

# Just Imagine: The Real Miracle of Easter

## Easter Sunday, The Festival of the Resurrection

*Scripture: I Corinthians 15:35-37, 42-50; John 20:11-18*

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### *Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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We have come a long way in a few weeks. If you have been journeying with us, with Jesus on the Road Less Traveled, we have been in some dark environments, and we have felt the heaviness increasing until Thursday evening, the night in which he was betrayed, and Friday noon, the crucifixion. It has been a long way, and in a post-9/11 world, we have felt it more poignantly, perhaps, than at any time that I can remember. In the darkness, as it concluded, the end of the journey, we heard the mixed messages, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?", "Father, into thy hand I commend my spirit," and now here we are on Easter Sunday morning once again, amid the flowers in all of their beauty, and the flickering candles, the magnificent music, and this setting of Easter worship.

Is it too bright too soon? Do you ever feel that? Just too bright too soon to move out of that darkness into the splendor of this moment - is it simply too quick a transition? One of our families who faithfully worshiped throughout Lent and entered very, very thoughtfully into that journey with Jesus told me they came Thursday night but wouldn't be here this morning because they simply couldn't move that quickly out of the darkness and into the light. I respect that. I feel that somewhat myself. For, what are we celebrating this morning? What has brought us from that somber and sobering darkness into this beautiful moment? What is Easter, after all? What is it all about?

A simple answer which the Church has given down through the centuries, of course, is that obvious answer. Jesus died in order that I might live. Jesus died to open heaven's gate. He lives and now we, too, shall live. Easter is about resurrection. Easter is about that movement from life through death to life eternal. And certainly, that is no insignificant movement and that is no insignificant realization, particularly if, as we celebrated here yesterday, we experience the life of one loved and lost a while. Not an insignificant affirmation if one receives a terminal diagnosis and knows that one's days are numbered. And so, in no way do I want to say that promise of Easter, that Christian hope is without deep meaning and great significance.

But, think with me for a moment about that. Is that really what Easter is all about? Is Easter really all about the assurance to Richard Rhem that, at the point of his death, he need fear no darkness, for the light will dawn? I mean, what about all of the history that we have been traversing together? What about the journey of Jesus into the darkness of his day which seems to be replicated all too well in the post-September 11 world when Jerusalem is burning, when Hindu and Muslim are massacring each other, when the globe trembles with the anguish that has it in its grip. Is it really enough to say that Easter is about my personal, ultimate, eternal life? We've done that in the Church, of course. We have made that promise, and again it is not insignificant, but do you feel my question? Isn't there something more? Aren't we brushed into a broader canvas? Isn't there another story going on?

My own personal existence is one thing, but what about the whole cosmic movement of 15 billion years? What about the course of human history? What about this creature that we are who comes to consciousness and to awareness and who gives society and culture and civilizations? What about the vast canvas of human history? What about the awesomeness of creation? What about the human possibility, the human experiment? Isn't there more to it than whether or not I live and die and live again? Isn't that a narrow focus compared to the broader question? Haven't we missed what Jesus was all about?

Let me suggest to you this morning that perhaps Easter is about human transformation. Maybe Easter is about social transformation. Maybe Easter is about a dawning awareness of something new. Maybe Easter is about the transformation of the world. Maybe all of that in which Jesus was engaged and all of the struggle and the anguish of the human community is reflective of something deeper and something more, and maybe the followers of Jesus in the wake of his death had something dawn upon them that said, "My God! He lives!"

Resurrection and the nature of it has been debated and discussed from the beginning. Peter read the lessons, Paul's long 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Corinthians. The Corinthians were Greeks, somewhat philosophically inclined, and there were those who were saying there was no resurrection, and Paul said, if there is no resurrection, I have no message to preach, your faith is vain, our preaching is empty, nothing has happened then if there is no resurrection. But, when he got to try to explain what in the world resurrection was, Paul didn't know any more than you do. Did you hear the torturous way he was arguing about that resurrection? In fact, he starts off that one paragraph by saying, "You fool!" That's the kind of thing we do with one another when we're not sure, raise our voice, get shrill. Paul didn't know what he was talking about, of course. He certainly wasn't talking about corpuscles. He wasn't talking about a physical body. I thought some years ago I mentioned that Easter certainly wasn't about the resuscitation of a corpse. I really thought everybody understood that by now, but not everybody did. It ruined a few Easters, I think.

But, you know, if you just hear Paul, he says flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. What is buried is perishable; what comes forth is imperishable. He talks about a physical body and a spiritual body and, frankly, Paul is going around in circles because it's not about corpuscles for Paul, because Paul was on his horse and on his way to Damascus and the light knocked him off his horse and he had a vision of the ascended Lord and there were no corpuscles there. He had to go into the city and sit there in the darkness for a while and think about it. And what happened to Paul after his resurrection experience was a transformation, an absolute transformation and he was turned around in his tracks. He began to think differently and he became passionate about something of which he could never have dreamed.

