

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, April 9, 2023

Procession, Solemn Eucharist and Renewal of Baptismal Vows

The Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Elaine Farmer

on

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18 OR Matthew 27:57-66

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Touching the Mystery A Sermon Series for Holy Week 2023 Living the Mystery

Easter Day, the end of our Holy Week journey together, and the resolution of God’s story with us in the grand mystery of the Resurrection. No words can bear the weight of God or explain the Resurrection. It defies science and word games and nitpicking. When we try to explain it, our little words dull its brilliance. Our grand ideas fracture its fragile substance. Of course, we have hopes of the resurrection — of what we want from it or think it ought to do for us. But it glides like Banquo’s ghost among us, refusing to be confined by our minds or to conform to our dreams. It slips through our clumsy fingers the moment we think we’ve grasped its meaning, and retreats into a cloud of mystery again.

You may have noticed how often during this week I’ve turned to literature, especially the poets, to help make a point or colour an idea and it is when we speak of resurrection that we are most in need of the poets — those of the world as well as of the Bible. The great Canadian writer, Robertson Davies, wisely said, “when religion abandons poetic utterance, it cuts its own throat.” It is poetry and its metaphors that allow us to reach out to take the hand of God, that hand ever extended to us, to walk the spiritual path through our lives — *the way*, Jesus called it — and to embrace the idea of resurrection; embrace, I say, not understand. Embrace, for we ourselves must be as poets this day, remembering, as Shakespeare said:

The poet’s eye ...
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

For us this day the name is the Christ and the habitation is the human heart.

So we must simply try to touch the mystery and cling, not to facts, but to awe and wonder. After all, what facts do we have? Precious few. The story varies from gospel to gospel. The number of angels. Who was there; who wasn’t. Who saw what; who missed the moment. Who believed; who didn’t. The gospels agree on two things only. The tomb was empty. There was no body.

It's not a lot to go on and raises an obvious and familiar question. Why would the disciples — a raggle-taggle bunch of ill assorted nobodies who had no credibility as followers of a dead and discredited leader — have had the courage to face down potential hostility by proclaiming faith in that leader? Synagogue and state had already colluded to execute Jesus, and they would collude again to stamp on his followers like cockroaches if they crept out of hiding. The disciples had everything to lose and nothing to gain by sticking around. Nevertheless — eventually — they faced down the consequences and proclaimed, not just faith in their dead leader, but that he had risen from the dead.

But what exactly is resurrection faith? All the gospel accounts say the witnesses responded and believed because of the events. God is the active party. *God* chooses; *God* acts; the other players respond. The angel said *'he is not here; he is risen'*¹ — something they knew was impossible — and yet they believed. This is very different from responding to something understandable and reasonable, but it still doesn't tell us what resurrection faith is. So — let's look at other players in this drama. We're accustomed to speak of Mary Magdalene, the disciples, the Beloved Disciple, but what about the guards? Matthew says that *for fear of* [the angel they] *shook and became like dead men*². At some stage, they got over their shock because Matthew says the guards went and told the chief priests what had happened. Whatever they said, it convinced the priests to gather the elders and between them they cooked up a plan to hush it all up. The guards were bribed to keep their mouths shut, and told that things would be squared with the governor so they wouldn't be in strife.³ It's a political cover-up! The chief priests and the elders believed the guards' report of what happened at the tomb sufficiently to swing into political damage control but — this doesn't transfer into resurrection faith either.

It just says resurrection faith isn't based on facts or evidence. All the same, absence of facts and evidence doesn't mean we can throw up our hands and fall back on saying, "oh well, we just believe". That's dangerously close to unquestioning acceptance of a happy ending to the tragic life of a man who messed up. Who got into trouble with the authorities and got killed by the bad guys, but rose despite them, and so shall we do if we believe in the resurrection.

The story of Jesus of Nazareth, his life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension surely deserves more than to be reduced to a feel-good fairy tale where sentimentality rules, and doubts and difficulties are quietly swept out the door.

Let's approach this problem from another direction — what is there in the history and faith of these witnesses that led them all to accept the unacceptable, to believe the impossible, and some of them to step out into a new way of being? They were of a people who for thousands of years had recited their story: *'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt ... [and] became a great nation ... [but] the Egyptians treated us harshly and ... the God of our ancestors ... brought us out of Egypt ... [and] gave us ... a land flowing with milk and honey.'*⁴

They remembered how they lost that land and how, as captives in exile by the rivers of Babylon, they had wept, *how [can] we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*⁵ They remembered how their prophet Jeremiah proclaimed the words of God saying, "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people ... I am going to ... gather them from the farthest parts of the earth ... With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back."⁶ I have loved you with an everlasting love," said God, "therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you"⁷.

