

Sermon on April 15th 2012, HIW Petri Church Kleefeld

Pastor Michael Klatt

Text: Hymn "Now the green blade rises"

Dear brothers and sisters,

Easter is something that can't be grasped by intellect alone. That's why there are so many Easter-hymns, joyful and powerful. Music wants to reach our hearts and emotions. "This joyful Eastertide", "Jesus is risen, alleluia", "Easter glory fills the sky". The good news of life overcoming death is overwhelming and incredible, in the true sense of the word, in-credible, un-believable. But what joy! We are touched deep inside, and we sense and trust rather than "know" that all this has something to do with us, too, that it is we who are comforted and saved even beyond death.

The story of Christ's resurrection is beautifully told in the hymn that I am going to preach on: "Now the green blade rises". The tune is not as rousing but rather gentle. This, however, seems quite appropriate considering that this hymn is actually a love song. It tells about God's enduring love that remains with us even when we don't see or feel it. In order to get tuned into the meaning of this hymn let us now join together and sing the first three verses, "Now the green blade rises"... > verses 1 – 3

What a wonderful way of comparing Christ's resurrection with what we experience in springtime over and over again. For weeks now nature has been coming back to life. After the long winter months green shoots have been poking through the dull, rain soaked soil and I have watched snowdrops, corcusses, daffodils and the like reappear in our garden. Something that can not be seen for months because it is hidden in the dark soil all of a sudden springs up again – springtime. It's simply amazing, isn't it? A marvellous miracle. And it makes me wonder, how many other things there are which we can't see but which do exist nevertheless.

"Now the green blade rises from the buried grain. Wheat that in dark earth has lain". At this point our hymn changes into the symbolic language as suddenly as the green blade springs up again. It continues: "Love lives again that with the dead has been." This is a reference not only to the crucified Jesus – he descended to the dead – but also to all who have died, including our beloved ones who died before us. It is not possible to actually see that God's love remains with the dead but they are not left alone. God is still with them, and through his love and with the power of his Holy Spirit they will rise again at his second coming when this world will be changed. Life everlasting, love everlasting. "Love is come again like wheat arising green". God's love is present in reality at all times but simultaneously transcends the present in the same way as it was with Jesus. When Jesus was alive his love was present and could actually be seen. When he was buried God's love could not be seen but continued

to be present. And when Jesus ascended into heaven, he himself could not be seen any more but his love has been present since and can be seen and experienced in many ways in our lives. Love is very real and yet at the same time surpasses all our understanding.

“In the grave they laid him” – the second verse endorses what was said in verse one.

“Thinking that he would never wake again”. Of course they thought he would never wake again. Someone who died on the cross was dead for sure, stonedead. And to be more than 100% certain, first a big stone was placed in front of his grave: “He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb”, as Matthew tells us. And secondly a guard was ordered: “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how”, Pilate said to the Pharisees. “Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen”, as the second verse finishes. That is complete darkness.

Darkness out of which he rose from the dead, as we sang in the third verse: “Forth he came at Easter like the risen grain.” The idea of comparing Jesus’ death and resurrection with processes we observe in nature is taken from the bible itself. Though with a slightly different emphasis, Jesus, in the gospel of St. John, chapter 12, points this out by saying: “I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12, 24).

By the way, death and life are as closely linked to each other as possible in this comparison with the grain. You don’t really know: Is it death or life that you are talking about? That may be the reason for the fact that in the German hymnbook our hymn is the last of the hymns in Lent “Korn, das in die Erde, in den Tod versinkt” sung as the “hymn of the week” in the middle of Lent on the Sunday that is called Lätare which means “Be joyful”. Lätare points to Easter and was therefore in former times also called “Little Easter”. In the British hymnbook the same song “Now the green blade rises” is an Easter hymn. Life and death, death and life, so utterly different, but also so close to each other and both embraced by the enduring love of God.

Interesting, too, that in a different version from ours the words are not: “Raised from the dead, my living Lord is seen”, but “quick from the dead”, “quick” probably meaning both “sudden” and “living”: the quick and the dead.

And here it is that for the first time our hymn becomes personal: “My living God”. This is like a confession. All that is told in the bible about the resurrection is not a remote or distant report, but is of relevance to me, too. Christ died and rose to save the world but also to save me.

