



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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New Creation Colossians 3:1-11 & St. John 20:1--10 Fr. William Klock

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“On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark.” If we’ve been paying attention to John’s Gospel—it helps if we’ve recently been reading it from start to finish, but even if what’s fresh in our minds are these chapters we’ve read as our Gospels these last few days—if we’ve been paying close attention, this bit about it being the first day of the week ought to jump out at us. In our reading on Friday we heard John’s echoes of the old story of creation in our Gospel. When Pilate presented Jesus to the people, robed in purple with his bloody crown of thorns, and declared, “Behold, the man!”; when they took him off to be crucified, John reminds us that it was the sixth day of the week—echoing the sixth day on which the Lord completed his work of creation by calling forth human beings to govern his good creation. John strategically quotes Pilate at that point, as he presents Jesus to the people, “Behold, the man!” Then, too, there’s darkness and the light—John echoes Creation there as well.

John’s telling us a great story of *re-creation*—of God, through Jesus, is fixing this world, broken and filled with tears because of our sin. God’s new creation burst into the world that first Easter morning. A new week had begun—a week in which we’re still living.

But within that bigger and all-encompassing story of creation and re-creation, there’s a narrower story that John tells. It’s the story of the temple. Remember that in Israel, the temple

was the place of God’s presence. Think back to Israel’s life in the wilderness, after the Exodus, when they built the tabernacle and then camped around it, each tribe with its spot. All arranged around that glorious tent where the Lord’s presence rested on the ark. God in the midst of his people. The temple, on the mountaintop in Jerusalem was the same. God, again, dwelling in the midst of his people. That’s the key thing that made Israel different from the nations: she was the people who lived with the one, true God in her midst. Living according to *torah* made Israel different in lots of other ways, but all of that was *because* she was the people who lived in the presence of God. The temple was the place where God and man met. It was the place where heaven and earth—which once, long ago and before or sin overlapped—the temple was the one place where heaven and earth intersected. The temple embodied our prayer: on earth as in heaven. And yet the temple was temporary—even though the Jews would have thought that sort of statement was blasphemy. The story of the temple is the story inside the story in John’s Gospel. Have you ever noticed that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus goes right from his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem straight to the temple to chase out the moneychangers and the merchants and all of that, but John places that cleansing of the temple at the *beginning* of his Gospel. John tells the story that way so that Jesus’ ministry can begin with his declaration that if the temple is destroyed, he will rebuild it in three days. Right there at the start of Jesus’ ministry, John points us to the resurrection of Jesus and to Easter.

As John writes in our Gospel, the disciples didn’t know what to do about the empty tomb. Sometimes neither do we. John says that he saw and believed. But he also says that he didn’t understand. It would take seeing the risen Jesus. Even then it would still take Jesus walking his friends through the scriptures before

they would *really* get it. But now, years later, John sort of hands us a pair of glasses so that *we* can believe *and* understand. Through the lenses of the glasses John shows us Jesus as the culmination of the story of creation and re-creation. But then John says, “There’s more.” We need to see that story within the story, and so he holds up a telescope to our glasses and when we look through the telescope, the story of creation and re-creation zooms in on the story of the temple. Again, the place where our world and God’s world intersect. It’s the place where God meets us with grace and mercy. And John shows us that at Easter something amazing has happened. This Jesus, who is God in our flesh—bringing our sphere and God’s sphere together by his incarnation—this Jesus has inaugurated a new temple. I encourage you to think about that every Sunday this Eastertide when we open our services with that acclamation: “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” That’s not just an acclamation that Jesus’ resurrection brings a happy ending to the sad story of Good Friday. Brothers and Sisters, when we say, “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” that’s an announcement that the dwelling of God is with us. It’s the acclamation that in Jesus, God has made us his people. It’s an acclamation of hope, that he will set the world to rights, that he will make all the sad things untrue, that he will wipe away every tear. In fact, if we go on reading where our Gospel today ends, Jesus begins all of this with Mary, coming to her as she stood weeping outside the tomb. Mary was the first one to experience the new reality that, in Jesus, God is with us as he never has been before. That Jesus has built a new and better temple.

