

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Easter Day
16 April 2017

Scripture readings:

Acts 10:34-43,

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24,

Colossians 3:1-4,

John 20:1-18

A seminary professor of mine in the late 60s or early 70s said something that challenged me as a young theological student. He asked, "*What would happen to your faith if the bones of Jesus were discovered and it was incontrovertibly proven that he didn't physically rise from the dead?*"

Just last week on the plane on my way home from England there was an article in the paper which I did not read. I do a lot of that. I look at the banner heads and sort of scan but don't read the article. This article was about a survey of people in England or Europe, and I got the sense that what they were suggesting was that if they polled people who didn't believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead that they weren't religious, and that to be religious that was a tenet of faith that you had to have or you were off the charts.

You only get in here if you're off the charts - one chart or another. One of you thanked me for opening the door for a sinner today and I said, "*I was better than you were when it comes to sinning.*"

My professor's question was an important one. What does that mean to us as Christians and what are we saying when we celebrate in Easter the resurrection of Christ? Certainly the tradition and the history of the texts, the documents, the creeds mean bodily resurrection. Thank you, David Granskou, New Testament professor however many years ago that was. What does it do to you in your faith?

So here we are - a major celebration of the Church Year, the *primary* celebration of the Church Year! Last night at the Vigil, the prototypical liturgy of the entire Church for the whole year, and Vito came to church this morning and said, "*The top is not on the font!*" You got it. It's not on the font. Last evening this piece of equipment which is not very new - but it's new to us - was central to the Vigil liturgy. The service started out on the porch with the lighting of the great column of wax called the Paschal Candle which is carried into a dark church, and on the way in the *Exultet* was sung beautifully by our choir director. She stopped three times on the way in and she sang, "*The light of Christ*" and the congregation sang, "*Thanks be to God.*"

And then we came to the font with the candle. The font was filled with pure clear water, and the confession of the Church is that we who are baptized in this or some other font are sons and daughters of God. And there an extraordinary thing happened. That candle was inserted into the font three times, and then the first hot wax from that candle was spilled into this font. How's that for imagery? That's stuff that everybody in the world understands - human sexuality. It needs no interpretation. Everybody everywhere, every stripe, size, kind, color, creed...everybody gets it. And the Church takes that elemental imagery and applies it to our theological understanding that as Christians we are born sons and daughters of God and this font is the womb of our dear mother the Church. Yes, and the erected, resurrected Christ impregnates the Church with his own hot wax and is our father. That's as elemental as it gets. That's why the top wasn't on it, Vito.

The font also stands as an image of a watery grave. In baptisms we say - and parents don't like this when they bring babies, to think that we're sort of pre-figuring a funeral - but we say when we have baptisms that if we are buried with Christ in a death like his in a watery grave - and if you have Baptist friends, you know that they have fonts that are big enough to *be* graves - if we are buried with Christ in a death like his, then we believe that we shall be raised with him in a resurrection like his.

And then as the Church grows and gets older, it starts to call itself - us, our corporate life and existence - the Body of Christ. We are baptized into Christ's body. Well, I see Christ here today, and every time we gather we celebrate a meal which reaffirms and re-confesses and re-admits and re-proclaims that God is with us, nourishes us and strengthens us to be his own body - alive and at work in the world today.

So I do, believe it or not, believe in the resurrection of the body - a new body - every time you and I take our baptism seriously and take each other seriously and listen to the simple message of Jesus. Now we've gone from understanding ourselves to be the Body of Christ by virtue of our baptism and incorporation into the

Church. What is it that Jesus says, believes, teaches and confesses that gets him into so much trouble?

Now one of the things that's bothered me this season is that the Church is good at blaming others. I know there are some Lutherans here this morning. There's a wonderful tradition among Lutherans. You know the music of J.S. Bach - the Gospel Passions set to music. There's a great German tradition, an Austrian tradition of Oberammergau - the great Passion plays that come out of the medieval Church, and of course those plays make it clear that it's the Jews' fault that Jesus gets killed.

