

“GIVE AND TAKE”

(Easter Sunday)

Job 1:20-22 (p. 493)

John 20:1-16 (p. 1052)

You could hardly find a more pragmatic statement anywhere than the one issued by Job in response to all the problems that had beset him. Having suffered one personal disaster after another, Job summed up his situation, not with a “*Why me, Lord?*” nor a “*What did I do to deserve this?*” He simply fell to the ground in worship and said, “*Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.*”

What a remarkably uncluttered attitude about life. “*I arrived with nothing. I leave with nothing. Everything I have is on loan from God.*” Chuck Swindoll in his inimitable way said the same thing. He said, “*I have never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer.*” We don’t keep anything. Everything is on loan. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. And that just about sums it up. Or does it?

Of course, it’s just as true of our relationships. There’s a real sense in which they, too, are “on loan.” You can’t hold on to people forever, no matter how precious they are to you. And we feel the truth of that in so many little ways. Those with kids in college know just how true that is. Each time they leave home, a little bit of our heart goes with them, leaving the kind of ache you don’t feel like talking about. And it seems like the more you love them, the more it hurts when you have to part.

Imagine what it must have been like for Mary Magdalene. Here was a woman whose self-esteem was as worthless as her reputation. She had nothing going for her. But then she met Jesus; and the Lord had loved her with a pure, intense passion she had never known – that she knew nobody deserved, least of all herself. But for reasons she couldn’t comprehend, Jesus had loved her. And by loving her he had killed the demons inside her and healed her life from within. And she, in turn, loved Jesus like nobody else.

Then he was gone, rudely torn away from her life without warning, publicly humiliated, tortured and executed. His broken body was taken from the cross, wrapped quickly and laid in a borrowed tomb. There wasn’t even time for a decent burial. Before her mind had time to grasp the enormity of what had happened, her Lord was dead and gone – never to be seen again. Mary’s heart, broken and aching with emptiness, might well have bitterly recited the words of Job: “*The*

Lord gives... and then the Lord takes away!” Everything that mattered to her, everything she had ever loved was lost. And that just about sums it up. Or does it?

Then, very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, Mary came to the tomb and found it empty. Numbed by grief and half-blinded by tears, she saw a man who she thought was the groundskeeper. She asked him if he knew where Jesus’ body was. And the man answered her with one word: “*Mary.*” He called her by her name in a voice too good to be true but too real to deny. Nobody but Jesus had ever spoken her name that way before. And she was so sure that she would never hear it spoken that way again. But here he was!

What’s in a name? I’ll tell you what is. Everything is – when you hear it spoken the way she heard her name spoken that morning. Hearing her name, the night of death’s inconsolable emptiness turned into the morning of God’s irrepressible joy. And as that happened, everything that she had lost was given back to her, better than ever, and never to be taken away again. On that Easter morning God gave back everything that Good Friday had taken away from Mary – and from us.

Above all, it is Jesus himself that God gives back to us. But what does that mean? Let me tell you three things it means. First, when Jesus gave himself back to us, he gave us **eternal life**. Second, when he gave himself back to us, he gave us back **ourselves**. Third, in giving himself back to us, he gave us back **our own dear ones who have died**. Now, let’s look at those three marvelous Easter gifts we’ve been given.

I. First, when Jesus gave back himself, he gave us **eternal life**. Do you ever wonder about eternal life? I’ll admit that the prospect of living forever, in itself, may not seem particularly inviting. Without something so good that you’d want it to go on forever, eternal life could begin to look like not much more than endless existence. And who in their right mind would want to keep on going on forever and ever – and ever – and ever – with no particular reason for going on and on – and on – and on?

What would you do with yourself for all that time? It was Thomas Huxley, I believe, who pointed out with irresistible candor that many people who desire immortal life are at a loss to know what to do with themselves on a wet Sunday afternoon. Eternal life could end up being endless boredom, you know. Think about that! But what makes God’s gift of eternal life so marvelous is that we’re going to spend eternity in the most wonderful relationship with the One whose love for us makes every new moment an adventure – forever. It is the quality of that life that determines whether or not eternal life is really worth having.

We all know how true that is. We prove it in countless ways. If I were to ask you, “*How long is an hour?*” you might answer, “*Well that depends on who I’m with.*” The eternal life that God gives us isn’t simply endlessness. Eternal life

is a growing, loving relationship with Jesus; and the depth of his love defines its nature.

And while we're on the subject of eternal life, think about this. If the nature of eternal life is a loving relationship with Jesus, and if you and Jesus are both alive right now, then eternal life has already begun. I suspect many Christians think that eternal life is a reward that doesn't kick in until after you have checked out of life. As far as I'm concerned, my eternal life has already been going on for quite a while.

The leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the good news that there is a quality of life that we can begin to enjoy right here and now. And what happens to us after what we call "death" is simply the continuation of the story of a loving relationship that will go on growing better and better forever. Cynics will tell you that heaven is just wishful thinking, the product of hyperactive religious imagination. But I'm here to tell you that when Jesus gave himself back to us on Easter morning, he gave us eternal life; a life more worth the living of it than anything we could ever dream up on our own.

2. Second, when Jesus gave himself back to Mary and us, in giving us himself, he gave us back **ourselves** as well. During his ministry Jesus quite literally invested himself in those who were closest to him. He called them by name; he nurtured their gifts; he helped them discover who they were by their relationship with him. Then suddenly the One who had been the meaning of their life together was taken from them. It was all over. In a profound sense, the best that was in them died when he was crucified, and they no longer knew who they were. Why? Because it was in him that they had found their life.

In a substantial way it's just as true of every Christian. For all our failures to be like Jesus, there's still something of us that is inextricably a part of him. Take him away and it's lost. The fact is that anything in us that is good and gracious and true and lasting is there because his grace planted it there. In fact, Jesus is so much a part of who I am that, if He were taken out of my life, I could no longer tell you who I am or what I ought to be.

Does that sound like I'm overstating the case? We might want to resist that idea. We might fear that we are defining ourselves totally in terms of someone else. And we all know that that's not healthy. Even if this "someone else" is Jesus, it still seems rather like an unhealthy kind of sanctified co-dependence. But the truth of it stands nonetheless. And all you need do to see the truth of it is to look at your friends and those who are dear to you.

In a very real sense, your friends and loved ones make of you what you are. Each one of them wins from you a unique response; each one brings you alive in his or her own way. Consequently, you are never quite the same person in response to any two friends. For instance, I am not the same person with you, as

your pastor and friend, as I am with my wife. But I'm not the same person with you not because I'm an unstable personality. It is because each person that I love calls to life a different part of me. So when someone dear to me is taken away, something of myself is lost as well. That's why the words of John Donne ring so true. "*Do not ask for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.*" Each one's death diminishes me, because the part of me they made alive dies with them when they die.

Certainly that must have been how it was with the disciples – why they were so devastated by his death. He had promised them just the night before, "*I will not leave you comfortless...*" (literally "orphaned"). But that is exactly what they had become. They were orphans – servants without a master – disciples without a teacher – evangelists without a Gospel. But then Easter came; and in giving himself back to them, he gave them back themselves as well. Immediately following Jesus' death they had all huddled in fear. But then Easter came and gave them back their Lord. And with their lives and faith restored, those same men and women fearlessly set about turning the world right side up.

3. When Jesus gave himself back to us on Easter morning, he gave us **eternal life**. Giving himself back to us, he gave us back **ourselves** as well. And there's one more thing. In giving us back himself, he gave us back **our own dear ones who have died**. St. Paul put the matter simply in 1 Corinthians 15. He said that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then all those who have fallen asleep in him are lost forever. And if our hope in Christ is limited to this life only, then our lives are really quite pitifully pointless.

His words ring true deep inside. There is something in the human spirit, both Christian and non-Christian, that cries, "*No! There has to be more to life. Death can't have the last word.*" And it doesn't. God has the last word. Jesus went to the cross and there took on himself the deadly consequences of our sin. But he did so much more than that! He died to give eternal life to all those whom you and I hold dear. And when Jesus gave himself back to us on that first Easter, he also gave us back our dear ones who have died in him.

Some of you have already had to say goodbye to someone as dear as life to you. I know that some of you are facing that prospect today. Let me speak personally. When I was two years old my father died. I never had time to get to know him. Shortly after we moved to Medford, Carol's mother died, a relatively young grandmother. There was much about that woman that her children and grandchildren missed growing to know. There are precious things about some people who are dear to me that I cannot lay hold of right now because they have died – things I don't know about them – things I long to know.

But this much I do know. Jesus Christ not only died for them. He also rose for them. And just as he did for Mary in the garden, he has called them by name.

And having done that, he has welcomed them to eternal life with him. One day, one final bright morning, he will call my name and welcome me home. And when that happens, there will be a reunion that will make all earthly reunions pale in comparison.

More than anything this Easter, I want you to know that Jesus knows you by name as well. He is calling you to life in him right now. I know, like Job, that it is the Lord who gave, and the Lord who has taken away. But I also know that on Easter he gave back to us all that we thought we had lost – forever! Do you know that? You can. The risen Jesus is waiting for you to turn to him so he can greet you by name. Don't keep him waiting.

αμεν

With gratitude to Maurice Boyd