope with slavery in Egypt. But once they were set free, they couldn't deal with it. They complained bitterly. They got manna, but they wanted meat. They asked Moses if he brought them into the desert to die. They didn't see the freedom and new life that was staring them in the face.

It takes courage to cope with new life.

5 Sermon, April 8, 2012 - Easter

7. David Vetter

Do you remember the story of David Vetter, the "Bubble Boy"? He was born in Texas in 1971 with an immune deficiency so severe that any germ might compromise his life.

In order to keep him alive, he lived in a plastic bubble, and people could touch him only through plastic gloves in the sides of the enclosure. The doctors wanted to give him some more room, so they painstakingly created a germ free "play room," 11 feet long, six and a half feet wide and eight feet tall, that was attached to his bubble in a totally germ-free way.

This playroom represented unprecedented freedom for David, but he refused to go into it. It took a psychologist with a bowl of goldfish to lure him into the new playroom. The psychologist gave David a glimpse of the goldfish, but to see them up close, he would have to venture into the new space.

8. The Disciples and Easter

To Jesus' disciples, his resurrection must have seemed something like that bowl of goldfish. It was new and strange and unreal and fascinating.

We can understand how hard it must have been to adjust to this completely new resurrection reality. It changed everything. Death was not the end. There was a whole new playroom, a whole new kingdom to be explored.

But the disciples *did* adjust to this new reality. And when they did, they preached and healed and spread the good news with a passion and fire that they'd never had before.

That's Easter. That's what happens when we take courage and follow Jesus into a whole new reality.