John's Gospel, written some six decades after the event, John who is dealing with people who have no possibility of any kind of encounter with the corpuscular Christ, tells the story of Mary and she recognizes Jesus. And of course, in the story, she wants to grab him and he says, "Don't hold me, Mary." Well, John is simply saying, isn't he, that this thing is not about bodies? Or, Thomas who missed the Easter Sunday night service, shame on him. And when he's told about the fact that Jesus was there, he says, "I don't believe it. I won't believe it unless I can put my finger in the wounded hand." And then the next Sunday night he was in church and, without coming through a door, no corpuscles there, Jesus - a hand, a wounded hand without corpuscles, can you believe it? There you are, Thomas. Well, Thomas doesn't need to touch the hand, because Thomas suddenly sees something and he says, "My Lord and my God."

It is about transformation of understanding, about seeing something, and John writing six decades after the event has to deal with people whose only hope is to be able to believe it without handling it. As a matter of fact, it's not about handling it. It is about finally understanding it, it is finally to see what came to expression when the word became flesh. What was embodied in that life? That is the point - what came to expression, what was the story, what was that initial impulse of the Jesus story that led to the Jesus movement that caused people after his crucifixion to say, "The Lord is risen." Wasn't it that they began to see that in this human one, this human being, God was revealed? So, God is revealed as human. So, human beings are called to be human. And in these past weeks I have suggested that we, contrary to what we assume, are not human, we're advanced primates. But then someone suggested to me that that is a slander on the monkey world. Monkeys don't behave as poorly as we do. But, you get the point.

The point is that Jesus embodied something - some truth and beauty and grace flowed through that flesh, and they saw it, and he was crucified, and they were crushed, and they said, "Oh, but he lives!" What lives is what he embodied. What lives is that which he represented. What lives is what he incarnated. God lives. God's intention lives.

Easter is about human transformation. Easter is about seeing something. Easter is "Aha! I understand." Easter is Jesus getting through.

Sometime or other in the past I put aside this little sheet, thinking some Easter I'd need a message. I came across it recently going through a lot of old materials, and it talks about an *imaginal cell*, from imagination. An imaginal cell. It is about caterpillars and butterflies. You know, the butterfly is the symbol of Easter par excellence, the transformation. Well, this paragraph talks about imaginal cells. Let us compare our situation with a metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly.

When the caterpillar weaves its cocoon, imaginal disks begin to appear. These disks embody the blueprint of the butterfly yet to come. All of the disks are a natural part of the caterpillar's evolution. Its immune system recognizes them as foreign and tries to destroy them. But, as the disks arrive faster and begin to link up, the caterpillar's immune system breaks down and its body begins to disintegrate. And when the disks mature and become imaginal cells, they form themselves into a new pattern, thus transforming the disintegrating body of the caterpillar into the butterfly. The breakdown of the caterpillar's old system is essential for the breakthrough of the new butterfly. Yet, in reality, the caterpillar neither dies nor disintegrates, for from the beginning its hidden purpose was to transform and be reborn as a butterfly.

What a magnificent analogy. What a beautiful picture. Imaginal cells. Someone named them imaginal cells. I'd love to know the zoologist who did that. I'd love to know why he/she called them imaginal cells. Those are cells that, coming out of the egg, the caterpillar carries with it, and they lie dormant in the caterpillar for a period of time until they begin to make their move and then eventually, in the transformation, they become the imaginal cells. Are they not the cells, perhaps, that imagined the butterfly? And imagining the butterfly, eventually the butterfly becomes the reality of the caterpillar.

Imagination, you know, is one of the great human faculties, and we have denigrated it by saying, "Oh, it's only your imagination." Nonsense. Those who study the human person say the imagination may be that very place where the Spirit of God has the opportunity of imprinting the human mind. The imagination can take human language and create a whole new reality, because when we tell our stories, we create a new reality. Reality is language embodied, and the imagination is that faculty by which we can dream of something that has never been.

And what if all of the anguish and all of the travail of the present - what if Hindu and Muslim at each other's throat, what if the Arab world in all of its anger and its terror against us, what if Palestinian and Israeli, what if all of the shaking of the foundations in this present day is the travail and the birth pangs of a whole new world of which we have not yet dreamed? What if Easter is that indomitable

human hope, because of that creative spirit within us that keeps pushing us to imagine another way of being, a different reality, a transformed world? What if Easter is about the dawning awareness of that which has never been, except in the intention of God? What if Easter is about something we've not yet dreamed of and even now is underway?

Just imagine! That's the miracle of Easter.