

Uncreated Life

John 20:24

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I think it's good especially on a day like today when we're all so happy and laughing, to talk realistically about death. So, maybe you would just think for a moment or a two of deaths that you have known and I could remember my dad's death. It was about 17 years ago and he died on the 17th of March, it was St. Patrick's Day in Belfast and he died in the morning and I remember being with him. And I was probably like all of you. I just couldn't conceive of life without my father and you know the way you feel that. You feel that it's unbearable. I couldn't even think of it, life without my dad. Yet it's amazing, isn't it, that the mind is incapable of conceiving the magnitude of the last beat of a loved one's heart. Isn't that right?

I mean the last beat occurs and the mind can't conceive of it and that inability to conceive of it, kind of, is God's good gift to us because it kind of dulls the pain and I remember seeing him just brave, you know and then I thought, "Well, he has just died," and then I asked the nurse to come in because I thought my dad had died and would she make sure that he was dead. Then you know over the next few days, the continued closeness that you feel to the loved one. You feel that they're kind of just around you, that they're still around you in the rooms. That's so good of God to give us that feeling.

Then especially after the burial, you know how you just feel, that's it. There's a separation between anyone who passes through death and this present world, there's just a separation. They're separated from us and probably all of you, even maybe the youngest, can think of some experience that you've had like that. You know too that we human beings have been trying to crack the finality of that experience in all kinds of ways.

You know that all of our attempts seem to end up as kind of cheap frauds or just inappropriate fakery of some kind and we have made many attempts. The mediums, and the spiritualists have claimed to be able to communicate with our loved ones who have passed beyond, and yet don't you agree that if you've ever heard or read any of their communications, they always seem to have that static, lifeless quality of evil spirits that are imitating our relatives, rather than the bright vitality of expressions of living people.

I don't know if you got involved in it but I think most of us at some time wondered, "Could they communicate? Could they communicate?" And yet you feel at the end of the day, that all they're doing is communicating with evil spirits who are imitating some of the words and some of the attitudes of our dead relations -- and of course that's why God condemned mediums and witches and all that kind of attempt to communicate with the dead, as rebellion. He said it was as the sin of rebellion and that's why you remember the witch at Endor was struck with fear when God made Samuel materialize in reality instead of the evil spirit that she expected to call up to imitate him -- and she was absolutely astonished.

God really has indicated to us that that whole world of spiritualism is evil and is not inside his will, and if you have had any experience of it at all, you've probably felt as I have had that it is evil and that it destroys the dignity of your loved one and destroys the dignity of life, destroys

the dignity even of death. And of course our television programs recently and our books have been filled with those dear ones who have lived in that twilight zone between biological death and technical death. They have lived in the twilight zone where their heart has stopped beating and their mind's pulses have continued.

So technically we've said they were dead and yet they were able to be revived and you know that they have written or they had their experiences recorded in books and we've had television programs about those things and yet, I don't know how you feel, but I always feel, "Well, yeah, but I don't really feel they died -- whatever the technical definition is or whatever the emotional experience was that they had. I don't really feel that they died, that they passed beyond and they experienced what life after death is like and that what they're telling us is what it's really like. I feel, look, their bodies were still warm. They were still just on this side of death and I myself don't feel I can trust that what they've talked about is anything more than their own ideas or their own feelings of what life after death might be."

Of course, it's for that same reason that most of us I think are skeptical of the gurus and the yogis who can control their breath so precisely that they are able to be buried for days at times and apparently come back to life. I think most of us feel, "Look, they're not dead at all. They have just controlled their breaths so that they appear to be dead and they appear to be able to stay buried longer than any of the rest of us."

But I think most of us feel, "Well, they never died. It's all a hoax," and of course it's that sheer difficulty of faking death and resurrection that has probably prevented the followers of other religious leaders like Muhammad and Buddha, ever claiming that their great leader had been raised from the dead, because it is a very difficult fact to prove. It's a very difficult fact to hold up in court that a person has died and has risen from the dead.

Loved ones, do you see that all those examples make the one great exception so much more striking, because there was a religious leader who was different from all the other religious leaders. His life is perfect. Theirs was not. His miracles were greater than theirs, his teaching transcends theirs. But the one great fact that distinguishes him from them is the one event, the proclamation of which brought persecution to his followers -- and that was the resurrection from the dead. This great religious leader was raised on the third day, stayed alive for 40 days and then his body lifted off the earth and it has never been found since and that is what distinguishes him from everyone else -- that resurrection from the dead.

Loved ones, that is why we're meeting together here -- because such an event as that took place. Many of us see of course that if it did in fact take place, if in fact Jesus did rise from the dead, then it means that he is alive now and it means that if he is alive now, he is the one important person in the whole universe for you and I to contact if we possibly can contact him and if He will bother with us at all, but really that's the crux of the whole issue, isn't it? Is this Jesus really alive? Did He actually rise from the dead?

