

Sermon on Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006
HIW Petri Church, 11.30 am

Pastor Michael Klatt

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,
remember the Old Testament reading? It's a rather unusual text for a sermon at Easter, isn't it? It is a song of praise written in the Old Testament and therefore hundreds of years before Christ and his resurrection. Why, then, is this a text for a sermon on Easter Sunday? Well, what Hannah experiences with the birth of her first born child is like a resurrection. It is like a resurrection in the midst of life, a resurrection which brings about new life. What else is resurrection about if not about life that totally unexpectedly springs out of death?!

Let's have a closer look at what lies behind our Old Testament story. Hannah shares a destiny with quite a number of women right up to the present day. Hannah is unable to have a child. For years and years she has been waiting for the moment when she would notice a change in her body and start sensing the unspeakable joy over new life growing inside her. Her husband, Elkanah, does stand by her, but he also has another wife called Penninah, and Penninah has children, lots of children. One can imagine how she mocked Hannah. But it was not only Penninah. Others, too, humiliated Hannah and looked down on her. It was the pits for Hannah. From a social point of view it was absolutely

desastrous for a women in those days not to have a child. Should her husband leave her or die she would have no social security whatsoever, which means that she would have no future and would gradually die socially. What is the meaning of life if you are avoided and despised by everybody? You might as well be dead.

How did Hannah cope with her situation? It would have been understandable if she had swallowed the mockery of the others and had become bitter or spiteful. But not Hannah. Hannah did not become totally down-hearted or embittered but remained, what you might call hopeful in spite of her unfulfilled desire. She somehow even managed to hold on to her belief. And so it happened one day, when she had travelled to the holy place in Shiloh with her husband that she burst into tears and cried to God. *O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.* Now Eli the priest heard her cry and said to her. *Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.*

And indeed: The impossible does happen as before with Abraham and Sarah. When Elkana lay with his wife at home the Lord did remember her. Hannah becomes pregnant, and at the end of the year she gives birth to a baby boy. Samuel is his name. It is the Samuel who would later anoint Saul and David to become king.

By the way, later on Hannah had more children, three more sons and two daughters.

But now her first born son after so many years of having no child and of being mocked. Finally she is accepted as a woman, finally no more mockery, finally a child of her own. It is like new life out of death, it is like resurrection, like Easter. I can vividly imagine how Hannah must have felt, can't you? This overbubbling joy when she held her little baby in her arms for the first time. *My heart rejoices in the Lord. In the Lord my horn is lifted up.*

Hannah feels and walks upright again, perfectly happy, *for I delight in your deliverance.* Joy, but also thankfulness towards the Lord. This son of hers truly is a gift of God.

Interesting enough there is a close connection between the event of a birth and the resurrection after death and the prospect of new life. This may be illustrated by a little story called *Conversation between twins in their mother's womb.*

"You know what", said the sister to her brother, "I do believe there will be life after our birth." "Ridiculous", replied her brother, "why should there be another life? It is so nice and dark and warm here with sufficient food to eat." His sister didn't give in. "There must be another place where there is light. May be we even could move around free and eat with our mouths." But she can't convince her brother. "Eating with your mouth, what a silly idea! And furthermore: Nobody has ever come back after being born.

This here is all there is. Life ends after our birth. Why do you always want more and more?” After a long pause his sister dared to say hesitantly. “Do you know what else I believe? I believe that we have a mother.” “A mother!”, her brother laughed. I have never seen a mother, therefore there is no mother.” “But sometimes you can hear her sing when everything else is silent, and you can feel her stroke us.” Once again both of them didn’t say anything for quite a while. Finally the sister continued. “Don’t you sometimes feel a kind of pressure? It’s not very pleasant, is it? Sometimes it’s even sore.” “Okay, but so what?” “I believe that this pain will get us prepared to be at another place soon, somewhere where it is much nicer than here and where we will see our mother face to face. Won’t that be great?” – There are so many moving associations in this little story, aren’t there? Life in the womb is like life here on earth, we can’t imagine anything else. And we don’t see God like the twins don’t see their mother. So why should there be a God? But then again, don’t we sometimes feel him how he strokes and comforts us? Last but not least, there will be a time when after experiencing the sore pressure of having to say Good bye to our life here on earth we will see our heavenly father and mother face to face. Won’t that be great? The bible tells us about this moment at the end of time as it is written in the book of Revelation.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying. "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Life at the end of the world, life after resurrection, life after birth, God's life, God's gift to us. We believe that God is capable of creating the world out of nothing, why then should we hesitate to believe that he is capable of creating new life out of death? -

