

Reversing the Irreversible

Matthew 28:1-10

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

Easter Sunday

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Some of you remember my first Easter sermon here at Second I told about how when I was a kid my pet Easter bunny was accidently killed by my brother. And so I associated Easter with death more so than life.

The writer Philip Yancey had a similar experience. When he was about five years old, he and his brother got a six-week-old kitten, solid black except for white "boots" on each of her legs—as if she had daintily stepped in a shallow dish of paint. They named her Boots.

Never was so much loving attention devoted to a kitten. Young Philip and his brother resolved to raise a pet so unblemished that their mother would desire a houseful of such wonderful creatures.

Boots lived in a cardboard box on the screened porch and slept on a pillow stuffed with cedar shavings. Forbidden to bring her inside the house, the boys spent most waking hours on that porch. Mother insisted that Boots must learn to defend herself before venturing into the huge outdoors, fixing a firm date of Easter Sunday for the kitten's first foray.

The final days before Easter tried the boys' patience and fanned their longing to take the kitten outside. At long last the time arrived, the day of Boots's emergence.

Easter morning began with the obligatory church service, after which the family was required to line up like prisoners beside the tulips and daffodils for family pictures. The boys endured the picture-taking with much squinting and complaining, then yanked off their ties and ran to liberate Boots.

She sniffed her first blade of grass that day, and batted at her first daffodil, and stalked her first butterfly, leaping high in the air and missing. She kept them exuberantly entertained until neighbor kids descended upon them for a prearranged Easter egg hunt.

But when their next-door playmates arrived, the unthinkable happened. Their pet Boston terrier, Pugs, following them into their yard, spied Boots, let out one growl, and charged. Philip screamed, and they all ran toward Boots. But already Pugs had the tiny kitten in her mouth and was shaking it like a sock.

The kids stood in a circle around the scene of violence, shrieking and making threatening motions to scare Pugs off. Helpless, they watched a whirl of flashing teeth and flying tufts of fur. Finally, Pugs dropped the kitten on the grass and trotted off, nonchalantly. Boots the kitten was dead.

Yancey writes now, *I could not have articulated it at the time, but what I learned that Easter under the noonday sun was the ugly word irreversible. All afternoon I prayed for a miracle. No! It can't be! Tell me it's not true! Maybe Boots wouldn't really die. Or maybe she would die but come back—hadn't the Sunday-school teacher told such a story about Jesus?*

Or maybe the whole morning could somehow be erased, rewound, and played over again minus that horrid scene. We could keep Boots on the screened porch forever, never allowing her outside. Or we could talk our neighbors into building a fence for Pugs.

A thousand schemes ran through my mind over the next days, until the reality finally won over, and I accepted at last that Boots was dead. Irreversibly dead.

That's a big lesson learned by a five year old. And as the years go on, as we grow through childhood to adulthood, we learn a lot more about that word *irreversible*.

Failing the unexpected pop quiz.

Moving away.

The first car accident.

The first broken heart.

Irreversible.

The death of a parent.

The rash act that can't be undone.

When the divorce is *final*.

The severing of a tie.
Irreversible.

We learn a lot about that word *irreversible*.

A minister I am familiar with writes a column every week for the newspaper in his city. His name is Kenny Wood, and he lives in McAllen, Texas—far South Texas near the Mexican border. In a column he wrote he told about how many years ago he was arrested for shoplifting.

He was taken to jail, booked, photographed, fingerprinted and held. Time passed and he pretended it never happened.

Twenty years later, he was sitting around a table interviewing for a job in north Texas that he wanted very badly. His arrest came up in a background check and the committee said, *We didn't know you were a thief.*

In his column, he wrote, *The choice I made when I was young eliminated the choice I wanted to make when I was older. That was the year I found out that everything counts.*

[Kenny Wood, "Bubba," April 23, 2002]

He could have put it this way: That was the year I learned the meaning of the word *irreversible*.

It was late Friday afternoon when Jesus died.

It's hard for us to understand the emotions of Jesus' followers at this point. They had put all their hopes in Jesus. Now he was dead, and their whole world had come tumbling down.

Even with their eyes closed they could still see the three crosses dark against the sky.

Even with their fingers in their ears they could still hear the sounds that had been made there: the cry of thirst, the cries of pain, the buzzing of flies.

Maybe this whole business of life doesn't really add up to much. Jesus had made all these great promises and great claims, and a lot of people had placed their greatest hopes in him. But now, he was dead.

It was so... irreversible. If only the whole weekend could be rewound and played back minus the scene of the cross and the death.

Then there was Sunday.

The women go to the tomb to take care of Jesus' body. Suddenly the earth moves and an angel appears and rolls back the stone. The angel says, *Do not be afraid. He is not here. He has been raised from the dead.*

What does it mean for our world that he has risen? Fundamentally, what it means is the awesome promise of

reversibility. That in the end nothing is irreversible. No childhood act, no youthful indiscretion, no sin or mistake, no broken connection is irreversible.

As I said earlier, Kenny Wood wrote about his long ago shoplifting arrest in his column in the local newspaper. He got two responses to the column.

