

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
Easter Day  
27 March 2016

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 65:17-25    Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24    1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:19-26    John 20:1-18

I would like to think with you about four people I am growing to believe are heroes of the Easter story. The first was a woman we read about a couple weeks ago who in our conflated understandings of her from the different traditions was probably a slattern, a woman of the gutter - you know what I mean. She was into cosmetics and all the rest of it, and she had a very, very valuable amount of perfume in an alabaster jar. When she encountered Jesus she spilled this ointment on his feet and then proceeded to wipe his feet dry with her hair. Now you don't have to agree with me, but I certainly believe that was a very sensuous and sexually suggestive act. She was using the language that she knew and understood to communicate with Jesus. Those around Jesus, in typical pious religious persons' fashion, said to her, "*Oh, you could have sold that and given all that money to the poor.*" They who had large pockets filled with money that they were not giving to the poor themselves, in perfect hypocritical fashion looked at a poor person who took all that she had and gave it in the way that she knew how to a man she recognized as different, a man who was different to her because I believe he valued her in a way that society and others around her did not. First of all, she was a woman, and in that society that was a bad foot to get started on anyway. We're not doing a whole lot better in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are we?

The next person is one of my favorite characters and it's Judas - Judas, who betrayed the Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Well, first of all, we need to remember that Judas did these things to fulfill Holy Scripture, so my question is whose fault was it? He was doing his job according to those who wrote scripture. But Judas did nothing that the rest of the Twelve didn't do. He may have done it better and he may have done it for money, but in the end they all turned their backs, and backs look the same when they're turned on you, don't they. And Judas early on attempts to atone for what he did. He takes those thirty pieces of silver back to the people who gave them to him and attempts to return them and attempts seriously to undo what he had done and is refused. He repents and weeps bitterly, and Judas, I think, must be understood because we all live with people we have known who have felt that they cannot possibly be forgiven by God which is our first clue that they can't forgive themselves. Then they end up doing what they think is the only thing left for them to do and take their own lives.

The next person is probably one of the most heinous personages in all of history: Pontius Pilate - not a very nice man, a prototype perhaps for people like Hitler and Mussolini - nasty, empowered, ugly, megalomaniac. But do you remember the words of Pilate about Jesus when he was brought to trial? "*I find no guilt in him. None!*" And Pilate, with all of the weight of *his* guilt, exercises this extraordinary symbol of washing his hands of the responsibility of the life of Jesus and says to Jesus' friends, to Jesus' Church, to Jesus' society, "*The blood of this guy is going to be on your hands, not mine.*"

And then the fourth character - before we consider ourselves - is the centurion who stands by the cross, and it's his job to make sure Jesus is dead by jamming a spear in his side in between his ribs when we have that gory record in scripture when blood and water come mingled out. And it is from his lips that we hear, "*Surely this was the Son of God.*"

What impresses me about all of these people, friends, is this: They all came to a recognition and a confession about who Jesus was before Easter. Their knowledge and recognition of Jesus' importance had nothing to do with the resurrection. It had to do with their experience of the man.

We're here to celebrate Easter which of course is the primary feast of the Church, and of course the Church's vivid and extensive and joyous and raucous celebration of the resurrection. Have you seen the film *Risen*? Do, if you can. It's a wonderful cinematic exposition of the political realities and importance of whether or not Jesus' body was found in a tomb after his death and what that meant to the Roman authorities, what that meant to the religious authorities. It doesn't take a position and it doesn't suggest that Jesus was risen from the dead the way some people think. It does acknowledge that the body was missing. And it put me in mind of an Early New Testament professor I studied with in Chicago - his name was David Granskou - who asked us what would happen to our faith if, in fact, we were able to dig up the bones of Jesus and prove that his body was still here.

Now it's the other Twelve, the pillars and the founding parents of the Church - such as Peter. You know that huge church in Rome, don't you? - built over his bones allegedly. Peter who made the confession of who Jesus was, who refused to let Jesus wash his feet on the night in which Jesus was betrayed and who said he would never abandon the Savior and who when asked whether or not he was Jesus' friend, said, "*Of course not. No, no, no, no!*" Then the sound of a cock crowing, and that was the end of that. He, the leader of the Church, the Rock on which I will build my Church, led them all into very subtle and not-so-subtle ways of turning their back on the Savior in his extreme hour.

They come to make their confession a long time after the resurrection. They unlike the slattern, they unlike Judas, they unlike Pilate, they unlike the centurion - take some more time. And it is they, the early Church, who start to make their confession and start this extraordinary process which continues today, I believe, of trying to understand who, in fact, Jesus was after Jesus is dead and when they believe they encounter him in strange places. So the next weeks in the life of the Church we will read what are called the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus when he is near Allentown on the road to Emmaus, a suburb of Allentown [*laughter*], and Jesus is recognized when they share a meal. They break bread, and they are sharing in nourishment. They are in community with each other and there is something recognizably present with them of quality and beauty and prophecy that they only knew when they were with Jesus. They acknowledge at that point that Jesus is present with them in the breaking of bread. Then in another one of the post-resurrection appearances Jesus is on the beach, of course, and preparing breakfast for them - fish. You may or may not know this but in the early Eucharistic rites of the Church it's believed that fish was one of the Eucharistic elements. Why not?

So it's the Church that gets on the bandwagon late in terms of making its confession about who Jesus was. And, friends, I think it's worth our time today to pause and remember those heroes who made confession about Jesus outside of the Church, before the Church, as pagans and non-believers. They say words that we would join in saying with them. "*He is worth all that I have, whatever it may be. It is valuable for me to spill at his feet all that I have and am.*" "*I find no guilt in him. He is blameless.*" "*I will ram a spear through his ribs and in so doing come to the knowledge that this is surely the Son of God.*" Those are the confessions of people who stand outside of the Church.