But that’s looking ahead. The bit of John 20 we read today, it’s all about the disciples running around. It begins with Mary running to the disciples to tell them about the empty tomb and then Peter runs to the tomb to see for himself. And then John tells us how he outran Peter to get there first. And

then Peter, breathless, catches up and pushes his way past John to crawl inside the empty tomb. John, finally then, managed to get a look, too. That's the point, he writes, when he believed.

But why does John have to tell us all about the running and his race with Peter. There's a famous painting by Eugene Burnand of John and Peter on their way to the tomb. A few years ago someone turned it into a meme, adding some comic book-style dialogue bubbles. Peter asks John, "Why'd you have to beat me to the tomb? It's not like anyone will ever know you got here first." And John responds, "Oh, they'll know. I'll make sure they know." Someone did that, because it's such an odd little bit of the story for John to include, but I think he included this weird bit of the story as a way of letting another bit of the Old Testament story echo into his. In 2 Samuel 18 we read about the victory of David's forces over the rebel forces of Absalom. Two men ran back from the battle line to tell David the news. The first one announced the victory. The second one announced to David that his son, Absalom, the rebel leader was dead. On one hand, this was good news for David. The rebellion was over. But on the other hand, it was devastating. That victory meant his son was dead. David wept, "O my son, Absalom! Would I had died instead of you."

But now, as John announces the good news with John and Peter running and John getting there first and Peter following, it's great David's greater son who has given his life for the sake of his rebellious people. David's Lord, the only son of the father, has defeated our great enemy. In rising from the grave, he has cast down sin and death. The Messiah has been victorious over all those rebel forces—sin, death, chaos, destruction—that have ranged themselves against God and creation and humanity. And that's the big story of creation and re-creation in John's Gospel. Again,

remember how John shows us Pilate presenting Jesus to the people on the sixth day of the week, robed in purples and crowned with thorns, and declares, "Behold, the man!" And on that sixth day, Jesus is crucified and with his last breath declares, "It is finished!" It's accomplished. It's complete. Just as the Lord did on the final day of creation. Jesus has finished his great work of re-creation and he rests.

I love the way Tom Wright's libretto for Spicer's Easter Oratorio describe the sabbath rest of Holy Saturday:

*O sabbath rest by Calvary,
O calm of tomb below,
Where the grave-clothes and the
spices
Cradle him we did not know.
Rest you well, beloved Jesus,
Caesar's Lord and Israel's King,
In the brooding of the Spirit
In the darkness of the spring.*

A day of waiting that seemed like an eternity for the disciples who had lost all hope. A day of celebration for devils who though they'd won and that creation was theirs forever to twist and corrupt. And then the first day of the new week breaks in—or as the early Christians called it: the eighth day, to highlight that Easter is the dawning of God's new world. Our Gospel lesson describes the early-morning darkness. John's been working towards this very moment from Chapter 1 where he wrote about Jesus saying, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." And in the paragraph that follows our Gospel John tells the story of Mary's encounter with Jesus to echo creation. She mistakes him for the gardener. I have to think that there was Jesus, freshly risen from death, having burst from the tomb, and there he is, kneeling on the earth and wrestling with weeds, pulling out some big dandelion taproot or yanking nettles from the ground. Here's the new Adam, tending the garden the way the

old Adam had failed to do, and with every weed pulled, anticipating that day when everything will be set to rights. I wonder if that's why Mary and Peter and John didn't see Jesus at first. There he was, tending the garden, and they missed him. Just the gardener working over there in the bushes in the early dawn light. It's only on Mary's return that she approaches him to ask if he'd seen who had taken Jesus' body from the tomb. And then he speaks her name and her eyes are opened and that glorious light overcomes the darkness. And then Jesus sends her to the disciples to tell them what's happened. New creation has begun and Mary's the very first person swept up in and made a part of it, but pretty soon they'll all be invited.

And that, Brothers and Sisters, that's what Easter is all about. Jesus has risen from the grave and his new body—the body we get a handful of glimpses of in the Gospels, the body that's as at home on earth as in heaven and in heaven as on earth—his new body is the prototype of God's new creation. And this good news, this light blasts into the darkness. Like when you pick up your iPhone in the middle of the night and accidentally trigger the flashlight right into your eyes, this light blasts into the darkness right when no one expected it. But it's here and it confronts us and we can't ignore it. Just as happened with Paul when he was confronted by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, this light demands that we rethink everything as it illuminates the world and drives away all the shadows. The light demands we rethink how we see the world and ourselves and the things we hold dear and the stories we tell ourselves. This is the great truth that challenges every other truth and that exposes so many of them as lies. God's new creation has burst into the world: on earth as it is in heaven and, not only that, but like Mary, Jesus invites us to be part of it. Like Moses beckoning the Israelites into the Red Sea as the raging wind held back the

water, Jesus calls us to pass through the waters of baptism. It can be frightening. We're not sure what it will mean because we've only just begun to rethink everything in light of his resurrection, in light of new creation, in light of...well...the Light with a capital ell. But then we pass through those waters and as we do Jesus plunges us into God's own Spirit and then he welcomes us to his Table to eat the bread and to drink the wine and in them we have a foretaste of that great banquet that awaits when God's new creation is complete, and we worship him and we glorify him and—like Mary and like the other disciples and like those thousands who were baptised into Jesus and the Spirit on Pentecost and like the millions since, Jesus story, this story of new creation becomes *our* story and, in the power of God's Spirit, we live his new creation in the world today, we become part of Jesus' light shining into the darkness. He's made us the people who proclaim his truth in a world caught up in lies. He's made the people of light who drive away the shadows from every last corner of creation.

That's the call of Easter. Too often we've reduced the good news to just the idea that we've been "saved". We turn our faith in to something that's little more than an escape hatch from this sin-broken world. But Easter reminds us that whether it was Israel in the Old Testament or us in the New, God has never created a people for himself to just be a holiness club while we wait for an escape to heaven. When we announce those words, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" we're announcing that Jesus has begun God's work of new creation and that he's made us a part of it. That means, Brothers and Sisters, that we take our Bibles in one hand—because that's where God speaks and that's where he tells what he loves and what he values and the good he wants to see for this world—and we take hold of Jesus with our other hand, we take a deep breath of the Holy Spirit, and we go out to

live—to *be*— God's new creation in the world, to be light in the darkness. We go out to work for justice and for mercy and for peace in whatever ways we can. We go out and we work to mend relationships, to fix things that are broken, to comfort and to wipe away tears, and to make things of beauty. We show the world the same servant love that Jesus has shown to us in whatever ways we can to the people whom God has placed around us. We're now the temple in the midst of the world. And we do it all while proclaiming the good news that in dying and rising from death, Jesus has made all this possible. He forgives our sins, he breaks the chains of death, he gives us the very life of God, he renews our minds and regenerates our hearts—he makes us *new* in anticipation of and so that we can be agents of his new creation.

Our Easter Gospel sends us out. But then we have today's Epistle. These first verses of Colossians 3 challenge us to live out Easter in our own selves. It's hard to be Easter people in the world if we aren't first Easter people in our own hearts and minds. When we pray "on earth as in heaven", we need to remember we're not just praying for the world and for others; we're also pray for God's kingdom to transform us. And so Paul tells us:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Seek the things that are above. Again, not with the idea that Christianity is an escape hatch from the world, but knowing that the work of new creation begun by Jesus is the work of restoring earth and heaven, of healing the breach that separates human beings from God. One day, through

the work of the word and the Spirit, that breach will be healed and heaven and earth will be one, just like they were before we sinned. But in the meantime, we—the church—are God's temple. We're the holy people, set apart and indwelt by God's Spirit. Being united with Jesus and filled with the Spirit makes us the place where earth and heaven meet. So we'd better have our minds set on the things of heaven that this earth so desperately needs and longs for.