There are four rules that philosophers and historians have accepted down through the years for determining a matter of fact, and they not only appeal to historians and the philosophers, they'll appeal to your own common sense and my common sense this morning. And a man called Leslie summarized those rules and he said for instance the first one is, "In order to determine a matter of fact of any kind and to find out if it really happened, the matter of fact must be such that men's outward senses, their eyes and ears, may be judges of it", and you can see that.

If a thing is a matter of fact, either in history or today, it must be such that man's outward senses, their eyes and their ears may be the judges of it. Now, if that had not been the case, big honest fisherman like Peter and cynical skeptics like Thomas would never have believed that this man rose from the dead. It was only because He appeared to their outward senses, to their eyes and their ears. You can see it yourself if you look at John Chapter 20.

John 20:24: "Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, 'Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

"Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless but believing.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.'

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

The men and women who gave us the first record of Jesus rising from the dead were actual eyewitnesses. They ate with him, they slept with him, they talked with him, they traveled with him both before and after his death. They knew him. Their eyes and their ears had perceived him. He was a fact that was present to their outward senses. Now you may say, "Yeah, but can you trust them? Are they the kind of people who can be trusted to tell you what they actually saw?"

You know that again and again we have tried to impugn their trust and we have tried to suggest that maybe there are other explanations, but it never really works and probably the most popular today, with our preoccupation with psychology, is hallucinations. Maybe these men, maybe they were honest, good, down to earth fishermen, maybe they were ordinary people like us -- but do you not think they could have had hallucinations and that the 12 or 14 so-called appearances of Jesus during those 40 days could in fact be hallucinations?

And what makes that difficult to believe is that the appearances to the disciples and the friends do not fit the laws that govern hallucinations. Hallucinations, for instance, occur to certain kinds of people and those are people with vivid imaginations who perhaps have a nervous kind of makeup to their character and when you look at big, honest, bluff Peter the fisherman and you look at hard headed James and you look at cynical, skeptical Thomas, you must admit that those were not the kinds of people who were likely to have hallucinations.

Another law that governs hallucinations is that the person wants something to happen. They want something to happen. They want this event to take place and so they project that into their imaginations and then they blur the distinction between their imaginative life and reality and they have a hallucination.

But why did Mary go to the tomb with spices to anoint the dead body if she actually hoped that he would be alive? You remember she went and told the disciples that he was alive and they wouldn't

believe it. They said, "No, we don't believe it. You're just imagining it," so that when Jesus actually appeared to them, they said, "He's a ghost" and Jesus had to say to them, "Look, a ghost hasn't flesh and bones as you see that I have. Come, let's have fish for supper. Let's eat together and you'll see that I am not a ghost." Now those were not men and women who were expecting Jesus to appear. Those were men and women that had given up any hope that this man was anything more than a man.

Hallucinations are things that have to appear over a long, long period of time and keep on appearing for years. These appearances of Jesus took place during 40 days and then they stopped and that was it. Some of us say, "Well, yes, maybe not hallucinations, but do you not think that the disciples themselves had an interest in getting us all to believe that Jesus had arisen from the dead? Do you not think that they would become very important religious leaders of this new sect if they could persuade others that their Master was someone who was different from every other religious leader?"

"Do you not think that they could have been con artists who were out to make up for the disappointment that they found when they discovered their Master had died instead of leading them into a military victory? Do you not think they could have stolen the body and then could simply have pretended that he was alive?"

You know the difficulty: why didn't they stop the lie when they saw the first child being slaughtered? Why didn't they stop the lie? Why didn't they stop telling the lie when the first family was imprisoned? Why didn't they stop telling the lie when they themselves began to be slaughtered by their thousands -- when they saw their friends used as torches at the garden parties of the Roman Emperor? Why didn't they stop the lie?

And you know that men and women will not die for what they know as a lie, they will not. When they see that it's gone that far they'll stop and they'll say, "Listen, listen, we just want to pass on his teaching but we don't want to pass on that lie that is bringing upon us all this persecution." So really it's hard to explain in any other way but that the resurrection meets that first rule -- that it was an event that presented itself to the outward senses of the men and women in that age. It presented it to their eyes and their ears, not to their hearts or their emotions or their hallucinations.

Leslie has another rule. He says that the fact should be done publicly in the face of the world. That is, that it shouldn't be done in a corner, shouldn't be some little guru somewhere telling some of his friends that he was actually dead for three days and now has is alive, but it is something that is done publicly in the face of the whole world. That was the very complaint of the Roman authorities loved ones, if you'd like to look at it, it's Acts 17:6.

Acts 17:6, "And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brethren before the city authorities, crying, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also." And that was the problem for the Roman authorities. If these people had kept this thing quiet, they might have been able to cover it up -- but these people were turning the then known world upside down.