A local minister took the time to write: *Now I understand why your columns are superficial. You're a thief.* He went on to say how tragic it is that Kenny has such a great opportunity (and forum) to "win people to Jesus," and that Kenny is "consistently a major disappointment."

There's a man who knows the meaning of the word *irreversible*.

The second response came from a longtime resident of McAllen. She called Kenny on the phone to tell him a story.

There is a house in old McAllen... she told him. A nice brick home on a corner lot. Anyway, somebody spray-painted the word "THIEF" in big, black letters across the front of the house. It was the kind of graffiti you can't paint over; especially on light-colored brick.

It was like that for years. At least it seemed like years. You couldn't drive by without being shocked by it, and a lot of locals drove by.

When I read your column last Sunday, that house is the first thing I thought of, so I got in the car that very afternoon to find the house.

Anybody who's lived in town for long knows exactly where I'm talking about. I found the house and pulled around front. The word was gone. The T-H-I-E and F had been sand-blasted off.

Not only that, she said, but an iron cross has been put up in its place.

This woman offered to pick Kenny up so he could see the house for himself. He let her. He met her in front of a restaurant, and she drove him right to the house.

She was right. It was gone. There was no trace of it. From the front seat she pointed at the front of the house and said, *It was right there.* She traced the word with her finger and said, *Gone!*

Then she turned to Kenny and traced the word across him, like scarlet letters; and then this elderly stranger looked at him, waved her hand and said, *Gone!*

What does it mean that he is risen? The awesome promise of reversibility. Reversibility for our lives and our mistakes and our brokenness, but also even for our death. Easter means that even death is reversible.

One time Ruel Howe went to a city where he had once served as a pastor. He learned that one of his closest friends in the church, a man named Charlie, was in terminal stages of illness from cancer. He had some time, so he went to the hospital to visit him. He found Charlie very lucid up to the very end of his earthly living, but willing to talk about it.

Charlie said, *Ruel, I've always wondered what it would be like to die and now that I'm up close to it, lo and behold, it's an old friend in new garb.* Ruel said, *Say some more about that.* He said, *Well, several times in my life I've had the experience of having to let go of a little world that I might gain access to a larger world.*

He said, *I remember one morning in September when I was six years old, my mother came into my room and said, "Today you don't put on your play clothes and go out in the back yard, today you put on your good clothes and you go to school."*

He said, *I had no idea what school stood for, I had never known anything but the simple life of the sandpile and the swings.*

He said, *I remember looking out the window as I was putting on my clothes, with a great deal of apprehension, a great deal of sadness. And I ventured out to this thing called school, but lo and behold it was a place where I became things that I could never have become if I'd stayed in the backyard. There were books there, science, mathematics, new friends.*

My whole world was expanded as I left the one to enter the other. Six years later I had to let go of that school to go to a thing called Jr. High School, and three years later had to let go of that to go to what they called High School, and then let go of that to go to a place called College.

And he said, *In all of these experiences of letting go of the little that I might have access to the more, I have learned something. An abiding pattern: every exit is also an entrance. You never walk out of something without walking into something else.*

So this dying man went on to say, *I'm confident that what I'm about to experience is of that same order — that as I relinquish this physical body, let go the world of time and space, I don't look for this to be the end of everything. It is another experience of letting go of the little so I might have access to the more.*

Ruel Howe thought this was a magnificent statement of Christian hope. Two days later Charlie did, in fact, die and because Ruel was still in the same city, the widow asked if he would participate in the funeral service. He did.

They had the liturgy. When they came to the end where the ministers had to go out the aisle in front of the casket — it's always a heavy moment, where the finality, the ending of what has happened becomes very real — and Ruel Howe recalls that as he was trudging up the aisle in front of Charlie's casket he had this terrible sense of heaviness.

But just about that time, he looked over the back door of the sanctuary and, thanks to the fire department, there was an illuminated sign with EXIT on it. He remembered what Charlie said, that every exit is also an entrance.

[as told in a sermon by John Claypool, "Easter and the Fear of Death," April 19, 1987, 30 Good Minutes]

Foreboding gave way to hope, and he saw what death really is in the Christian vision; it is transition, it is not destruction. It is moving from one realm of becoming into a larger place of being. He saw that even death is not irreversible. Even death can be reversed.

On that Friday that we only in retrospect call "Good," that ugly word *irreversible* held sway over Jesus' disciples. Two days later, when the crazy rumors about Jesus' missing body spread through Jerusalem, they couldn't believe it. They were adults; they were conditioned by this point in their lives to the meaning of the word *irreversible*.

Finally, personal appearances by Jesus himself convinced them that something altogether new had broken out on earth. When that sunk in, these same people who had been crushed by fear and despair at Calvary were soon preaching with great boldness to large crowds in the streets of Jerusalem.

Easter hits a new note of hope and faith that what God did once in a graveyard in Jerusalem, God can and will repeat for the world. And for us.

What does it mean for the world that Jesus is risen? No childhood act, no youthful indiscretion, no adult sin or mistake, no broken connection, no foolish decision, not even death is irreversible.

Against all odds, the irreversible can be reversed. Every exit is also an entrance.

Easter contains within it at the core the merciful and poignant promise of reversibility.