



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A New Day

**St. John 20:1-18, Isaiah 25:1-9,
Colossians 3:1-4**

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April 21, 2019 – Easter Day

In our Easter Gospel this morning, St. John tells us that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb of Jesus, on the first day of the week, while it was still early and still dark. We can imagine her mournfully making her way through the dark garden. The morning dew forming on the grass and wetting her feet, while she wept tears that wet her cheeks. Had she slept that night? Probably not. Not with the awful picture of the cross and Jesus nailed to it burned in her vision. She was tired. She was distraught. And so she rose in the pre-dawn darkness to do the one thing that made sense, the one thing she knew she could still do: she went to anoint his body; she went to look after the dead.

Darkness on the first day of the week. John echoes his own prologue—the Gospel we read at Christmas—those familiar words: “In the beginning...” Those words echo Genesis. “In the beginning the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep.” But the darkness wasn’t empty. There was a wind blowing through the darkness. God’s Spirit, hovering over the waters. And God spoke, “Let there be light!” And there was light. God spoke and Creation began. That was the first day.

And St. John recalled that first day as he put pen to paper and wrote his account of Jesus: “In the beginning... was the word.” God’s word was the agent of creation. And now John tells us that that very word has become flesh, that he dwelt amongst us, and that he—the agent of light and life in the beginning—has brought light and life into the darkness. He brought new creation. Wherever he went, the darkness was undone, light shone, sickness became health, what was sinful was forgiven and

made holy, even death was turned into life.

And John echoes Genesis again in our Good Friday Gospel. On the sixth day, God spoke. He created life—this time creating man and woman. The crown of his creation. His priests, created to bear his image in his garden temple. But they would be the very ones to rebel and return Creation to the darkness. And on the sixth day of that first holy week so long ago, as it seemed the darkness had overcome the light once again, as Jesus stood bruised and bloody before Pilate, the Roman governor declared to the people, “Behold the man!” New Creation was breaking in even as the darkness seemed to have won. The Word Incarnate, the second Adam, despised, rejected, and crucified.

A spear in his side satisfied everyone that Jesus was dead. The darkness closed in. His friends wept. They took him down from the cross, wrapped him in linen, and laid him in a tomb. And again there’s a silent echo in John’s Gospel. This is the sixth day. Behold the man! Somehow God is seeing this—seeing evil rise up to do its worst—and yet despite the horrible events of the day this Friday is somehow still “very good”.

The sixth day rolls into the seventh. Jesus, the word of God, has done his work and lies in the tomb taking his sabbath rest in the midst of the darkness. Somehow the sabbath, just as it always had, sends a message: God is in control. Take your rest. Don’t worry. No matter how dark it may get, trust in the one who continues to sit on his throne.

And as the sabbath ends and the first day of a new week begins, as the dawn of the eighth day breaks, Mary comes to the tomb with a jar of spices and another of oil. And she finds the great stone rolled away and the tomb empty. Mary didn’t understand. It was insult added to injury. It was another twist of the knife in her heart. And she ran as fast as she could to Peter’s hiding place. John was there, too. Out of breath and sobbing, she told them the news, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know what they’ve done with him!”

Peter and John were in hiding, lest they suffer the same fate as Jesus. But Mary’s news was enough to bring them out. They ran to the garden and to the tomb. There was so much running that first Easter morning. John tells us that he got there first. Sure enough, the stone was rolled away. But he wasn’t sure what to make of it at first. The door to the tomb was small and low. You’d have to get down, probably on your hands and knees, to crawl through it. He crouched down and looked into the semi-darkness and saw a curious thing. The linens used to wrap Jesus were still there, lying on the stone shelf where they had laid him on Friday. But the body was gone. Someone must have stolen it, but why hadn’t they taken the linens? And how did they get the body out of the linens without unwrapping them? I don’t think John and the others could help but think back to that day, not long before, when Lazarus had emerged from his tomb at Jesus’ calling. Out stumbled Lazarus, barely able to shuffle, arms pinned to his sides by linen wrappings—just like a mummy—and mumbling through the cloth wrapped around his head. They’d had to help unwrap the linens and what a tangled mess that had been. But here are Jesus’ burial linens, seemingly untouched, but missing the body that had been wrapped in them—like a deflated mummy.

Then Peter caught up. Big, impetuous, boisterous Peter. He saw John stammering at the entrance of the tomb and pushed him out of the way. He got down and squeezed his way through the little door and into the tomb. Sure enough, there were the linens, empty but undisturbed. And then he noticed another strange thing that John hadn’t. The linen cloth that had covered Jesus’ face, neatly rolled up and set to the side. None of it made sense.