If you read that story, Pilate - who was not a very nice man at all - comes off as one of the better characters. He washes his hands. "*I don't find any fault in this guy.*" So we blame the Jews. But the State participates in the execution. And this guy didn't have any money. He didn't have any bombs. He didn't have any political party. He had no influence. He had a ragtag bunch of friends - about twelve or so and other people who came out on the mountainside to listen to him. He was essentially powerless - this Christ who we believe, teach and confess that we embody as the Church. So let's think about what the message is that he gave us and what our message might be to the world. I think his message was as simple as the belief that we who are baptized are the Body of Christ and are alive and at work in the world today. I think his message was even simpler than that. Jesus' message that cost him his life was that God is love. And that means that God loves just us. *[laughter]* We need to be a little bit self-critical. A lot of our religion does that, doesn't it? We've been exploring some of that in our ecumenical exercises during Lent here.

Thursday morning, for reasons I cannot explain to you, I was up at 7:30 and decided, "*Oh, I'll run up to St. Tikhon's for the matin service*" which was more than a matin service. It included the mass. It included the blessing of holy oils which is done only about every five years. It was the only one done in the Orthodox Church in America in the entire country. Three and a half hours later it was over!

As a person who has had certain ecumenical interests my whole life and who probably learned more from my Roman Catholic neighbors in Hudson County than I ever learned in my own seminary, I knew I was not welcome to receive at their celebration of the sacrament. It's always been my custom not to eat where I'm not welcome. I understand different traditions work that way. We can snicker at that, but we've done it ourselves. You know it.

Toward the end of that service I was standing against the back wall. There aren't pews; there's just a bench around the outside. There was a lot of prostration on the floor, genuflection - great humility, great piety. The day before, Gregg Schafer and I had been to the shop. He was interested in buying an icon of Cyril and Methodius because it has some relationship to the Moravian tradition. The woman who was our sales person at the shop was at the mass and sat next to me. She recognized me and she said, "*If he wants that icon, tell him to be in touch with me. I finally found it.*"

In the Orthodox Church loaves of bread are used for the celebration of communion and a plug is taken out of the middle of the loaf called "*the Lamb.*" The part of the loaf of bread that is left after the *Lamb* is removed is called the *Antedoron*. The *Lamb* portion is cut apart and crumbed with little spear-like instruments and put into the chalice with the wine. When people come to receive they receive a sop on a spoon from the bread and wine mixed in that chalice. I knew that as a non-Orthodox person I shouldn't receive and I didn't and that's fine.

So after this lengthy service had concluded I was standing against the back wall and my friend from the shop, a Russian woman, came to me with a piece of *Antedoron* and put it in my hand. The Body of Christ doing what Christ says. God loves you even though there is a fence between us. And as far as I'm concerned, that act had more sacramental impact than anything else I did that day. Instead of building a wall between me and them because I was different, a stranger, an outsider - by the way, I know that I'm known there as the priest from here so I know that I'm not entirely a stranger - that crossing of the boundary, that reaching out, that sharing of nourishment, that act of affection, that act of inclusion was the radical stuff of Jesus' message that God loves everyone - *everyone!*

We live in a day and an age when we are encouraged not to do that. We're encouraged to treat foreigners as unwelcome. We're encouraged to not provide sanctuary. We are frightened to help those in need

and those seeking asylum and refuge and care from situations that are dangerous and difficult and life-threatening. And Jesus didn't give a hoot. And somehow the act of that woman proved that there are possibilities in being Christian and which just might come with a price. And so we spend a lot of time in Lent considering what the price Jesus paid was. And some people want to blame the Jews, and some want to blame the centurions, and some want to blame Caesar. Theology has given us a real creepy out. We're taught in theology to blame God. Now how is *that* for dumb? God demanded a sacrifice for your sins so God's not going to take skin off *your* nose. He'll have a son whom he loves and kills him. Dumb! Popular ancient idea. Historical. But as far as I'm concerned - cockamamie!

