

“Away from the Tomb and Into the World”
March 31, 2024

Isaiah 52:7-12
Luke 24:1-12

After a mild winter, spring comes with chilly winds and rain and storms. Even so, in God’s great mercy we are here *together* on this glorious Easter morning. And we can be thankful for that.

Spring is something of a holy symbol, a visual sign each year of an ultimate reality: that life does conquer death; that our wintry hearts can thaw; that God can bring something new out of desolate circumstances. The beauty of spring often fuels our Easter joy; the new life of spring tells us something of Easter resurrection. And both spring and Easter lead us into the depths of God.

You know, of course, about the connection between our celebration of Easter and the coming of spring. The date for Easter changes from year to year because the date is the first Sunday after the first full moon falling on or after the vernal equinox. It’s early this year—and it will be even earlier three years from now.

Just as both Easter and the arrival of spring—real spring—cannot be pinned to any single day, Resurrection cannot—and will not—be confined to any one season. Because there is no set date, we are reminded each year that Resurrection can happen any time.

Resurrection happens any time you discover God’s power working in you calling you into new life:

When you discover the grace that allows you to forgive, even though you’ve been hurt...

When you discover the strength to live by your deepest values instead of selling out to the highest bidder...

When you discover the hope that allows you to continue after disappointment or tragedy...

When you discover the courage to stand up for yourself, for others, to seek justice, to do the right thing rather than what’s convenient...

When you discover a sense abundance moving you to unexpected generosity...

Resurrection is happening regardless of the time of year or the day of the week.

Resurrection can happen at any time.

So, while our celebration of Easter is connected to the spring, it is not spring that we announce and celebrate in the church. Especially this Sunday, but, really, every Sunday of the year we proclaim the resurrection of Christ.

As John Updike put it in his poem, “Seven Stanzas at Easter:”

Make no mistake: if he rose at all

It was as His body;

...

It was not as the flowers,

Each soft spring recurrent;...

It was as His flesh; ours.

Easter speaks to us of something far greater than spring. It tells us something we *want* to hear, something we *need* to hear, because it speaks to us as people who know the weariness, the pain, the profound loneliness, the confusion, and the fear of living. It speaks a message of new possibility, new beginning to us. Our suffering is not ignored, but it is held in God's care, and we are transformed.

We are invited us to gain new understanding, to consider in new ways what the Resurrected One might mean for us.

In a world threatened by climate change, the risen Christ is a sign of God's renewal, calling us to renew the earth;

In a world ripped apart by hatred, violence, terror and war, the risen Christ is a sign that God overcomes evil and death, calling us to bring love and life and light to all nations;

In your own life this day, however calm, however tumultuous, the risen Christ is a sign of God's abiding presence, calling you—calling all of us—to bring our best to each encounter with other human beings, struggling and rejoicing as we do.

Resurrection sets our sight on the horizon and tells us to keep moving toward possibility, toward potential, toward wonder.

Each of the four Gospels tells a somewhat different story, but all acknowledge that women come to the tomb first. As Luke tells it, on a Sunday morning Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and other women come to tomb. On the previous Friday they saw how the body of the crucified Jesus was put in this rock-hewn tomb. On their arrival, they see that the stone that had sealed the entrance is rolled away.

Updike again:

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache,

Not a stone in a story,

But the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of

Time will eclipse for each of us

The wide light of day.

“The vast rock of materiality” is rolled away, revealing...nothing. I read recently someone asking: “Was the stone rolled away to let Jesus out, or to let the women in?”

Going inside the tomb, the women do not find the dead body they expected.

They are at a loss about this. They are “perplexed,” Luke says.

That is the effect that Jesus often had on his followers. It was usually difficult to get a grip on what he was saying, what he was doing.

As the women take in this situation, as they try to make sense of this startling reality, two men in dazzling clothes show up. Luke doesn’t come right out and say it, but in describing what seems to be the first occasion of people all dressed up for Easter, he is suggesting that these two are angels—a word, you will remember, that simply means “messenger.”

Now, you know—because I’ve said it often enough—that when angels appear in the Bible, the first thing they usually say is “Do not be afraid.”

But not this time—not as Luke tells the Easter story.

The women are terrified. And instead of words of reassurance, they are challenged by a question: “Why search among the dead for one who is alive?” Their motives and their very presence at the tomb are questioned. If they are looking for Jesus, they are in the wrong place, for one does not seek the living among the dead.

Easter begins with a message, not with a body.

This is good news, because that body thing is hard to believe—not impossible, not ridiculous, but *hard*. We know, as people two thousand years ago knew, that dead people do not rise. To take those two messengers seriously when they say: “He is not here, but has risen,” requires some effort on our part—or it requires the grace of God that makes faith possible.

Updike warns and challenges us:

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
For our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
Lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are embarrassed
By the miracle...

Your faith might be shaky. You may have no faith at all.

That’s OK right now.

All of us—those of great faith, those of little faith, those of no faith—all of us can listen.

Listen to the message that the Christ “has risen.”

If we seek Christ in the realm of the dead the question meets us again and again: “Why? Why do you search among the dead for one who is alive?”

The tomb is not the final destination.

We do not stop at the tomb.

We move on.

We are told—by angels, by emptiness, by our own great hope, by our own small faith—that we need to go away from the tomb into the world, from death to life.

The Resurrection invites to move away from the predictable, dying ways of anger, resentment, and bitterness. The Resurrection invites us to move toward possibility, miracle, and wonder, knowing that Christ is going on before us.

We can hope in the face of despair,

We can live the challenging way of peace,

We can welcome the stranger,

We can seek to love one another,

because we are no longer among the dead as we look for the One who is alive.

The resurrection of Jesus means that our days are filled with possibility.

At every turn there is wonder and miracle if we live with our eyes open.

The women hear the resurrection message and leave the tomb—because the tomb is not the place of resurrection.

These women are the *first* to bring good news to others. The women are witnesses to the resurrection. They are *apostles* equal to the men in their experience and their calling.

As is the case in all the Easter stories, a lot of people—all men in this case—had their doubts about the women’s story. A lot of people still do. Maybe you do.

A lot of breath has been spent in Easter sermons trying to “prove” the resurrection, trying to argue people into belief. But what convinced the people that Jesus had risen from the dead was not the arguments of others, not even an empty tomb. What convinced the people that Jesus had risen from the dead was a living presence.

Jesus is not in the tomb where they put him.

God is not confined in the places where we try to put God.

Jesus’ resurrection is the beginning, not the culmination of the Christian hope. The joy of Easter is not yet complete, but it is promised.

Keep moving.

We will not find Christ by visiting the tombs of the past.

But if we get up and move

If we recognize that we have died and have been raised with Christ to a new way of living

If we open our eyes to the new challenges and opportunities that come to us each day on this corner in this city

If we let the message of Christ—the new possibility—dwell among us in all its richness

We will see the risen Christ in our midst, in the midst of life all around us. We will discover wonders and miracles unexpected and undeserved that we might share with others.

Christ is risen.

He is going before us.

Let us follow.