It isn't only writers in the Bible here that write about them, you can study Roman governors like Pliny and you can study their letters to the emperor asking, "What am I going to do with these Christians? Here is what I do, and if they confess then I let them free and if they don't, I kill them. Now what do you think I should do?"

Celsus and Porphyry wrote continually about this Christian group, and there's a Tertullian who kept the archives in Rome, and here's the way he writes about it, "Tiberius accordingly, in whose days the Christian name made its entry into the world, having himself received intelligence from Palestine of events which had clearly shown the truth of Christ's divinity, brought the matter before the senate, (that's the emperor) with his own decision in favor of Christ. The senate, because it had not given the approval itself, rejected his proposal. Caesar held to his opinion, threatening wrath against all the accusers of the Christians." The thing wasn't done in a corner. This matter of fact was known throughout the world. It was not something that was done in secret.

Leslie is interesting because he then goes on to the difficulty of preserving correctly the memory of an event and he says the third rule for establishing particularly a historical fact as a fact is that not only public monuments be kept up in memory of it but some outward actions be performed. Not only that some public monuments be kept up in memory of it but that some outward actions be performed, and that's the guarantee you see that the event will be remembered as it actually took place and that that memory will be accurately passed down from generation to generation without any exaggeration or without any distortion and that's why he says, the only way to be sure of a historical fact is that public monuments be kept up in memory of it.

That is, monuments that are obvious to everybody and that certain actions be performed. Maybe the most obvious monuments -- because monuments are not necessarily statues -- they're just things that make it clear what actually happened and remember it -- maybe the clearest monuments are the manuscripts that hold the written record of that event, and of course that's what you look to when you study any ancient history.

If you look at Caesar's "History of the Gallic Wars", you immediately ask yourself, "Well, how do we know that this even was remembered as it actually occurred and how do we know that over this passed down through the years reliably without distortion? What you do is you go behind the manuscripts. You try to get to Caesar's original manuscript and you find out where he wrote the history, because it was written at the time the event took place so you try to find the original record of it. Then you find the next record maybe a hundred years later, check that up to see if they confirm each other or if somebody changed them. Then you check the other manuscript.

Caesar's "History of the Gallic Wars" has a grand total of 9 or at the most 10 manuscripts, that's all. We believe ancient history on the basis of 9 or 10 manuscripts and never question it. Those are all the monuments you have to Caesar's "Gallic Wars". Do you know when the first one was written? It was written 900 years after Caesar wrote his original history. 900 years! 900 years elapsed during which all kinds of myth and legend could have developed, yet we never question Caesar's "History of the Gallic Wars" as being true.

We say no these are public monuments. These are literary manuscripts that give us the original record. We can check them against each other and they are more or less the same so we believe it. It's even worse with Livy's history. His history has two manuscripts and the oldest one is a thousand years after he wrote his original history. The monuments and the manuscripts behind this book, the Bible: 4000 Greek manuscripts. And the oldest one is written 30 years after John completed his fourth Gospel.

In other words, there is no manuscript evidence for any history as reliable as the manuscript evidence for this history. There is not. You cannot find it. If you throw out this book as

unhistorical, you throw out not only all the ancient Roman and Greek authors, but you throw out half of our own history because there is no manuscript evidence for any history up to maybe three or four hundred years ago that is as solid as what lies behind this. These manuscripts have been found throughout the ancient world and we have 4000 of them, plus thousands of scraps of manuscripts.

Then the actions that need to be performed: here it is today. Here it is today. This action has been performed for 1900 years. Ever from Peter's little Jewish son asked him, "Dad, why do we worship on Sunday when all our friends in the Jewish church worship on Saturday?" and Peter answered, "My son, because our Savior rose on this day of the week", -- and loved ones ever from that first Easter Sunday, there has not passed one Sunday but there has not passed one day in the world's life, when a group of people have not got together and celebrated the communion of the Lord's Supper. That action has been performed down through the years for 1900 years.

Now, you see the importance of that. We human beings are pretty dumb people but we will not keep on doing something like that again and again and again without some horrid little cynical son sometime persuading us this is a ridiculous game we're playing, there's no reason for it. There'll always be somebody to say, "Dad, why are we doing this?" and unless Dad really can show that there's a reason, the thing will die out, that's what happens in our society. Things die out when there's no sufficient reason for them or no sufficient basis.

Then Leslie adds one other fourth rule. He says that "such monuments and such actions and such observances be instituted and do commence from the time that the matter of fact was done." You see the importance of that. That the monuments and observances and actions be performed from the very moment that the original act fact took place. The reason for that is so that there'll be no time gap during which legend and myth could develop and that's the difficulty you see with the lives of Muhammad and Buddha. It's years afterwards that we wrote of their lives -- and myths and legends of all kinds surrounded them. But if you have no time gap between the original fact and the first record of it and if that record is the same as all the other records that you have down through the centuries, then you can be sure that that fact actually took place as it was written about.

