

Christ Church *Sermons*

Easter: The Day of Resurrection, March 23, 2008

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Acts 1:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

TRAMPLING DOWN DEATH BY DEATH

Alleluia, Christ is Risen! It is the great cry of hope that issues from the Christian Church in every land and every tongue. In a Jerusalem tomb that is now part of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, every year at this time, a priest will walk into the absolute darkness. Like the women before him, he will expect to find only death and decay, misery and defeat. But, year after year, the darkness explodes with the new fire of God's unquenchable Life. In a matter of seconds, the flame passes from hand to hand, little candles and torches taking their light from that glorious Paschal light. Then, beginning with deep, powerful bass voices that resonate through the sepulchre like the voice of the angel of God who first rolled away the stone, like the earthquake shaking the foundations of a dying world, the song of victorious triumph begins: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and giving life to those in the tombs."

All over the world this song of unconquerable joy resounds – "Jesus Christ is risen, today;" "Welcome, happy morning, age to age shall say;" "The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun. Alleluia!"

Only song and symbol seem to come close to expressing the message of Easter. The preacher is always a pedantic intrusion into the celebration. For, the job of the Easter sermon is to talk about something that doesn't really fit into words. Every preacher in the land knows that he or she is not up to the task. Every preacher is grateful for the other ways in which the resurrection is celebrated – through music and hymns, organ and brass, flowers and trumpet song – through radiant faces, and scenes of little children gathering their Easter eggs. These are the things that bring us into the presence of the Easter mystery. But, song and symbol, prayer and liturgy go only so far. By themselves, they usually do not open the door to the transcendent glory of God. O, some of us may have the faith of that other disciple who enters the darkness of the tomb, sees only the grave cloths, and instantly believes. If such is your faith – well, blessings on you. That's almost as much a surprise at Christ Church as Easter, itself.

But, "Surprise" is what Easter's all about. For, even here, amidst old and cynical people like you and me, who have certainly been around the block a few times and are not likely to be fooled by a few hymns – even here, in our own lives and in the example of our own friends, we know, and we have seen, the power of the resurrection.

I'm thinking about someone who was very much a part of this church. So many little touches of beauty still grace our lives because of what she did and who she was. But, there came a time when she became gravely ill and knew that she would die – as we all must. She lived her last days with amazing grace and generosity. Then, when her body would no longer support her spirit, she gathered her family around her and asked for the prayers of the church – those awesome and, yet, wonderful prayers by which we express our resurrection faith. "Receive, O Lord, your servant, for she returns to you. "Wash her in the font of everlasting life." "Speak your words of invitation, 'Come, you blessed of my Father.'" "May she gaze upon you, Lord, face to face." "May angels surround her and saints welcome her in peace." "Now, let her heart and soul ring out in joy to you, O Lord, the living God, and the God of those who live." As we anointed her with oil, and

laid our hands upon her, and prayed these prayers, she – who was conscious all the while of what was happening – opened wide her arms, as if on the cross. And, we all knew, by that sign, that she gave herself, utterly and completely, back into the hands of God. She took hold of the Risen Christ, and walked with Him along that path which none of us, yet, has trod. She is only one of the saints of this congregation for whom I will be eternally grateful. She was, without a doubt, a witness to the resurrection. Like Mary Magdalene of old, she, too, confessed, “I have seen the Lord.”

In this world, we all simply stand at the threshold of the Easter Mystery, and we will go no further, unless we are willingly to enter it through the door of our own lives. For, Easter is not so much an historic event as it is the revelation of God’s will for humankind in all times and all places. Easter is God’s will for Life – Life even from the tomb – Life even when there is no way – Life that will use even the grim power of death to trample down death by death. What matters is that we are willing to receive that Life even in our weakness and in our sin.

The Risen Lord tells Mary Magdalene, “Do not cling to me” – Do not hold me as the prisoner of your small faith and your small expectations. Don’t keep me in stained glass windows or only for Sunday mornings. Go with me into the world, and into the heights and depths of your own life. Walk with me where there is no path. Find out for yourself that God’s will is always for Life in over-flowing abundance.

This is the tough reality of faith – we have to use it, or it’s not faith, at all. And, this is the core of our faith. This is the greatest treasure we have to hand on from age to age – our conviction that “Christ is risen from the dead, and that death no longer has dominion over him.” That’s not just true for Jesus. God wills that it also be true for us. So, where do we use this faith in our own life? What terrifying graves are we afraid to enter? What secret sins do we believe cannot be healed? The angels say to Mary Magdalene, “Why are you weeping?” And, maybe that’s the question we need to ask ourselves if we are to find an Easter faith. Why are you weeping? – What hurts inside? – What needs to be mended? – What still needs to be resolved? – What seems broken beyond repair – in our relationships? – in our family? – in the legacy we hope to leave the world? Many of us spend years and years unconsciously denying our wounds, or that we are searching for something that is lost. Perhaps, it is a lost love, or a lost sense of fulfillment in our work. Very often it is our lost dreams. Why are you weeping? That’s a good place to begin if we want to regain our Easter faith. For, even though we think these things are dead and gone, they still cry out from the grave to be touched, and healed, and raised up by the mercy of God and by the unconquerable power and the limitless victory of the Risen Christ.

Perhaps, you, too, come to this Easter service out of the darkness, just as the disciples of old. Perhaps, you are as confused and disbelieving as Mary Magdalene, and Peter, and Thomas and all the other disciples. Well, you are in good company. Faith that comes too easily is usually not faith at all. Real faith is born only when it confronts the sting of death. But, that’s just the thing about the Resurrection – its not really for believing people, or satisfied people. It is, precisely, for dead people. The hymns, the anthems, the well known prayers and readings, the color and the trumpet song, they’re all magnificent. But the real work of Easter is done down in the tombs; down where we have buried so much of what God still needs from us.

Today, the Risen Christ calls to you and me by name, just as he called to Mary Magdalene long ago. He meets us within the sepulture of our grief and our pain. He calls us forth from every grave. Let us go out to meet him. For, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and giving life to those in the tombs.”