“My living God”. Are we able to proclaim this, too?

You will have noticed by now that I rather like this hymn and its wording. I also like the idea that’s implied in it, the idea that the resurrection of Jesus is a way of saying that, if we wait long enough, our lives and perhaps human history itself will yield new life. If we wait long enough what seemed dead will come to life again. I believe there is a lot of truth in it. And yet...

Is this really what the Easter story is suggesting? Is the story of the resurrection of Jesus “like wheat that springs green”? Is the story the same kind of thing to us as when a bulb comes up again after having died in the winter? Or is the story of Easter getting at something bolder, something stranger, something harder to believe?

If we look at the Easter accounts in the bible, we see little that suggests that Easter is a sort of grain of wheat growing slowly back to life. The stories are far more disorienting and terrifying.

Mark e. g. writes that when the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body they discover the impossible – the stone has been rolled away and an angel is sitting where Jesus should have been lying. Mark tells us they flee in “terror and amazement”. Matthew adds a violent earthquake, and an angel that terrifies the guards until they shake and become like dead men. Or for Luke resurrection comes in the form of two men in dazzling clothes that are suddenly standing beside the women in the empty tomb. In their fear they bowed down with their faces to the ground.

All of these accounts suggest that the story of the resurrection of Jesus is not a story of our waiting and watching as new life emerges from what lies dormant. No, instead, the story of the resurrection is about the power of God that acts decisively to open the tomb and also the tombs of our lives, and to raise up all that has been bowed down in fear or grief in us and in the world. In this sense, the resurrection is not natural at all, not something continuous, but rather something completely new. It should leave us speechless and disoriented, for it comes to us as something “unnatural”, completely unexpected and unexplainable. It’s like a new creation.

With this in mind, let us now turn to the last verse of our hymn and, first of all, sing it together.

> verse 4

“When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain...Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been” – who wouldn’t know what this means? What we experience in our own lives and what we see around us is often bare fields of disappointments and of hope that has been abandoned. It so often seems to contradict our belief of God’s enduring love. We yearn to fully believe in the change that has come about in Christ’s resurrection, we long to fully believe in the promise of the whole world utterly new, but when we look at ourselves or around us, we often do not see much of it. We see violence and oppression, we see death and grief, we see split relationships, lost jobs and illnesses, sometimes incurable. We see accidents that leave permanent handicaps. We see our own limitations, bent lives, we see war and poverty. So if the risen Christ does walk towards us like he did towards Mary Magdalene in the garden, he comes as an impossibility in this world, as we stand weeping. He comes to us as a gardener in a graveyard. As the one who works in the dirt, in the place

where the bodies decay. A gardener who takes a place of death, and begins to make it alive. Remember what we sang?

“Your touch can call us back to life again”. “Your touch”: With Mary it was Jesus calling her by her name. And Mary literally bounced back to life again and immediately hurried to tell the others that Jesus was alive. “Your touch”, this may be something different with you, a word of comfort, or that somebody asks you for forgiveness. It may be that someone is just holding your hand or that someone is given an offer for a job. “Your touch” may be the tearing down of a wall which separated a country or a truce with a true prospect of peace. Whatever it may be. As Christians we believe: Behind all this is the power of everlasting love, the power of the Holy Spirit of the risen Christ. The Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ before ascending into heaven promised us to be our guide and comforter. And there is an even greater promise which is indeed disorienting and inexplicable: That all will be redeemed, every last tear and drop of blood, and that all will be brought into a greater joy, a greater life than we can ever imagine. “Let it be so,” as someone once phrased it in her sermon. And she continued: “And let us find the beginning of it now. Let it be that we can turn towards the person beside us in the graveyard, and speak each other’s names, and know and be known. Let it be that we can turn our graves, our broken lives to gardens...let it be that we can do our best to make them places of life, places where people are nourished and loved, where food and gentleness are grown. Let it be that we can mourn the deaths, work for justice, feed the hungry, touch the sick. And fail and fail, and try again, and reach out our inadequate hands for the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ.”

And there we hear the angel’s voice: “Do not be afraid.” That’s why we won’t act out of fear but out of hope and thanksgiving for all we have been given, because: “Love is come again like wheat arising green.”

Amen