John, at that moment, squeezed his way into the tomb to crouch beside Peter. And as they crouched there looking at the empty linens, John says that belief dawned in them. Jesus’ body hadn’t been stolen. If that had happened, the robbers would have taken it away still wrapped in the linens. No, this was the moment—just as day was dawning

outside the tomb—this was the moment they began to understand that God’s power was at work in an act of new creation. I doubt understanding came all at once, but it was at that moment that all those things Jesus had said over the past three years “clicked” and started to make sense. It the moment when their despair faded and hope returned. They had believed Jesus was the Messiah and that he’d come to bring a new world. But Messiah’s—at least not the *real* Messiah—don’t die at the hands of Romans, nailed to a cross. Hope had died for the disciples on Good Friday. But now it returns with the realisation that Jesus had risen from death. It was the only explanation that made sense. And then the other things Jesus had said, thing’s they’d never really understood, started to make sense. They’d been assuming that Jesus was going to usher in God’s new world with a sword—like another Joshua or David or Judas Maccabeus. They’d expected him to throw down the Romans and lead the Jews as they fought their way back to the top of the heap. And now the realisation begins to dawn that all those hopes were part of the old world, part of the darkness, and that somehow, in dying, in allowing sin and death to do their worst, Jesus has inaugurated a new world, a new creation. Because Jesus had died and was alive again.

The key was the missing body. Resurrection had happened.

If I recall correctly, it was last Easter that the New York Times ran one of their usual Easter-time stories about Jesus. In the story they explained that on Easter Jesus was raised the dead and went to heaven. It was par for the course for the New York Times. And yet even they occasionally have the clarity to realise just how much they don’t get Christianity. Also last year, one of their editors wrote a piece in which he noted just what a mystery Christianity—and in particular, Evangelicalism—is to their writing and editorial staff. He was trying to explain why they had repeatedly failed to grasp what was motivating Christians when it came to politics and culture. But their misunderstanding of Easter is a common

one. The disciples were thrilled, people often think, because they realised that even though he’d died, Jesus went on to a happy existence in heaven with God. But that’s not at all what restored hope to the disciples. In fact, in verse 17, we see Jesus explaining to Mary that he has yet to ascend to his Father—he will, but not yet. No, belief dawned in John—and presumably also in Peter—at this moment when they realised that Jesus’ *body*—his actual body, not just his spirit—had been raised from death.

And this, right here, is one of the single greatest pieces of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Because everyone in the ancient world knew it didn’t happen. They were no less intelligent or observant than we are. People don’t rise from the dead. They don’t. It doesn’t happen. Greeks and Romans understood the concept, just like we do, but they knew that when you die, you die. That that’s it. In fact, the Greek philosophers taught that you wouldn’t want to be bodily raised from the dead anyway. They developed a system of thought in which the spiritual was good and the material was bad. The spirit was good. The body was just dead weight. The spirit realm was good. The physical earth was nothing but pain and sorrow. And so most people longed for death as a great release as they left behind the pain and sorrows of life and moved into a purely spiritual existence. It’s not all that different from what many people believe today. This form of Platonism even influenced the thinking of the Church in those early centuries and, still today, plenty of Christians hold to some form of this idea. We’ve just borrowed language from the Bible to describe it.

But there was one small group of people who *did* believe in resurrection. Those people were the Jews. Not all of them. The Sadducees were adamant that there was no such thing as resurrection. They were firmly committed to the status quo and this idea of resurrection, if it was true, meant that someday the status quo would be overturned. But many other Jews, most notably the Pharisees, had a belief—they hope in and longed for the day when the Lord’s Messiah would come to set the world to rights and on

that day everyone—well, everyone meaning all the faithful Jews—would be resurrected to share in the Messiah’s new world. They weren’t sure about the details. Well, most of them were probably pretty sure, but they also disagreed with each other on the details, but one thing they all agreed on was that when resurrection happened, it was going to happen to *all* of God’s people at the same time. It would be one glorious event that would happen at the end of history. It would bring an end to the present age of darkness and usher in a new age and a new world with the Messiah and with Israel finally on top of things.

And this was why the disciples—not to mention everyone else—failed to understand so much of what Jesus had said and done. This is why Jesus’ friend were suddenly hopeless when he was crucified. This was why some of them—like Thomas—had so much trouble believing the reports that he had risen from death. Because, first, everyone knew that dead people don’t rise from the grave. And because even the people who did believe in resurrection had never thought of it as happening to just one person, let alone that it would happen to just one person while the world continued to trundle along, seemingly the way it always had. Resurrection was supposed to come at the end of the age, at the end of history. It would happen to all of God’s people at once. And it would change the world. No one would have made up this story of Jesus rising from death—at least not as we’re told it happened—because, before Jesus rose from death, absolutely no one in the world ever expected resurrection to happen this way. As they recalled these events to their family and friends, they were fighting their way upstream and against the strong current of Jewish belief.