But let's go back to our Old Testament story again. When we look at it again it will strike us that joy is not the only topic in it. There is also envy and danger. That's the reason why Hannah sings her song of praise against her foes. *My mouth boasts over my enemies*, as we read right at the beginning. This is more than a hint to the fact that Hannah's happiness is not permanent but rather continues to be endangered. There will be people who continue to work against her and who will envy her happiness. We know what that is like. If only I could hold on to unclouded happiness a little longer. But alas, suffering and distress are lurking round the corner. The adversities of life want to take possession of me again. Can this be God's will? Can't God protect me from all this? Hannah's song of praise is a hard nut for us to crack at this point, because it seems to suggest that nobody but God is responsible for

the evil as well. *The Lord brings death and makes alive, he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth.* What does this mean? Is it God's will when we experience mishaps and misery? As a matter of fact, when we look around we often feel encircled by the dark sides of life. Again and again people's plan of life is thwarted. There is e.g. the man whose wife died far too early; or there is the woman who in spite of lots of attempts does remain childless. There is somebody's son who is made redundant with hardly any chance of a new job in the near future. Or there is the young woman who is hit by a serious illness. All of a sudden her whole life is completely turned around. Is all this God's will? -

It is amazing to realise that our Old Testament story never raises the question "why?" Why is it that some lie in the dust or are poor and others get away with it and are well off? It is not questioned why Hannah remained childless for so long. All that seems to be said, is that there is mishap, that there is suffering and darkness in life and in our world. But something else is said, too, more indirectly, but it is most important. Hannah herself with her belief is a witness to this. It is the unshakable trust in God that in all hardship and distress he would never leave us. Experiencing hardship is not according to the will of God, but if we are hit by it God would never withdraw from us. On the contrary, in the midst of all turmoil God holds you tight, like he did with his own son

when he was dying on the cross. Even if you are blinded by pain or despair and are not able to see or feel God's nearness he is still right beside you and offers you his strength. One thing is therefore for certain. Darkness never has more power than the love of God. In other words, all that may oppress or burden you has no ultimate power. The ultimate power lies in God's hand alone. That's the reason why in our story it was not the devil or any other evil power that was the cause of Hannah being barren. It was the Lord. Yes, it was the Lord. Strange, but at the same time somehow comforting. Because if it is God, then you don't have to give up hope. God can change situations for the better. His concern is directed to those like Hannah who are down-hearted or in despair. That's why she praises God for his rescue and for his healing power. *He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap* – resurrection in the midst of life.

This melody of surprise and joy runs through the whole bible and makes more verses of songs of praise. For example Mary's song after the annunciation. *My soul glorifies the Lord, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant...He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.* And another of these verses was read in today's gospel when the angel said to the two women. *Don't be alarmed. You were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen!*

But that's not the end of this melody. Up until this day many more people have added their verses to Hannah's song. One verse e.g. tells us about someone who was seriously ill but through a successful operation was able to slowly turn to life again. He regained breath and courage. Another verse tells us about people who were mourning or who were weary of life but got new hope again through someone who just listened to what they were saying and who was sympathetic. Still more verses sing about how people resist violence and hate and bring about peace, or how people successfully fight for the right and life of asylum seekers. And in all these verses you hear the sound of the same continuous bass note of the Lord calling the dead to new life, of resurrection already in the midst of life. Easter is not only today and tomorrow on Easter Monday but happens every day all around this world. Easter happens everytime when God gives people like Hannah, people like you and me, the gift of being able to raise up their heads and hearts and start walking upright through life again. - It is the power of God's Holy Spirit which makes these things happen. It is God's abiding love which, especially in times of need and despair, encourages us to hold on to the power of hope and to the power of life.

And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our risen Lord,

Amen