

Easter Sermon, April 16, 2006
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Mark 16:1-8

The day of Resurrection! The day of the great unbelievable news about the empty tomb and about Jesus being raised. The women in Mark's gospel are told they will see him back home in Galilee. The empty tomb and the risen Jesus - presented so briefly by Mark, are at the heart of the Christian story. Without the Resurrection, we would not be here. The story would not hold.

There are many ways to believe in Resurrection, and I invite you to claim Resurrection faith in whatever ways this story rings true for you. I suggest that debates over whether the truth of the Resurrection is based on factuality (what a video camera would have recorded) or not, miss the point of Easter and get in the way of embracing its meaning.

Let's think about the truth of the Easter story - what it means - for you, for us, here and now. One of the best expressions of the meaning of Easter that I've run across was from my friend Tom Wright, actually a conservative theologian and Jesus scholar, now bishop of Durham in England. He was quoted in the Post on Friday by E.J. Dionne. Wright says this:

“When Jesus emerged from the tomb, justice, spirituality, relationship and beauty rose with him. Something has happened in and through Jesus as a result of which the world is a different place, a place where heaven and earth have been joined forever. God's future has arrived in the present ... a world full of new potential and possibility”.

How good this sounds in today's world! How much we need this hope. When we hear Mark's version of Easter morning, we can identify with the women going to the tomb. They are feeling inadequate. Who will roll the stone away? They aren't strong enough, and they are afraid once they see the stranger there with the amazing news that Jesus has been raised.

Inadequate and afraid. This is sometimes how I feel, and I suspect you do too, when we are confronted by our world's many problems, or - when we face problems closer to home - our own challenges, illnesses, pain and losses. We wonder who or what will help - how we will get through.

In Mark's gospel, the women discover this: the stone has been rolled away - the help they needed has been given, and, an entirely new reality is announced. Jesus is not dead, but raised, and, even better, they will see him, and it will be in Galilee, back home, where they live.

This is a story of transformation - of life-changing news, undreamed of possibility. It happened with the Resurrection of Jesus. Resurrection happens now - in the political world we all share and in our personal lives. The Easter Parable of Transformation does come true.

Last Saturday night I sat with a group of St. John's parishioners at the 20th anniversary celebration dinner for the Samaritan Ministry of Greater Washington - a network of partner parishes in which St. John's has been an active participant for years. In fact, our own Carolyn Peirce has just become President of the Board, and her remarks were gracious and eloquent. Samaritan Ministry is all about transformation and new life. Through the Next Steps program, people whose lives are falling apart are offered resources and coaching to get back on their feet. Often, just as in the gospel story, inadequacy and fear are the very real obstacles that keep folks bogged down.

At the dinner, the main speaker was Terry Hayes, a lovely woman who looked to be in her early forties. She told of the turmoil in her life because of serious health problems and a tragic murder in her family and then depression. She had been a firefighter, but found herself jobless and out of money and feeling hopeless. She saw an ad for Samaritan Ministry in the East of the River paper - even still, it took her two weeks to follow up. But when she finally overcame her fear of long lines, paperwork, being unable to cope, she walked into Samaritan Ministry's Southeast office, and a new world opened up. Case workers listened to her, helped her sort out the various obstacles she faced and helped her focus on how her life really could change. And it has - not overnight - but over a period of months during which Terry's own response to the help offered her resulted in a successful collaboration. She was radiant, engaging as she talked to this huge roomful of secure, well-off, well-dressed Episcopalians (mostly). Terry's life has been resurrected. Her inadequacy and fear have been met with help and new promise, and she is living this new life effectively and gratefully.

St. Augustine once said "We without God cannot, and God without us will not." This is an Easter truth - it's there in Terry's story and so many others, even though they don't make headlines. Easter offers us both the hope and the challenge of transformation in our world. Jesus' Resurrection was about God's vindication of him as what is intended for humanity vs. the domination systems of riches, pride and honor that ruled then - and still do. It was for the women who came to the tomb to receive the Easter message, tell it, which at first they were afraid to do, and finally, to live it - not in some new heavenly realm, but in Galilee, where they already lived. I think that's what we, who come today to hear the Easter message, are challenged to do as well.

But as much as we are challenged to reach for a vision of transformation, of Resurrection in the political realm, perhaps it is in our own very personal experiences that we encounter Resurrection most powerfully. Resurrection is, after all, an experience before it is doctrine. We celebrate Easter because we experience it for ourselves. The long ago event was then and stands for all time as the good news that Resurrection touches us - that Easter life can be a reality for all of us.

One of my all-time favorite poems speaks to me very personally of this power of Resurrection that reaches to us. Like the gospel story, it begins with inadequacy and fear. It doesn't refer to Easter morning, but rather to Jesus' beckoning of Peter across the water, but the invitation to new life and the love that is offered seem very much about a

personal experience of Resurrection. The poem is by David Whyte. It was read by my sister at Bill's and my wedding just about a year ago.

The Truelove

There is a faith in loving fiercely
the one who is rightfully yours,
especially if you have
waited years and especially
if part of you never believed
you could deserve this
loved and beckoning hand
held out to you in this way.

I am thinking of faith now
and the testaments of loneliness
and what we feel we are
worthy of in this world.

Years ago in the Hebrides
I remember an old man
who walked every morning
on the grey stones
to the shore of baying seals,

who would press his hat to his chest in the blustering
salt wind and say his prayer
to the turbulent Jesus
hidden in the water,

and I think of the story
of the storm and everyone
waking and seeing
the distant
yet familiar figure
far across the water
calling to them,

and how we are all
preparing for that
abrupt waking,
and that calling,
and that moment
we have to say *yes*,
except it will
not come so grandly,

so Biblically,
but more subtly
and intimately in the face
of the one you know
you have to love,

so that when
we finally step out of the boat
toward them, we find
everything holds
us, and everything confirms
our courage, and if you wanted
to drown you could, but you don't

because finally
after all this struggle
and all these years,
you don't want to any more,
you've simply had enough
of drowning,
and you want to live and you
want to love and you will
walk across any territory
and any darkness,
however fluid and however
dangerous, to take the
one hand you know
belongs in yours.

One of the great men of our era, William Sloane Coffin, minister, social activist, self-proclaimed Christian revolutionary, died this week. In both his public and personal life, he embraced passionately the promise of Resurrection - of new life out of death. He knew Resurrection as real experience, in the Galilees of our lives. In one of his Easter sermons, years ago, he said: "I myself believe passionately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because in my own life I have experienced Christ not as a memory, but as a presence." He continued, "So today on Easter we gather not, as it were, to close the show with the tune "Thanks for the Memory," but rather to reopen the show with the hymn "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." Amen