“He is Not Here, and So He Is”

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April 20, 2025 - Easter

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I must have begun a sermon in the way I am about to some years ago, because I saw a Facebook memory of a former parishioner quoting my having done so. Whoo hoo! I guess I’m not surprised, and I would say it again today and invite you to join me, with as much or more enthusiasm, even, as Whoo hoo! we proclaim aloud, Christ is Risen! Alleluia! Easter morning is attached to a lot of familiar images, each of them strong and sure. One continues from last week, when we thought together about the stones beneath the feet of Jesus and his followers as they made their way into Jerusalem. This morning, we know a larger rock—rolled away from its place as guard and keeper of Jesus’ body, crucified and buried. Like the stones that would cry out Jesus’ kingship, this new stone cries out with us, Hallelujah! He is not here, he is risen!

We have images throughout the sanctuary today that bring us in our memories to other Easters, to the moments in which we have wondered at and wondered about resurrection. ‘Often called the "White-Robed Apostles of Hope,’ lilies are said to have been found growing in the Garden of Gethsemane after Christ's agony.” The pictures of seeds and palms that I shared earlier are images like these, metaphors for the way in which God took a life that had ended and raised it up to newness. And at the front of the sanctuary we have our cross. I say *our* cross, because it symbolizes for us the way in which we now own what Jesus has given to us—eternal life, by God’s grace. And this, the most central symbol of our faith, does not repeat the image of Jesus’ dying body, but is empty. “He is not here, he is risen.” This morning, we can hold that idea close, and hang on it our hopes and our dreams—even the ones we have come close to giving up.

 The message from Isaiah today is one of my favorites, with echoes of Verse 43, in which we also hear how God will do a new thing, and how we are not meant to remember the past. For some of us this is great news. Some of us may find ourselves wanting to hang onto *some* of what we know with tight fists. Still, things change, don’t they, and some changes are more than a little difficult to swallow. It was several months ago that a friend of mine, perplexed and dismayed by circumstances in his life, in our nation, and around the world, asked me why, if God loves us so much, did he come only once to Earth, and 2,000 years ago? Maybe some of us want to chime in with the same or a similar question?

And why, if God became human in Jesus, did he let himself be killed? Walking through Lent, and particularly through Holy Week services, the weight of Jesus’ suffering can weigh heavily on us. Yet today, we gather to celebrate. Jesus Christ is risen! With this statement, one *could* almost forget the past week with its somber reflection and the underlying sense of foreboding. And we should, in some ways, forget it. By God’s grace, God became human in Jesus Christ, not only teaching us a new way of living in love, but also giving us the firmest examples of peace. Still, maybe some of us still wonder about Jesus’ life and death, and maybe some of us want to make of the notion of resurrection a simple metaphor. There *are* beautiful and powerful metaphors about resurrection that we hang onto, and that give us a sure sense of the possibility for change in this world. This is *not* the resurrection we are celebrating today, however. What God has done with the human life, which he bore, is beyond metaphor. It is beyond our reckoning of possibilities for change. The new thing that God offers us in Jesus is indeed a mystery, but not so inscrutable that we shouldn’t want to know it and understand it in a profound way, and as a possibility in our own lives. *That possibility* is what we know to share with one another when we look at the world with wonder that is sometimes devoid of hope. I hate to say with that, “Can I get an amen,” but maybe you sit in that space along with me these days.

Why, if God so loved the world, did God become one of us, only to die on the cross? Those of you who worshipped here together during this Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday, finishing with Good Friday, and including our Maundy Thursday Tenebrae service may have been wondering this. What do we do with the betrayal of even Jesus’ closest friends? How do we make sense of the kind of political workings that would condemn an innocent man, because of fear and a desire for continued power? Some stories of the depth of humanity’s capability for evil feel as though they turn on repeat mode, don’t they? And God so loved the world that God became human, and so God knows with absolute certainty the difficulties that each one of us faces. God understands the patterns of violence that humans are prey to. And God wants no more of it. God didn’t want our fear and sadness 2,000 years ago, and God doesn’t want it now.

I am so very grateful to have arrived at a nearly constant litany in my mind of the words of the two men, or angels at the tomb. Jesus is not here; he is risen! For Jesus to rise, he had to die. But he had to die so that there would be *no more sacrificial deaths; no more scapegoating others for our own wrongs; no more using persons as a tool for political gain.* Jesus willingly died so that we might live and live fully the abundant life God wants for us. God *did* become human and walk among us and wants us to know that the false security of violence and domination must be shown to be what it is—a sham. Jesus, our Prince of Peace, chose to die so that we might live. Without Jesus’ death, there would be no resurrection. Without Jesus making the way straight for us, we would not know the path that is open for us to take—believing in God’s love for us and believing in the possibility for newness daily. And can I get an Amen?! Do you need to hear this as much as I do these days? There is a possibility for newness every day, thanks be to God! We have spoken of some of the beautiful symbols we claim as we try to understand resurrection in our lives, but I will say repeatedly and resoundingly that the Resurrection is *not* all metaphor, though there are some lovely metaphors that help us to understand what a gift that Jesus has given us. May Sarton, a wonderful poet of the 20th century, wrote the following lines that provide an understanding that might help us.

 Even I would like to believe when I die that I have given myself away like a tree that sows seed every spring and never counts the loss, because it is not loss, it is adding to future life. It is the tree’s way of being. Strongly rooted perhaps, but spilling out its treasure on the wind.

Why would Jesus come only once, and not again, when we need God so very much? Well let’s remember, folks, that who and what Jesus was and is as God is far more than what he was as human. As a man, Jesus learned how we suffer, and because, in the mystery I cannot get my head around, Jesus is God, he wanted to stop that suffering—not just in the thirty some years of his ministry when he walked the earth, but for all time. He is not here! He is Risen!

He is not here, and so he is! Jesus did not remain locked in a tomb. Jesus did not remain trapped by all the difficulties that life can hold and does hold for many of us—not the betrayal, not the sadness, not the physical pain. Jesus rose above them, even having moved through them. Christ is risen, and *is* still with us, just as he promised his disciples when he told them that he *had* to die, explaining that he would send the Holy Spirit, who remains with us always, thanks be to God. What he offered wasn’t just for those whom he met face to face, and as he rose, bodily, he offers it to each of us, eternally, through the Holy Spirit! Jesus is not closed, is not buried behind the stone that marked a full tomb. He is risen, and so in this miraculous way he is with us even today, and remains with us always. Easter isn’t a one-time thing; not a tourist event, as my friend Jen says, where you stop by, take a picture and move on, but rather is an everyday part of life. I’m not claiming that Easter isn’t special. It absolutely is, but I am saying that Jesus, if we relegate him only to one day, and Easter, if we relegate it only to one day of the year has less significance for us. Easter loses some of its meaning if we think that the point of the story is to set aside *one day* to practice resurrection. The point of the story, the story that is so familiar to us, is that resurrection is happening ALL the time.

Jesus did the new thing!I wish that Jesus did not have to die for me, but I am grateful that he did. I wish that the story of Jesus’ life didn’t include the sadness of his last days, but it does. We can’t forget, though, that Jesus *knew* that he was doing a new thing, even though his disciples didn’t understand. What we now know is that God *continues* to do a new thing in *our* lives, through our faith. We look forward to life eternal, promised to us, by grace, because we believe. We also look forward in our earthly lives, never losing hope, knowing that no stone of difficulty is so weighty that God cannot roll it back to reveal even greater possibilities. Resurrection is like that. Jesus’ path of peace and reconciliation is like that. Hallelujah! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen!