

Sermon, Easter Day

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

If you want new life, look for it in a place of death. If the Resurrection is what you really want, you will not find it anywhere else.

No one was more surprised to learn this than Mary Magdalene. As the first disciple to go the tomb, she was the first to discover it empty. As the apostle of this great Good News, she was also the first to encounter the risen Christ. “Mary!” says Jesus, standing just outside the tomb. “Rabbouni!” is her joy-filled reply — even as the tears are still sliding down her cheek.

Expecting a lifeless body in a grave, she found the risen Jesus in a garden. Anticipating death, she was startled to find life. And not merely life as it had been before, but a new and transformed life that springs from death itself.

The Resurrection, you see, did not just happen to Jesus. It happened and will happen over and over again, in our lives and in the life of the world. God has woven it into Creation, into the very DNA of our existence. The stories from the Bible point the way. Peter was supposed to be the best and brightest of the disciples. But he denied Jesus three times in a humiliating moment of weakness. Yet, this is the same Peter who later proclaims the Easter message — the “rock” of faith on which the Church is built.

St. Paul was once the most zealous persecutor of Christians, even as a silent accomplice to the stoning of Stephen, the first known martyr. “I am ... unfit to be called an apostle,” he confesses. “But by the grace of God, I am what I am” — the architect of Christianity as we know it today. The new life of the Resurrection became a reality for Mary, Peter and Paul — because they discovered it through weakness, failure and death.

Yes, death.

The dawning rays of Easter appear first at the tomb. Easter lilies grow best in soil made with things that have died. The yellow and green palm branches we waved last Sunday will be burned and used next Ash Wednesday — the day when a grayish-black cross once again will be smudged across our foreheads. In the Christian message, death and new life cannot be separated, because they are two essential parts of the same Mystery.

I have the privilege of bearing witness to this through the work I do as a priest. As we go about ministering to the souls in our congregation, we get to see first-hand the way that death and new life are linked together. Last year, I was startled when Maria made a comment to me just after a funeral at the end of Lent: “We ought to have a memorial service every year at the start of Holy Week.” The wisdom of her words came back to me this year when, sure enough, our Easter celebration is being preceded and followed by funerals. Christian burials proclaim the unbreakable link between death and new life. Two days ago, I stood in this same spot and recited the ancient words, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.”

In a similar vein, our Easter Vigil service last night began in the dark and ended in bright light. In the liturgy, we traced the pattern of this mystery in the Old and New Testaments. We remembered that, in baptism, we are buried with Christ in death. And in the very next moment, we rise with him from the waters of death to the divine life of grace. The Christian message is not the avoidance of death or the immortality

of the soul. It is Resurrection — springing from the grave ... and only from the grave. Not life after death, but life in and through death itself.

Listen again to Peter's proclamation of the Mystery: "They put [Jesus] to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day" (Acts 10). "Christ died" for us, says Paul, "he was buried, and ... raised on the third day" (1 Cor. 15). Buried and raised; death and resurrection.

We cannot have Easter without the anguish of Gethsemane and the passion of Good Friday. The miracle of Easter did not start on Sunday morning, but on a cross — where a man poured out his life so that God would fill him with the Spirit that gives life to us all. God raised Jesus to this new life — but first, he had to embrace death. There was no end-run around mortality; the path of resurrection ran straight through the heart of death itself.

So, if you want new life — for yourself, for others, for the world — you have to make peace with failure, weakness and decay in all their forms. It's a Christian principle that can help us see the hand of God at work in every situation. If, for example, the carmaker GM declares bankruptcy, it may mean the death of Detroit as a major engine of American industry. But it may also lead to new forms of transportation that use less energy, do not pollute as much, and eventually release us from dependence on foreign oil. If our Diocese and our denomination literally cannot afford to carry out ministry in the ways we've become accustomed, God may be opening a door for new ministries that more effectively touch the hurts and hopes of the people around us. And if our country can no longer be called a "Christian nation" — as many are now concluding — then a new and more vibrant kind of Christianity might just emerge from the ashes of the old.

This is in fact the implication of an article I received recently from one of you. In the April 13th edition of *Newsweek*, there is a long feature story which bears the ominous-sounding title, "The End of Christian America." In it, Jon Meacham says that new survey results show the number of Americans who claim affiliation with Christianity is declining at an unprecedented rate. And it concludes that the "historic foundations of America's religious culture" are "cracking."

If you are not inclined to look for the Paschal mystery, you could simply stop there, throw up your hands, and join the cynics in concluding that the end is near — that our country really is going to hell in a hand-basket. Or, you could read on and find those interjections from the writer that bear the hope of the resurrection. In Meacham's opinion, the decline of Christianity as a shaper of our culture is "good" for us who still follow Christ. If we can no longer claim Christianity as the dominant religious force, we can re-discover "the virtues of a separation between church and state" — because, he says, "the church is truest to its core mission when it is farthest from the entanglements of power." And a more marginalized Christianity "may help open the way for a more theologically serious religious life." Perhaps more people will actually "count the cost," as Jesus admonished all his followers, before committing themselves to the crucified way of life.

The mystery of our faith says that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. We are dying, we are rising, we are being re-born — and in so doing, we shall live again. Easter didn't just happen 2,000 years ago, or even once a year; it happens every day and at every moment.

Some of you know that I am coming out of a difficult and sometimes dark chapter in my personal life. In the past two years, I went through depression and a period of chronic insomnia. It's only by looking back that I can begin to understand how death and resurrection were at work in this time of trial. At times, it felt as if part of me was dying. There were times when I didn't know where or who God was anymore. Left to my

own devices, there also were times when I fully understood the concept that there was “no health” left in me. Within my spirit — in my inner life — some old ways of thinking and feeling and behaving needed to die. So in the midst of this crisis, I literally had no choice except to let go and let God. To let God bring about *the new life that could not be born* until some part of the old creation was dead and buried.

“While we live,” says Paul, “we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake — so that the [new] life of Jesus may be made visible” in us (2 Cor. 4:11). Later in the same letter, he says, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away!” (5:17). This new self grows a little stronger every time we allow part of the old one to be crucified. Maybe that’s why Jesus said that we must become like children to enter the kingdom (Matt. 18:3)!

My sisters and brothers, if you want new life, do what Mary did: look for it in a place of death. As Christians, we can declare confidently that death is the midwife of the resurrection. The words of our burial service remind us that “in the midst of life, we are in death.... Give us faith to see in death the gate of eternal life” (BCP, pp. 492-3).

... through Jesus Christ Our Lord, the One who lived, died, and rose again for us and for the life of the world.

AMEN.