This is the thread through all their tumultuous history — the faithfulness of God to them. That history encompassed countless endings. Destruction. Death. Loss of hope. 'God-with-us' was real to them because in their history they experienced God as the one who led them, guided them and rescued them from misfortune despite their sin and faithlessness. God had remained gracious and faithful and they had survived. And some of them saw again in the man Jesus — who lived among them in brutal dangerous times of new submission under the Romans — the gracious action of the God who had acted to free them so often before with *a mighty hand and an outstretched arm*, so their scriptures said, *and with signs and wonders*.⁸ For those who believed, in Jesus was 'a new wonder'. A man like them, but who had risen from the dead.

To learn something about resurrection faith I suggest we need to learn from the experience of these ancestors, and begin in the same place — with the endings. With the dreams that have died. The hopes that have withered. The deaths we have mourned. The ones we have buried. The elderly parents. The friends. The dead babies. All the loved and lost ones for whom we have prayed that the story of this day is true and that we will meet them again in the brilliant light of God. This is the day that God has made for us to rejoice and be glad because of this hope. Of course, life lived with hope does not mean life without suffering and pain. It didn't for Jesus and it doesn't for us. Memories and pain are jostling to get in at the door, and we need to let them crowd in here and squeeze in among us. It's with these lost loves and hopes and dreams that we begin to catch a glimpse of the God who has suffered for us and who suffers with us. The god of resurrection faith.

Faith becomes resurrection faith, I think, when we experience God-with-us in the wilderness places of our lives. When we take hold of God's grace and hope with both hands. And cling to it, even when death and disappointment plague us and faith falters or fails. And carry it with us out of the empty tombs of our lives to Galilee where the light of Christ shines for us and we say, 'here I am, I believe'.

Resurrection faith hovers with us each time we hold out our hands at the eucharist, that great thanksgiving — even with grief still breaking our hearts and doubts still lingering in our minds — and are fed by the God who loves us. Even as we whisper, "Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed." Even as we remember that God has spoken The Word, who became flesh and dwelt among us, and now feeds us with courage and with hope. How else can we respond to that but with awe and wonder?

Let me leave you with a story from the world which touches the mystery of this day. From the book, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, by Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini. It tells of Mariam, Muslim woman and *harami*, bastard; in other words, an outsider, rather like the chief priests and the scribes view of Jesus. A bitterly hard life made her think 'love was a damaging mistake, and its accomplice, hope, a treacherous illusion'.⁹ These two, love and hope, eventually entered her life though she resisted mightily. After her death, her friend, Laila, mourned her but she, too, learned a comforting truth:

"She wished she could visit Mariam's grave," she mused, "to sit with her awhile, leave a flower or two. But Laila sees now that it doesn't matter. Mariam is never very far. She is here ... in the trees they've planted ... in the children's laughter. She is ... in the prayers she mutters ... But mostly, Mariam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns."¹⁰

Just so does the Christ shine in our hearts. This story we have followed this Holy Week, for all its horror and gruesomeness, despite 'the fact of evil, the difficulty of virtue, the fickleness of [our hearts]'¹¹, does, like Mariam's and Laila's, have an end that speaks of hope and future.

Sentence was passed, and [Jesus] was led away. Crucified, dead, and buried, he yet rose in the hearts of his disciples who had loved him and felt he was near. Tried by the world, condemned by authority, buried by the Churches that profess his name, he is rising again, today and tomorrow, in the hearts of [all] who love him and feel he is near.¹²

Christ is risen! Hallelujah! **AMEN**

¹ Matthew 28:6

² Matthew 28:4

³ Matthew 28:11-15

⁴ Deuteronomy 26:5

⁵ Ps 137:1-4 selectively

⁶ Jeremiah 31:1-9 selectively

⁷ Jeremiah 31:3

⁸ Deuteronomy 26:8

⁹ Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2007, p.249

¹⁰ Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2007, p.402. This quotation adjusted.

¹¹ A.N.Wilson, *The Vicar of Sorrows*, Penguin, 1994, pp.286-287.

¹² Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (2nd Ed., Berlin/New York, 1974), p.208. found in Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection*, Penguin Books, 2008, p.152. The Winter text reads “in the hearts of men” not of “all”.