I think there’s a reason why John includes some echoes of the resurrection of Lazarus in his account of Jesus’ resurrection. When Jesus raised Lazarus from death, he brought Lazarus back to the life he knew. John, I think, wants us to know that what happened to Jesus was, in *some* ways, like what happened

to Lazarus. But, I think more important to John, are the contrasts that show that what happened to Jesus was very much *unlike* what happened to Lazarus. Jesus raised Lazarus to the same life he'd always had. That bad tooth? Still there. The painful bunion? Still there too. The leaky roof was still waiting to be fixed. The jerk neighbour he never got along with was still next door being as annoying as ever. When Lazarus came out of his tomb he was still wrapped in linen. His friends had to extract him from the mess and they made a mess of the linens in the process. In contrast, Jesus left his grave clothes neatly behind. But, most important, death still mattered to Lazarus. Lazarus would grow old or get sick and die again. Nothing could stop that. But, in contrast, Jesus had passed through death and conquered it in the process. Jesus burst from the tomb, victorious over it. Jesus came out of death a new creation. There was certainly continuity with the old. His old body had been transformed, not left behind or destroyed. And in that, Jesus inaugurated new creation—one in which death is defeated and the life of God restored. In Jesus' resurrection, the words of our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah were fulfilled: "He will swallow up death forever."

John and Peter—and Mary and the others—believed *because* they saw the empty grave clothes, *because* they saw that Jesus' body was gone and that resurrection was the only answer. I'm sure it took them much longer to work through the full ramification of this belief. Again, no one had ever thought of resurrection in this way—it was supposed happen to everyone all at once at the end of the age, not to just one person in the middle of history. But St. Paul works it out for us. In our Epistle from Colossians he stresses that Jesus has led the way. In our baptism, through faith, we have been united with Jesus. Because we have been united with him, we have died with him. Because we have died with him, we will rise with him. And even as we wait, we have already been raised with him in that we already share in the life of God through his indwelling Spirit. We've

been plunged into the Spirit in our baptism and the life of the Spirit is the down-payment on the life of the age to come. Paul writes, "When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." When the time is right, when Jesus has finally put every enemy under his feet, all of God's people will be resurrected—will be made new—just as Jesus was, and with us all of Creation.

You see, the problem with the way the Jews had been thinking about resurrection and the end of the age, was that it gave no room the redemption of humanity. They were waiting for the Messiah to bring history to a close by raising them, the Jews, to the top of the heap while raining down fire and brimstone, death and destruction on the nations—on the rest of the human race and particularly in all those detestable Greeks and Romans. Instead, Jesus stepped into the middle of history and died and rose again. His work of new creation began with the creation of a new Israel—a new people of God—now filled with God's own Spirit. And that new Israel was created to herald the new age, to go out to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and eventually to the whole world—even to those awful Greeks and Romans—to announce the royal summons: the Jesus who died on the cross and rose from the grave is Creation's true Lord. He will finish what he has started. He will set all things to rights. He will wipe away every tear. But to do that the people who insist on upsetting Creation, the people who cause the tears, will have to be dealt with. To set things to rights, evil will, one day, have to be destroyed and wiped completely from Creation. And so, in his graciousness, the King has come in the middle of history, so that his Good News might be proclaimed, and so that we rebels—we sinners and idolaters, we who have had a hand in the darkness and in causing the tears—can respond to the royal summons, kneel in faith before the risen Lord, be forgiven and made new ourselves, and have a share, not in the destruction of the old age, but have a place of glory in the new.

New creation was inaugurated that first Easter morning. The resurrected Jesus was busy with his work when Mary found him and mistook him for the gardener. John knew what he was doing when he included that little detail. He knew it was the eighth day. New creation had begun. Eden was breaking in to a world filled with thorns and weeds. And there was Jesus, the second Adam, tending the garden—pulling weeds or, maybe, pruning a fruit tree. And in that image you and I, Brothers and Sisters, ought to find hope. The Lord Jesus has inaugurated God's new age. We who are in him by faith have a share in it. What has happened to him will, one day, happen to us and to the world. As St. Paul writes, "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." Let us then set our minds on the things of his kingdom, on the things of the age to come. Let us be like Jesus, tending the garden, not only preparing ourselves, but preparing the world. We are the new Israel, we are the heralds of the kingdom. Let us live as people with hope, let us be faithful in proclaiming the message: planting, cultivating, and tending the seeds of the Gospel and the fruit of the Spirit.

Let us pray: Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant us by your grace to set our minds on things above; that by your continual help our lives may be transformed; through the same, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*