And Paul gets specific as he goes on:

Put to death therefore, he writes, what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Paul makes a list of things (some of) the things that have made such a mess of God's creation. Five different sort of sexual immorality. Five different sorts of angry and divisive talking and behaviour. These are the things that hurt others, that hurt us, and that destroy relationships. They're all things that stand opposed to the love we see on display at the cross. They undermine the goodness, the truth, and the beauty that characterize God and his new creation. Put these things to death, Paul writes. And then he uses the imagery of baptism as he talks about putting off the old self that was once enslaved to sin and putting on the new. Live the reality that God has already created in you when he rose

victorious over sin and plunged you into his Spirit and filled you with his own life. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, it can be easy to fall back into old ways—to long for the fleshpots of Egypt as we struggle with Jesus through the wilderness. Following him isn't always easy. There's a reason why he tells us to take up our crosses if we're going to follow him. But remember, the old is passing away. The new is breaking in and the new is the future. The new is our hope. So put to death the works of the flesh and put on the life of Easter, the life of the Spirit. Cultivate the fruit of God's kingdom: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Brothers and Sisters, Easter is good news for the whole world, but it has to start in each of our hearts.

And that's a good reminder to us that Easter isn't the end of the story. It can be easy to think that way, can't it? The story of Jesus begins at Christmas and works its way through Epiphany and Lent and it culminates in Holy Week and with Good Friday and then comes Easter and Jesus is alive again and we think of his words on the cross as he died, "It is finished!" And I'll tell you that after the whirlwind of Holy Week that's the favourite Bible verse of pastors everywhere. It is finished...unless you've still got services on Easter Monday and Easter Tuesday, then it's not finished until Wednesday. But it's easy to think that Easter is the end of it. Go home, eat some ham and candied sweet potatoes and take a nap and return to life as usual. But Easter isn't the end. The Gospel writers all remind us in their own ways that while Easter may be the end of the old story, it's the beginning of the new one. They all make it clear that Easter means that in Jesus, God has won the great battle against sin and death, but it also means that God has created a new people for himself, a people united with Jesus and filled with his Spirit, a people he has called and equipped to go out and be light in the darkness, to make his

new creation known to the world as we proclaim this good news of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Think again of Jesus, the new Adam, in the garden that first Easter Day. Pulling up weeds, maybe borrowing the gardener's tools and hacking down a thornbush. Tending the garden was Adam's job in the beginning and when Adam failed he was cast out and weeds and thorns took over creation. And now here's Jesus, he's defeated sin and death, and he set straight to work undoing the rotten fruit of our rebellion, setting the garden to rights, making all the sad things untrue. This is the work of the kingdom: bringing God's life to the world. And Jesus hands one of us a shovel and another a rake, he points to those thorns over there and those weeds over here. Jesus points one person to a broken relationship that needs mending. He points another to go to those folks over there to help them root out some awful sin that's dominated them. He points to another patch of weeds—a mess of injustice—and tells some of us to get to work setting it right and points to another patch—a place desperately in need of mercy—and sends us to get to work with the tools of compassion. Take this good news to the world he says. Proclaim it in word and deed and set what is broken to rights. Jesus invites—he gives us the amazing privilege—of working beside him to bring God's new creation into being. That may be one of the most amazing things that came to me as I preached through Revelation: That this life-giving, world-renewing gospel work is God's, but that he fills us with his Spirit and invites us into it and that in the end, when the work has been finished and the kingdom has come in all its fullness, we even have the privilege to sit with him as judges.

There is a wonderful, ancient Easter hymn that was written by John of Damascus thirteen-hundred years ago. It was translated and set to music by John Mason Neale, so it's always

bewildered me that it's in none of our hymnals, but regardless of that, it captures this Easter commissioning. The first verse goes like this:

*Now let the heavens be joyful,
And earth her songs begin;
The round world keep high triumph,
And all that is therein.*

Heaven rejoices. If heaven rejoices over a single repentant sinner, imagine how heaven rejoices at the resurrection of Jesus and his victory over sin and death. Imagine how heaven rejoices to see God's work of new creation. It's our job now to get the earth joining in that song of praise and we do that as we, ourselves, are transformed by Easter and then carry its good news out from here and into the world, to make new creation known where we work and where we live and everywhere we go. Brothers and Sisters, we live in hope that one day the whole round world will keep high triumph, but the day will come because Jesus' people, because we, have been faithful with this Easter message of life. Alleluia! Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed. Alleluia!) Now, let's get to work.

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.*