

**Easter Sunday
April 17, 2022**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the spirit.
Amen.**

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

What a beautiful day ... even if it may rain later this afternoon! Easter celebrates new life and even here in St. Augustine seeing flowers and trees and plants come alive again after winter is one symbol of that new life. But today we celebrate more than flowers and budding trees. Today we celebrate the power of God to bring new life out of death, to give us joy instead of weeping, to empower our lives into wholeness after being broken. It is a joyous Easter Day!

Today is the first Sunday after the first full moon following the Spring Equinox. That is why Easter is celebrated while our Jewish sisters and brothers celebrate the Passover. Passover began on Friday evening with that first full moon. Jews are celebrating the Exodus ... freedom from their oppression under Pharaoh ... and freedom from all oppression. We Christians are celebrating the Resurrection ... freedom from the oppression that death of all kinds holds over us.

This morning we heard Luke's story of the empty tomb. The women rose early and took spices expecting to prepare the body of Jesus. But the tomb was empty except for two angels. "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" they asked. The women reported this to the other disciples but their story was dismissed as foolishness. Only after Peter ran to the tomb and found it as the women had said, did the disciples begin to experience the amazement of the event.

These few verses are just a snippet of the bigger story. Two thousand years after they were written they are, for us, Good News. But what must it have been like on that first Easter morning. Remember, it was the week of the Passover Festival in Jerusalem. Jewish pilgrims from all over Israel had flocked to the holy city. Watching over the pilgrims were the occupying Roman troops on high alert for those they considered rabble rousers, troublemakers, and firebrands ... firebrands like the one they thought they had found in Jesus. Along with two others, Jesus had been hung on a cross to die on Friday.

The disciples of Jesus, and the others that had followed him throughout Galilee, must have been devastated with grief. And, I imagine that at the same time, they were living with an overwhelming fear that they might suffer a similar fate.

Jesus wasn't just a companion ... a friend ... or a family member to those people. He was a person in whom those close to him saw love expressed in ways they had never known or seen before. To them, Jesus was a person who had such a sense of who he was ... who he was as a beloved child of God ... born of goodness, for goodness ... that they saw God alive in Jesus. Not only that, but he was always encouraging others to be more than who they thought they were ... more than they thought they could be ... more than the labels that the world placed upon them. He empowered those around to him to live into the full image of the God in which they were made. And, the blind were made to see ... the deaf could hear ... the lame took up their mat and walked ... the marginalized were included ... those who were broken by sin were made whole. Jesus was someone who brought life to those who thought they were dead to others in the world around them.

This was the Jesus who died on the cross. Not only was there the personal grief of the loss of Jesus, but it was the loss of hope for what might have been. And I imagine that there was at least a deep questioning about the God of Jesus ... their God ... who let Jesus die the way that he did. If God really was all that Jesus had said that God was, then why did this God allow this to happen?

From Friday afternoon when Jesus died until Sunday morning the disciples and the rest of the band of followers of Jesus had to live with these feelings. Grief ... fear ... loss of hope ... perhaps even the beginning of a questioning of their faith. And then the women went to the tomb ... at the break of dawn ... and they found it empty.

At the break of dawn ... that is when Easter really begins. It begins in darkness. It begins with fear, bewilderment, pain, and a profound loss of certainty. The creeds and clarifications we cherish nowadays came later ... hundreds of years later.

When I was a student in seminary ... and for many people today ... the key Easter fact to proclaim was that Jesus rose from the dead ... physically, bodily, and literally. As long as one intellectually believed in the historicity of the resurrection, they were safe ... they were considered to be faithful Christians. However, I was one of a very few who expressed doubts about that historicity, and I learned that there were other ways to understand the resurrection ... and that is still true today.

In my almost fifty years of ordained ministry I have encountered other versions of the Easter narrative ... other versions of the Easter narrative that coincided with my evolving faith. I found I was not alone in seeing the resurrection as a potent symbol of transformation, renewal, and rebirth ... not necessarily a literal, historical fact. What I have come to embrace is whether or not Jesus physically rose from the dead isn't the issue ... at least for me. The fact is that his friends and followers experienced his continued presence, and the only way to convey that extraordinary knowledge is found in the story of the resurrection.

The fact is the resurrection happened in total darkness. Sometime in the predawn hours of that Sunday morning, a great mystery transpired in secret. No sunlight illuminated the event. No human being witnessed it. And even now, two thousand years later, no human narrative can contain it. It exceeds all of our attempts to pin it down, because it's a mystery known only to God.