In the Orthodox Church the icon of Easter is a surprising image. It always astounds me when I encounter it because I grew up in pious Protestant, North American churches with lovely stained-glass windows sometimes showing Jesus risen from the dead and ascending into heaven, and Jesus is always going up. Well, in the Orthodox Church tradition the icon of Easter shows Jesus going down. And you know he's going down because his dress is going up [*laughter*] and he's reaching into graves - two graves in particular - and just to show that Jesus is a feminist, one of them was the grave of a woman and one was the grave of a man. Guess who? Adam and Eve. And the Orthodox icon reminds us of that little phrase we use in the creed, one which I never understood and still have trouble understanding - "*He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead.*" Well, the Orthodox icon is an attempt to make that tenet of faith significant and meaningful,

and what it is is the Church saying, “*If Jesus is the Savior, what about all the people who lived and died before Jesus was born?*” So the Orthodox icon shows us that Jesus is able, the message of God’s forgiveness, the message of God’s salvation, the message of God’s love is able to reach behind history, is something that becomes and is and has been a reality long before Jesus was ever around, with people like Moses and Elijah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Leah and Rachel and maybe even Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh - that the love of God has been a reality and a living necessity for humans in this world since the shootin’ match got started, since the first day of Eden and that the love of God, which we celebrate here on Easter Day and on every Sunday which is a commemoration of Easter Day throughout the year, is a universal reality - and this is hard for us to swallow - a universal reality and a universal necessity for human life in this world for all people in or out of the Church, that we believe, teach and confess that in the beginning God created the world, everyone in it, God stood back from what God created, God looked at what God created, and God said, “*I love this. I love her. I love him. I love them to death!*” That’s an incredible kind of love. It’s not a self-assassinating kind of love which we call suicide. And you must know, friends, I have great difficulty believing that Jesus’ death was payment to an angry Father of his who was a testosterone-ridden, cloud-riding, spear-aiming, angry old crank in the sky looking to punish us for our sins or - now this is really perverse - this is not an example of healthy parenthood, demanding that my first and only son should die for their sin. That is cockamamie stupid! It’s not good thinking. It can’t be holy.

Last night at the Vigil we read the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham takes his son out to the wilderness because, like all crazy people, God is telling him to kill his son. Have you heard that scenario before? If not my son, your son. Thousands of years before Jesus was born people of faith started to realize this is a very bad idea to sacrifice your firstborn children. My feeling is so they came up with a neat idea. We’ll cut off their foreskins and call that a sacrifice. I really believe that’s what that’s all about. *[laughter]* We won’t kill them. We’ll just mutilate them.

But then to come to this extraordinary popular theology that God kills his own son because of what you and I have done is nuts! And it’s nuts for this reason: because it gives us an excuse to say it wasn’t really my fault. It gets us off the hook. We assassinated Jesus. Well, the Church assassinated him because he proclaimed the kind of God they didn’t believe in, a kind of God who loved their enemies. The state assassinated him because he was subversive. He had people following him who weren’t really particular supporters of the empire. And he had people in society who climbed all over each other to be more important than somebody else - the wealthy over the poor, the hoity-toity over the non-hoity-toity - angry with him because he said everybody’s equal. God loves everybody and you ought to love each other that way. They couldn’t stand it! So kill the messenger. It’s a popular activity. We do it all the time. It’s not God who kills Jesus; it’s we in our human condition who kill Jesus. My suspicion is that we forget the towering figures who come to a confession about Jesus before Easter because they represent dark aspects of ourselves that we are genuinely afraid of. There is, I firmly believe, in each of us a slattern, a Judas, a Pilate, a centurion. We’re not happy they’re there but - believe you me, folks - they’re there. If we don’t accept and acknowledge that, we’re really going to have trouble believing and acknowledging that God’s love is big enough not only for them but - here’s the hard part - for us.

So in the 21<sup>st</sup> century people such as you and I get up at unimaginable hours on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the first day of spring - that’s today, by the way, Easter. Five-thirty I was up. Nobody in his sane right mind does that. It’s the Moravians’ fault. They have a six-thirty sunrise service. *[laughter]* And we gathered at an uncomfortable time in an uncomfortable little box of a building to reaffirm our confession that somehow when we gather as the people of God, as the family of God, there is something here that is larger than the sum of its parts, and we believe, teach, confess and experience that when we come together God is present with us and that the only way that God’s love can be known by anybody else in the world is the way it came to

us - through other people who inhabited living human bodies who loved us. And not all of them were Christians. Not all of them went to church. Not all of them thought the way I did, but they communicated love to me which gave me life. I don't think there's any requirement on any of us to agree about much other than this: that if we are going to come to a common confession that God is with us and God can continue to live in the world as we gather, that God will also continue to be known in the world as we share what it is we see, perceive and experience as a risen, living, loving God in our midst.

On my way here from the Moravian Church in Newfoundland - did I tell you I was down there at six-thirty? *[laughter]* - I had on the car radio and can you believe they were playing Handel's *Messiah* - the nativity portion. And here I'm listening to this business about this baby being born and it occurred to me nobody would know anything about the birth of Jesus if we didn't have something to say about the resurrection, Easter, and the ongoing living, loving presence of God in our midst. And that's why we're here today - to reaffirm the fact that we participate in the incarnation, in the business of putting flesh and blood on the love of God, and it is our job to share it with each other and with the world especially, friends - now get this - especially with those whom we perceive do not deserve it because we don't either, and that is our joy. We've got it in full measure to share.

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