

Easter, Yr. A  
April 16, 2017  
John 20:1-18

There's a story about a priest who preached a sermon that offended one of his parishioners who, on the way out the door said, "If Jesus heard that sermon, he'd be rolling over in his grave!" But to say that is to miss the Easter message that the grave was empty!

It's interesting to think about Christmas and Easter. At Christmas, we have pageants, with cute kids and all the rest of it, we have decorating and presents and, at the center of it all, that sweet and vulnerable baby. The Incarnation has a powerful message about God's love but it's softened somehow because it's centered on the infant. With all the things that babies mean to us, they aren't intimidating.

But Easter is a bit different. It too has a powerful theological message, but it confronts our deepest questions and our deepest fears. Easter is about coming face to face with the resurrected, victorious, transformed LORD of the universe. Preaching at Christmas, with the old, familiar beloved story is hard enough, but at Easter, the preacher is confronted with the inadequacy of language in the face of mystery.

But the Easter message is central to our faith. So let's look at that message.

First of all, Easter is about the sure and certain hope of our own resurrection, about the fact that if we have died with Christ, we will surely live with him. But that's not all; there's much more. Easter is not just about individual salvation, it's about the fact that we can live differently here and now by the power of the Resurrection. So, as N.T. Wright says, it's about life after life after death. Phillips Brooks says it this way: Resurrection is not so much that we are to live forever as that we are to live nobly now BECAUSE we are to live forever.

Easter is a new creation, the beginning of God's reign, God's kingdom here on earth. It's the beginning of that movement by which God is setting right all the things that have gone off the rails. To think about that, I'd like to look at John's Gospel, especially his prologue, in the context of the widest possible Biblical arc – starting with Genesis and ending with Revelation. And if you do that, it's all about LIGHT.

Remember the very beginning of Genesis. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the Earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep...And God said, "Let there be light. And there was light." And then go all the way to the end, to the Book of Revelation which says, describing that new heavenly city, "The city did not need sun or moon for light since it was lit by the radiant glory of God." And then put John's prologue in the middle of that: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God – Jesus, present from the beginning, present from the start of creation, bringing things into being. And John says that what he brought into being was life ... "and the life was the light of all humankind, it was a light shining in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it..." John goes on to tell what we all know, that the light came into the world but some didn't recognize it and some outright

rejected it. But to those who accepted it, he gave the power to become children of God. We have seen his glory, says John, full of grace and truth.

It's fascinating to compare this with the Big Bang theory of creation. Scientists describe the creation, the Big Bang, as a single, blinding pulse, a moment of glory much too swift and expansive for any form of words. The singularity, which is everything that is, every last particle of matter squeezed into a spot so infinitesimally small that it has no dimensions at all. And in less than a minute this singularity has expanded to be a million billion miles across and growing fast. There's a lot of heat, 10 billion degrees of it, enough to begin nuclear reactions that create the higher elements. And now we have a universe, a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility and beauty and all done in the time it takes to make a sandwich. (Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*) One Stanford cosmologist, when asked what caused this Big Bang said, "Well, these are very close to religious questions." Yes, indeed.

Rowan Williams, the former ABC, simply says that Easter is a second Big Bang, a surge of divine energy as fiery and intense as the very beginning of the Universe. Easter is nothing to be trifled with.

For science, light creates life; for John, life and light and love are cognates. But for John, something else is going on in the light and that is that light enables SEEING in the sense of coming to know and believe and then to live in accord with what's been seen. The light of Christ illumines Reality. So it's worth asking what we see that's been revealed in the light of Christ – both by his life and by his death.

- We see, first and foremost, the nature of God. God as the one who loves without bounds, God is the one whose very essence is about self-giving, the one who is always creating new possibilities, the one for whom love and life are the final answers, the one who wills nothing but blessing.
- We see also that, in face of suffering and death, in the face of evil and failure, Jesus, as God, does not respond in kind. In the face of evil, he speaks forgiveness; in the face of hatred, he speaks love. His response is not, as the world's almost always is, to act to dominate, or to take revenge. His response is always about life. You'll remember his statement - I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.
- We see that, as God originally intended, life is meant to be about peace and union and not about division and discord. Life in this new kingdom of God is to be about community and not hierarchy, about compassion and inclusion and not domination and exclusion.

So, the resurrection is a preview of the great future that awaits all creation. God has established in Christ this new creation that will no longer know dying or separation. There will be tears, but they will be tears of joy, not tears of mourning.

And why does this matter to us? Because this is the life we're being offered right now, the life we, as disciples, are challenged to live right now. A life that recognizes that we are imperfect and cracked vessels, but that we are full of glory because God's divine and self-giving love dwells within us. We, like God, are being asked to always choose to be on the side of life – to

choose against everything that diminishes life – whether that’s fear or poverty, despair or loneliness, violence or oppression. We, and the world, are being transformed and we’re asked to cooperate in both those transformations.

Two things in closing. One is from Thomas Merton, who tells that in the old days, on Easter night, Russian peasants would carry the blessed fire home from church. The light would scatter and travel in all directions through the darkness and the desolation of the night would be pierced and dispelled as lamps came on in the windows of the farmhouses, one by one. Even so, the glory of God sleeps everywhere, ready to blaze out unexpectedly in created things. Even so, his peace and his order lie hidden in the world, even the world of today, ready to reestablish themselves in his way, in his own good time – but never without the instrumentality of free options made by free people. (*The New Man*)

And to end, a story illustrating just that. It’s told by Anne Lamott in her book *Traveling Mercies* about an incident at a little church she was attending – a miracle she called it.

One of our newer members, a man named Ken, is dying of AIDS, disintegrating before our very eyes. Shortly after Ken started coming, his partner died of the disease. A few weeks later Ken told us that right after Brandon died, Jesus had slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon’s loss left, and had been there ever since. Ken has a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiles, he is radiant. He looks like God’s crazy nephew Phil. He says that he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus. And us. There’s a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, and who has been a little standoffish toward Ken. She has always looked at him with confusion, when she looks at him at all. Or she looks at him sideways, as if she wouldn’t have to quite see him if she didn’t look at him head on. She was raised in the South and was taught that his way of life – that HE – was an abomination. It is hard for her to break through this. But Ken has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face even more lopsided, as if he’s had a stroke. Still, during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, of how safe and happy he feels these days.

So on this one Sunday, for the first hymn, we sang “Jacob’s Ladder” and Ken couldn’t even stand up. But he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap. And then when it came time for the second hymn, we were to sing, “His Eye is on the Sparrow.” The whole congregation stood – only Ken remained seated – and we began to sing, “Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?” And Ranola watched Ken for a moment and then her face began to melt and contort like his and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up – lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her draped over and against her like a child while they sang.

Easter life – here and now as well as forever. Amen.