

2009 EASTER SUNRISE  
 SERMON  
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA-Rock Hill  
 John 20:1-18  
 April 12, 2009  
 James T. Richardson

William Styron has a novel which I commend to you entitled Lie Down In Darkness. Because (1) I have retired and (2) have given away most of my books and (3) living now somewhere between here and Black Mountain, NC, I have not been able to find my copy of the novel. But I can tell you about it. The novel is set in Virginia, and in reality, it is a study of an alcoholic personality, a man named **Peyton Loftis**, imprisoned by and bound by and dying of alcoholism. In one of the final scenes of the novel, Peyton Loftis goes to a cemetery to bury his estranged and divorced wife. On the rainy and heavily-overcast day of the burial, when the funeral home black limousine pulls up to the edge of the grave, the man gets out of the car and goes berserk, and the last anyone ever sees of him, he is running wildly, leaping over head-stones and tombstones, escaping to go who-knows-where.

If you are as I am, you have probably been in many cemeteries, and if you put your mind to it, countless scenes and stories would come rushing into your memory.

What have you learned from being in a cemetery?

The reason that you and I have gathered here this morning is because of *another cemetery scene* which is remembered by the gospel-writer John. Listen as I read it.

**John 20:1-18 (NRSV)**

- 1 *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.*
- 2 *So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."*
- 3 *Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.*
- 4 *The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.*
- 5 *He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.*
- 6 *Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,*
- 7 *and the cloth that had been on Jesus head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.*
- 8 *Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;*
- 9 *for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.*
- 10 *Then the disciples returned to their homes.*
- 11 *But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;*

- 12 *and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.*
- 13 *They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."*
- 14 *When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.*
- 15 *Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."*
- 16 *Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).*
- 17 *Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"*
- 18 *Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord;" and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

#### DO YOU BELIEVE THAT GOD RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD?

Shirley Guthrie was my theology professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. He was also my colleague when I worked at the Seminary. He was also my friend.

Many of you know of Shirley Guthrie through his well-respected book entitled Christian Doctrine. And you may remember that Dr. Guthrie says that what is at the very heart of the Church and the Christian faith is the affirmation:

#### GOD RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD!

##### **Do YOU believe it?**

And how do you handle these words of the faith from the Apostle Paul?

*Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that God raised Christ---whom God did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (I Corinthians 15:12-19; NRSV)*

#### GOD RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD!

##### **Do YOU believe it?**

A few minutes ago I asked you what you had learned from cemeteries where you have been. I want to tell you one interesting thing about the Old Stone Church Cemetery in Clemson. For 27 years I led a sunrise service in the Old Stone Church Cemetery. Revolutionary War generals Andrew Pickens and Robert Anderson (for whom Pickens County and Anderson County are named) are buried there.

The name of the Old Stone Church was really the Hopewell Presbyterian Church.

One of the most interesting persons who is buried in the Old Stone Church Cemetery is a child named **Osenappa Reese**. His grandfather, Thomas Reese, was the first pastor of Hopewell Presbyterian Church back in the 1700s; it was a congregation whose membership was made up of white settlers, black slaves, and Cherokee Indians.

One Cherokee Indian named **Osenappa** was converted by Thomas Reese and spent some time living in the Manse with the Reese family. As a result, the first grandchild of Thomas Reese was named **Osenappa Reese**. Unfortunately, Osenappa Reese lived for only seven months before he died of diphtheria, and he is buried in the Old Stone Church Cemetery, along with his namesake, **Osenappa**, the Cherokee Indian who was a friend of Jesus.

GOD RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD!

*Do YOU believe it?*

There is one other thing that I want to read to you before we leave this OAPC Memorial Garden Cemetery. It is from a book by Frederick Buechner entitled The eyes of the Heart. It involves the death by cancer at age 70 of Frederick Buechner's younger brother, **Jamie**. Jamie never went to church his whole life, and he told the family that when he died he did not want a funeral (just, incidentally, that had also been the case with their father----there was no funeral).

What Jamie did want was for his older brother Frederick to write a prayer for him that he could keep with him during the final days of his battle with cancer. This is the prayer that Frederick Buechner wrote for his brother Jamie, and I give it to you as an Easter present for your own use. Listen:

*“Dear Lord, bring me through darkness into light.  
Bring me through pain into peace.  
Bring me through death into life.  
Be with me wherever I go, and with everyone I love.  
In Christ’s name I ask it. Amen.”*

(Beuchner, Frederick, The Eyes of the Heart,  
San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1999, p.163)

GOD RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD!

*Do YOU believe it?*