

Resurrection
John 20:1-18, Easter, Year B
12 April 2009
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

A dear woman and her ever-nagging husband of fifty years, both of them unchurched, went on vacation to Jerusalem. While they were there, the man ate a bad matzah ball and died. The undertaker told the wife, “You can have your husband shipped home for \$5,000, or you can bury him here, in the Holy Land, for \$150.”

The woman thought about it and told the undertaker she would have her husband shipped home. The undertaker asked, “Why would you spend \$5,000 to ship your husband home, when it would be wonderful to have him buried here and you would spend only \$150?”

The wife replied, “Yesterday our tour guide told us about a man who died here, was buried here, and three days later rose from the dead. I just can’t take that chance!”

Folks who are not churched have a hard time understanding resurrection. But that’s o.k. Those of us who do darken the door of the church—at least this one Sunday per year—have trouble with resurrection, too. We’ve walked a long road since last Sunday. On that day, we celebrated Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, but with a bittersweet edge as when you know you’re celebrating a terminal friend’s last birthday. On Thursday we remembered Jesus’ poignant last evening with his friends before his chaotic goodbye. On Friday we grieved his death and our own sense of bereavement and loss. Each of those three days—Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday—is visceral. They connect with basic and familiar human emotions and sensibilities. They amplify experiences we have in our own lives, and that’s why our smiles on Palm Sunday are tender, our expressions on Maundy Thursday are shell-shocked, and our tears on Good Friday are real.

Easter is infinitely more difficult. Unbridled joy is the emotion of the day, and the locus of that joy, we are told, is resurrection. But though we search for another human experience similar to this particular kind of joy, we come up lacking, so we clothe our joy in what are some admittedly strange customs: celebrating giant rabbits who sneak into our homes at night and lay colored eggs.

Perhaps the best analogy to resurrection we *can* come up with in our lives is what I’d call the “New Year’s impulse,” when we make all those resolutions at the turn of the calendar year to reform or amend some part of our routine to better our lives, and then think of this as a kind of rebirth: *This year I will lose 20 pounds*, or *This year I will learn to play the guitar*, or better yet,

This year I will attend church more regularly. While all of these are commendable (especially the last one), is that what resurrection means? Is that what it looks like?

To answer that question, we need to join Mary Magdalene, who has just approached the tomb of Jesus. It is misty early morning, and Mary's eyes swim. For her, you see, it is still Good Friday. Mary had staked her life on Jesus and pinned her fortune to his. But there have been consequences to that. On Friday when he died on the cross, every hope in her life was crucified. She might as well have died, too. No resolution to better her life can change that. No reordering of things will make any difference. Even to try would be like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Can we step into her reality? Can we imagine what it feels like for life's course to be irrevocably set as a result of our decisions, and headed downhill fast? Many can. The news these days is replete with those who go so far as to harm themselves and others because they experience life as fixedly doomed. This must be what Mary feels. She goes to look at Jesus' body in the grave as final confirmation that all is lost. When he isn't there, for her the pit becomes unbelievably deeper. She is without hope, and the silence of a life without hope is deafening.

In that silence and through the dark and tears she barely sees the man who emerges from the mist. But when he speaks her name, it is so unexpected that her hopeless world is *shattered*, and a new world takes its place.

Mary sees Jesus in the dawn of that new day, and she sees him for who he truly is. He is *alive*, and she realizes that even her earlier expectations of who he was and what he was about are nothing more than a pale shadow of this reality. Being one with Jesus is *not* about a reordering of the old life, even a good reordering. Being one with Jesus is about looking upon his resurrected self and realizing that the future that *had* stretched before us—the fixed future of diminished possibilities and sometimes hopelessness—is blessedly *gone*. In its place the future is wide open. *That's* the source of this crazy joy we feel today.

This is a joy that realizes—unbelievably—that the future *isn't* determined by the events we have already experienced or endured in our lives, even those bad decisions in which we are complicit. The ultimate future, whatever we must endure at this moment, is, through Jesus' rising, opened wide by grace.

By the way, this is why we include, as we will today, the line “he descended to the dead” in the Apostles' Creed. Even for those for whom death had *already* appeared victorious, Jesus opened a new future.

New Year's Day is always a letdown. But for college bowl games, the wide-eyed hopes of the night before are caricatures in the bleary exhaustion of January 1. It is just another day. But what if you woke up this *Easter* morning, and *everything* were different?

It is. From this day forward, nothing is the same, not for Mary and not for us. *The reality that Jesus has bested death and risen now accompanies us in all our endeavors, all our lives.* It blows the future wide-open. Horizons are broader, and even what had seemed like the deepest pit is made shallow because Jesus stands at its other side.

We are invited to participate in Jesus' resurrection both now and at the end of days. *His* resurrection remakes *us*, so that the very basis—the ground—of who we are is found in his resurrected self. This is not a reordering of the old; this is *new life* altogether.

Like morning's song, today he speaks our name as he did Mary's in the garden, and for us, too, the deafening and hopeless silence is ended...

[Sung.]

In a garden just at dawn, near the grave of human violence
The most precious Word of Life,
Cleared his throat and ended silence
For the good of us all.

And he's here when we call him,
Bringing health, love, and laughter
To life now and ever after, for the good of us all.

Amen.