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Date: Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018
Sermon Title: The Power of Symbol: The Cross
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Introduction:

On Easter, Alida and I always divide the sermon in two parts to tackle some Easter subjects from two angles. It also makes the sermon seem a little shorter, even if the total minutes are the same. There's a method to our madness!

This year, we decided to look at the two powerful symbols of Easter: the Cross and the Tomb. The Cross on which Jesus died. The Tomb from which Jesus emerged, raised from the dead. Now, you might think the Cross is for Good Friday. Why bring it up today, on Easter? Well, they are linked. No Cross, no Easter! No death, no resurrection!

It's true in our own life. We link life and death together all the time. We'll say, "My Uncle George died of cancer." Or, "My mother, she had a heart attack." Or, "My cousin Freddie, he was killed in the war." As Christians, we say, "Jesus, who died on the Cross." So our Easter joy, our Easter resurrection, goes hand-in-hand with the Cross. Today, Alida and I will share a little bit about both, as "The Power of Symbol."

Look at the debate about the flag in America, or kneeling for the National Anthem at football games. It gets heated because symbols are powerful. Symbols hold our deepest values and truths. That's why we treasure them.

Look at the cross on the altar. At our Church, it's really an Easter Cross. It's empty. Just like the tomb. Many Churches have a Crucifix, a Cross with the body of Jesus still on it. Nothing wrong with it. In fact, I often really like it. The Crucifix symbolizes the sacrifice of Christ. It's clear as day, Jesus suffering and dying on the Cross. It's haunting and beautiful at the same time.

As you know, every two years we have a "Field of Flags" out on the Church Green. Last time, there were 7,000 American flags planted in the ground, representing all our soldiers who have died in Afghanistan and Iraq. Like our Cross: equally haunting, equally beautiful. Truly tragic, yet triumphant. At our

Church, the Cross is triumphant. There is a wonderful Easter hymn we rarely sing that captures that: "The Strife is "O'er":

*The strife is o'er, the battle done
The victory of life is won.
The song of triumph has begun
Alleluia!*

That's the Easter Cross. Or look at this Lenten Garden, a favorite Sunday School project each Lent. Families take home a kit each Lent: a big planter, some dirt, grass seed, rocks, a little palm tree, a wooden cross, and a small empty planter, representing the empty tomb. All there, all the symbols within yet another symbol: a garden. A garden, a place of life.

Just as many of you are doing in your yards, clearing away the death of winter storms, stirring the ground, planting some seeds, preparing for the total rebirth of life. Like the first Easter.

Stephen Hawking died two weeks ago, the world's greatest physicist since Einstein, a great mind entombed in a Lou Gehrig's diseased body, but he never let that stop him. He was supposed to have died 50 years ago, but every day for 50 years he resurrected himself, a miracle of human will and modern science, restoring life every day. His specialty was the "black holes" of the universe, the great holder of universal truths and mysteries, where everything goes to die, to be no more . . . Or, so it was thought.

Instead, as his *New York Times* obituary described, Dr. Hawking proved "Black holes are fountains of energy . . . And over vast eons they would eventually explode, giving back to the universe all the mass and energy that had once disappeared in a sort of cosmic reincarnation." (Overby, Dennis. "Stephen Hawking Dies at 76; His Mind Roamed the Cosmos." *The New York Times* 14 Mar. 2018: A13. Print.)

A cosmic Easter. What has ceased to be . . . becomes. What was no more . . . is. What was gone . . . is back. Hawking credits the wonder of creation. We credit the Creator. The end result is the same. Easter and Stephen Hawking. Two truths not that far apart.

Many years ago, I was in Central Africa, the Congo. It was a violent time of the Civil War. One night, we had a farewell prayer service for two elderly English missionary ladies who were returning . . . *not* to England. They were returning to the war zone, to the very place where many of their friends had been killed. I remember being very much amazed and inspired by them, but also very much

afraid for them, and I said, "Why? Why are you going back?" The two elderly women smiled so sweetly and quoted a great old hymn:

*"When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the Prince of glory died
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul my life my all."*

And off they went. Christianity has always had this unlikely blend of love and life, of faith and action, of boldness and sacrifice, all rooted in the power of the Cross. Even our hymns take this awful emblem of execution, the Cross, and embed it in joy and celebration, almost like a great athlete taunting an opponent, thrusting his chest out, jutting out his chin as if to say, "Ha! I took your best shot, and I'm still standing." We see it after a football player or ice hockey player takes a hard hit and bounces right up, after a tennis player returns a powerful serve and wins the point.

