

**2008 EASTER SUNRISE SERMON**

John 20:1-18

March 23, 2008

Oakland Avenue PCUSA

The Memorial Garden

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One of my best friends when I was growing up in Gainesville, Georgia, the Poultry Capital of the World, was Austin Edmondson, and he did not like to go down the main lane in Gainesville's Alta Vista Cemetery. The reason that Austin did not like to go down the main lane in Alta Vista Cemetery was because of a family whose last name was Austin. That family owned a plot on the main lane in Alta Vista Cemetery and somewhere sometime in the past someone had erected a huge marble family tombstone which proclaimed in large letters: **AUSTIN**. Austin Edmondson was afraid that that gravestone was calling for him!

Next month, April 13th, will be my 69<sup>th</sup> birthday. It will also be Austin Edmondson's 69<sup>th</sup> birthday. In addition, April is the birth-month of a girl friend of mine and Austin's, named Barbara Ward. 40-something years ago my friends Austin and Barbara were married, and I am sad to tell you that this past year a death has occurred in their marriage promises; they are divorced.

I got a telephone call several years ago from my friend Barbara Ward Edmondson. She wanted to tell me that her younger brother, Eugene, had died, and Barbara wanted to know if I would have a graveside service for Eugene. Of course I said that I would.

I do not remember exactly but I think that Eugene was about three years younger than we. I remember that he was a fraternity man at the University of Georgia, and that was where he started drinking. If there is one word that comes to mind when I think of Eugene Ward, it is the word "drinking." Eugene was an alcoholic. While he was at the University of Georgia, the party boy met and fell in love with a beautiful sorority girl; they married and had a child or two. Eugene's drinking sometime over the years killed the marriage as well as destroyed his vocation in insurance and real estate.

On the occasions when I would think to ask about Eugene, either my mother or Barbara or Austin would sadly shake their heads about the tragedy of his addiction. And many times Barbara or Austin would tell me that either Eugene was in a treatment center somewhere or else they had absolutely no idea where in the world Eugene was.

When Barbara called me to ask me to have Eugene's graveside service, she told me that Eugene had died a week earlier as an unidentified, homeless person on the streets of Atlanta. He had no identification on him, so he was to be buried in a pauper's grave by the City of Atlanta..... until another street person remembered that Eugene had once

told him that his father had been an eye surgeon up in Gainesville. The police discovered Barbara Ward Edmondson as his surviving sister.

We gathered at the Ward family plot in Alta Vista Cemetery in Gainesville on the designated day. My mind returned to the day, sometime when I was in high school, that I attended a graveside service in this very same place: it was for the burial of Barbara and Eugene Ward's mother, Mildred, or, as we called her back then, Mrs. Ward. The reason that experience stuck in my memory was that I was so impressed that our Pastor, Glenn Dorris, had worn his black pulpit robe just as he had in the earlier church service. It symbolized for me then as it symbolizes for me now that the Presbyterian Minister in the Sanctuary is the Presbyterian Minister in the 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; some of you may have studied it together in a Sunday School class. 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?*

Standing beside the graveside at Alta Vista Cemetery in Gainesville, I had two books in my hands: my Bible and a copy of Henri W. Nouwen's book, Our Greatest Gift. As I read at the Alta Vista Cemetery, I want to read to you gathered here at Old Stone Church Cemetery. Listen:

The flying Rodleights are trapeze artists who perform in the German circus Simoneit-Barum. When the circus came to Freiburg two years ago, my friends Franz and Reny invited me and my father to see the show. I will never forget how enraptured I became when I first saw the Rodleights move through the air, flying and catching as elegant dancers. The next day, I returned to the circus to see them

again and introduced myself to them as one of their great fans. They invited me to attend their practice sessions, gave me free tickets, asked me to dinner, and suggested I travel with them for a week in the near future. I did, and we became good friends.

One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump." "How does it work?" I asked. "The secret," Rodleigh said, "is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catchbar."

"You do nothing!" I said, surprised. "Nothing," Rodleigh repeated. "The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It's Joe's task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe's wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him."

When Rodleigh said this with so much conviction, the words of Jesus flashed through my mind: "Father, into Your hands I commend my Spirit."

*(And then Nouwen comments)*

Dying is trusting in the catcher. To care for the dying is to say, "Don't be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. God will be there when you make your long jump. Don't try to grab God; God will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust."

**GOD RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD!**

**Do YOU believe it?**