Of course, that's the situation with this Book, the Bible. The letter to the Galatians was written in 48 A.D. In 48 A.D. there were thousands of people alive who had seen Jesus die, there were thousands who had observed him and seen him alive. All they had to do was, as this letter to the Galatians was circulating round all the churches in the world at that time, they simply had to say, "No, it didn't occur this way." There were many eyewitnesses alive at the time that these records were circulating and all they had to do was contradict them and that would have been the tale finished.

It's the same loved ones with the actions that are to be performed. If you like to look at it, it's there, it's Acts 20:7: "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight."

"On the first day of the week, we gathered together." That was five, six years after Jesus rose from the dead. Right from the earliest times, Easter has been observed, the communion of the Lord's supper has been observed.

In other words, the most amazing thing about this fact of Jesus destroying death is that this incident, that stands so unique in the lifetime of the world, this one event in which a human being

so absolutely demonstrated control over death and life -- that this incidence has been studied and discussed and criticized and examined more than any other event in history and has now come out among all scholars and philosophers and historians as the most established and the surest fact of our history.

There's an old brilliant scholar at Cambridge - an old cynic too -- but he says this about the resurrection, "Taking all the evidence together, it is not too much to say that there is no historic incident better or more variously supported than the resurrection of Christ." If you say that Jesus' resurrection from the dead is not a fact, let's throw everything away. There are no facts then. There are no facts anywhere in the world. Because if you say that is not a fact, there are millions of facts that are far less surely established than that one, and this life that we live is not real at all if you say that that resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not a fact.

Do you see the conclusions? If Jesus destroyed death once, then he can destroy it however often he wants and that means he is alive today -- and he is alive and can see us all here. See, you have to conclude that, don't you? You must admit that if he is able to pass through death and if death does not keep him away from us, then he must be here in this room this morning. He must be here, right here. And do you see that that means there is an elixir of life. It means there is a fountain of rejuvenation and of eternal youth such as all the old explorers searched for.

There is an uncreated life that turns death into sleep, because that's what it did in him. There is an uncreated life that comes into this created life we have and changes it completely. There is an uncreated life that can change you and can enable you to exist forever. But loved ones, what we find is that that same life is able to change the bitterness in your heart into love because that life is the Spirit of Jesus and that life can change you completely and it can change you from being a miserable, petty, selfish creature into a person that is the image of Christ and that's what uncreated life did in Jesus. It's what uncreated life did in me and it's what uncreated life has done in hundreds here in this room and it's what uncreated life can do for you.

You have created life, and you can see it there, but there is an uncreated life that can turn death into sleep. If you say, "how?" all you do is be willing for that life to come in. You have to be willing for that life of Jesus' Spirit to come in and reproduce in you himself, and you may think that's easy but that is the hard part. And the reason you don't experience that life, the reason you're still bitter at times, the reason you're still angry at times and selfish is you won't let that life come in and control you and that's the same reason that will force you to go out into lonely darkness at the end of this life.

And loved ones it is a package. It's either Jesus and the beauty of love and the kindness of his spirit ruling your life now and that continuing forever -- or it's you continuing as you are with that created life that you've got with your selfishness and your pettiness and at times your misery and it's that going on forever after this life is over.

So Easter is not a day for spectators. Easter is not a day for applause. Easter is not a day to stand outside the tomb and look at the mighty thing that happened. Easter is the day to go into the tomb yourself and ask this Jesus, "Lord, if you are alive now, and it seems I am led by my own logic to believe that, will you begin to show me how to let your life come into mine -- because I sorely need a change." Let us pray.

Lord, that is what we would pray. Death is something that is so real that we have no trouble

imagining it, Lord, and we have trouble with imagining what we mean by anger or jealousy or envy, but we know what we mean by death and we know as sure as anything that we're going to meet that, that's the one thing we're sure of, Lord. We're going to meet death. And Lord, you seem to have a way through and Lord Jesus, we want to find that way ourselves. We feel we're made for something more than just a gravestone. We feel we're made for something more than just to be forgotten.

Lord, we ask you now to show us why your Spirit that enabled you to rise from the dead has not been able to come into us. Show us what we have to be willing to do for your spirit to come in and change us, and Lord we want to do that. Lord, I pray for our brothers and sisters here that they, in spite of all the excitement of the lunch time and the lilies and all the brightness of the day, pray that you'll give them grace to settle down somewhere in their room today for 15 minutes and pray to you and ask you to begin to change them and to give them the Spirit that will enable them to live forever. I ask this in your name and for your glory. Amen.