Whatever the resurrection was and is, its fullness lies in holy darkness, shielded from our eyes. All we can know is that somehow, in an ancient tomb on a starry night, God worked in secret to bring life out of death. Somehow, from the heart of loss and misery, God enacted salvation. God's love transcended death then ... and God's love still transcends death today.

Not only did the women find the tomb empty, but two angels were there ... "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" In the confusion of all that had just happened, what could this possibly mean? Two thousand years after that first Easter morning scholars and theologians have put lots of meaning to the resurrection, but can you imagine the confusion of the women at the tomb in that darkness just before dawn?

Even after the forty-day fast of Lent, we continue daily to empty ourselves of all that separates us from God and one another, so that there will be room in our lives for this new life given to us in the resurrection of Jesus. In a sense, we seek continually to be like Joseph of Arimathea's borrowed tomb on the third day ... emptied of death and fear and sorrow, and liberated by the resurrection of Jesus to embrace new and unending life.

"Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" It did not take long for the disciples to understand that what Jesus had preached in his earthly life was true even in his death. The God of all creation has the power to bring new life out of death. Death could not ... and cannot ... stop God's love. The God who had the power to make even the barren become fruitful. The God who could rescue those in bondage and lead them to freedom. The God who could restore an exiled nation to its homeland. The God who could make the lame to walk, and the deaf to hear, and the blind to see. This God also had the power to give life to Jesus even after his death on the cross.

The accounts from the Torah, and the words of the Jewish prophets, that Jesus had quoted in his earthly life, now took on new meaning. The stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Exodus, the return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile, the call for Jubilee and a restoration of God's plan of salvation ... they all became extremely real. They weren't just stories of the past ... they became as real as Jesus' life had been when he was among them ... and as real as his resurrected life would become for the Church in generations to come.

Remember, this isn't just a story about the past, about an event 2,000 years ago. If it means anything at all to faithful people today it means that we can live with the knowledge and hope that God has the power to bring new life when we die those many small deaths everyone who risks living in God's image is going to experience. Things that are old will be made new ... what has been torn down will be built up again ... when life has been sucked out of you there is still more life to live in all its fullness.

Oppression and violent death are cruel and merciless. They bring suffering wherever they exist. Yet, the message of Passover and Easter is hope ... the muscular kind of hope that can conquer death-delivering fear.

When we live a life of muscular hope, we live the life of the resurrection. In his earthly life Jesus lived and preached that God wants this Creation to move beyond its limitations into the fullness in which God created it ... and that includes you and me. God wants our hearts and souls to see and hear in ways that we could never imagine. God wants us to live beyond the burden of guilt and to know God's love for us so that we may express our own love in the world around us. And, on this Easter Sunday, after the world killed Jesus on Good Friday, we see the power of God to bring life out of death in his resurrection.

Jesus showed us what it really means to love ... to love God and to love others ... the dispossessed, the outcasts, the marginalized, the stranger, the refugee, the immigrant ... Jesus showed us what it really means to love others so much as to be willing to die for them. This was God's love ... through Jesus ... in action. Jesus could love in that way because he knew the fullness of God's love, and he trusted God wherever that love would lead him. After Jesus' death his disciples understood that love in a way they did not ... nor could not ... understand or know when Jesus was alive. When the disciples finally understood the depth of that love ... and could make it their own ... that was when Jesus was alive to them again. That was the resurrection moment for them.

In the abundance of our Easter joy and celebration, may we not forget how empty and broken are the hearts of God's beloved in Ukraine, and other innumerable war-torn places around the world. We also remember those who live with the oppression of prejudice, racism, and inequality. As Easter people, we are called to fill that emptiness with hope and healing, with humility and compassion, and with the generous, unconditional, impartial, and inclusive love of God.

To that end, we pray on Easter morning that, emptied continually of self-interest and self-focus, we will have room in our souls for all that God intends for us to bring to the world. May our sins of prejudice and pride, of self-protection and self-service, of resentment and retaliation, be buried time and again with Jesus. May our doubt and despair, our fear and shame, and our violence and narrow-mindedness be abandoned as we join his sacrifice. And in their place, may we find a spaciousness for that peace that

passes all understanding, and that love that knows no bounds, so that we, ourselves, may together be the risen body of Christ.

Today we celebrate the power of God to bring new life out of death, to give us joy instead of weeping, to empower our lives into wholeness after being broken, to throw off the burden of guilt once and for all, so that we may live in God's loving forgiveness. May we all live in the knowledge, and the hope, that God's power to bring life out of death can be lived in our lives today.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.