On Easter, the Cross became our language of hope; it became our boast, our courage, our triumph.

You may remember in old vampire movies, when you're stalked by a bloodthirsty vampire, all you had to do was make a cross out of something. Two pieces of wood, or even two fingers, and the vampire fled. Nations put crosses on their flags to lead into battles over enemies, real and imagined, against armies, dragons, vampires. The Cross wins. We took the enemy's tool of torture, a wooden cross, and made it our symbol of life eternal, of cosmic resurrection, of "fountains of energy that had once disappeared, exploding" back into being.

I don't know if you're New England Patriots fans or Yankee fans or Barcelona or Serena Williams. Or, dare I say, UConn Women's Basketball? If you root for a team that mostly wins, it's winning the championships that matters. For certain teams, if you're not in the championship, if you don't win it, then it feels like a lost season.

That's Easter for Church. This is our championship. We actually have 122 worship services each year. But Easter is our Super Bowl, our championship. Not to beat the analogy into the ground, but we play all year just for today. If today doesn't connect, if today has lost its meaning, if we drop the ball, if we lose today . . . Well, I'm sounding like Bill Belichick, aren't I? Or Geno Auriemma. "We're in it to win it," if I may steal a phrase.

When I was much younger, there was a great hymn we loved to sing:

*"We've a story to tell to the nations,
that shall turn their hearts to the right,
a story of truth and mercy,
a story of peace and light,
a story of peace and light.*

*For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
and the dawning to noonday bright,
and Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth,
the kingdom of love and light."*

That "story to tell to the nations" begins with the Cross and the Tomb, two powerful symbols of God's love, a heroic love that the world at that point had not yet been able to imagine. Beyond anything the world imagined before.

I've been doing college tours with my granddaughter. What a blast! There's nothing more fun than taking your relative on a college tour because you get to share the pride of acceptance, but when the Admissions Dean says, "It will cost \$65,000 a year," you don't sweat it because you're not the parent!

Well, we toured some great colleges. I usually wander off by myself while they check out the science lab, the dining hall, the dorm rooms, the library. I wander, and I always check out the chapel. You can always tell the chapel. In America's greatest, oldest colleges, the campus chapel always stands out. It's imposing, beautiful . . . and empty. Always empty. I mean, *really* empty. Many of those colleges were founded by Churches. My college, Colgate, was founded by 13 pastors. All across New England, especially, those chapels were once full. The great preachers in America once guest-preached in those pulpits. They were places of inspiration, challenge, tradition, motivation, and even confrontation.

Now they sit mostly empty. Crosses taken down. Altars removed. Christianity seems like a thing of the past, a vestigial organ, an anachronism. At one college there was a prayer room devoted to a vast array of religions. Quite fascinating, very spiritual. I liked it. But Christianity seemed absent, as if we were an embarrassment.

Lots of times we were an embarrassment. The Cross isn't a lucky rabbit's foot to keep vampires away. The Cross isn't meant as a weapon to lead us into battle and senseless wars. The Cross is exactly what those two elderly English lady missionaries said it was, a "love so amazing, so divine"; the Cross is

exactly what Stephen Hawking was recognizing, an “explosion of energy,” a cosmic Easter, bringing back to life that which we thought was lost. That is what we take out of Church today. That’s what we take out into the world waiting for our message today.

Let’s sing together our final hymn for this Easter Day, “Crown Him With Many Crowns,” No. 234

*Crown him with many crowns,
the Lamb upon his throne.
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns
all music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing
of him who died for thee,
and hail him as thy matchless king
through all eternity.*

*Crown him the Lord of life,
who triumphed o'er the grave,
and rose victorious in the strife
for those he came to save;
his glories now we sing
who died and rose on high,
who died eternal life to bring,
and lives that death may die.*

*Crown him the Lord of love;
behold his hands and side,
rich wounds, yet visible above,
in beauty glorified;
no angels in the sky
can fully bear that sight,
but downward bends their burning eye
at mysteries so bright.*

*Crown him the Lord of years,
the potentate of time,
creator of the rolling spheres,
ineffably sublime.
All hail, Redeemer, hail!
For thou hast died for me;
thy praise shall never, never fail
throughout eternity.*