Jesus lost his life because he loved, cared for, fed and saw as equal - women, poor people, blind people, crippled people, Mexican people, Serbian people, Syrian people, foreign people. And it cost him something to believe that God equated with love. And it cost all of them something. It cost the Church of its day its integrity because they thought that God loved only them, and they were in the business of keeping themselves pure and they did a darn good job of it. We're hard on the scribes and Pharisees. If you want to talk about religious behavior and piety, they were better at it than any of us will ever be. They were good people. The State was concerned about religious freedom. Frankly, what was Pilate's concern? "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" What power do you have? Shall I crucify your king? And do you remember what the Church said at that point in the Passion history? Be careful, because we can be caught saying the same thing today. "*We have no king but Caesar.*"

And do you know what happened? Jesus lost his life because the Church was afraid of him. And I'm sorry, friends, I don't believe that God demanded the sacrifice of his own son. I think he lost his life because everybody else in the world was afraid of him, down to his last twelve friends, and every last one of them abandoned him in the end - because of the cost of believing a simple equation: that God is, in fact, love. Period. Nothing else.

Wherever there is love there is a living God. And wherever love is discouraged God is sacrificed - not by God but by us when we act as the State or a screwed-up Church rather than as sons and daughters who belong to the Body of Christ and are connected by the waters of baptism. It's not God's fault that Jesus was sacrificed for our sins. We're sinners and we killed him because we were too darned afraid of that simple message.

But the joy of Easter is that we are all connected in one body, in one family, which is universal and - despite our screwed-upedness and there's plenty of it to go around - there is always the possibility of taking a crumb of bread - that isn't a whole lot, friends - and pressing it into the hand of a stranger without a word, and at that point she and I shared a kiss. As far as I'm concerned that was an Almighty and Divine kiss from God himself. What you might not know about the Orthodox tradition is when people go into the church they venerate icons - pictures just like this one - with a kiss. This, by the way, is the Orthodox icon of Easter and it's backwards because Jesus is going down - not up - reaching into the graves of Adam and Eve and all of history before him to bring back to life those who have died. That's where we get the part of the creed where we say, "*he descended into hell.*" That's what this is all about. That's Easter!

Do you believe in the resurrection of the body? The older I get the less interested I am in 2000-year-old magic, but I don't find *you* difficult at all to see and to love. And I don't find *you* difficult at all to be Christ's body alive in the world today.

Let me tell you something. A couple of weeks ago in our ecumenical exercise we attended Stations of the Cross at St. Thomas More which was lovely. At the end of the service some of us decided to walk across the street to the Lake Ariel Inn which is a dumpy little bar where Danny is the bartender, and we had a drink and a conversation. [*laughter*] Pat Ware decided that they should re-name the bar "*The Fifteenth Station.*" [*laughter*]

On Good Friday we were at the Methodist Church - as close to the bar but on the other side - and after that service I said, "*Fifteenth Station?*" Some who had gone there previously chose not to go because it was Good Friday, but there were five of us who went. Before we entered the bar, I had my hand on the doorknob of the bar and said to my friends, "*I have a very strong suspicion that Jesus would more likely be found in this*

place than the place we just came from.” That’s not a criticism of Methodists. It’s just generally the Church.

Isn’t that what frightens everybody about real Christianity - that every last weirdo in the world is the object of divine affection, and we have no excuses to do anything other than love our neighbors as ourselves. And who is our neighbor? You know the story of the Good Samaritan - whoever is in need, whoever’s hand is empty and needs a piece of bread, whoever’s heart is broken, whoever’s throat is thirsty. Jesus spent his entire ministry tearing down walls and teaching love, and those of us who continue his work will do the same. And it won’t make us friends, but it *will* make us *his!*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.