

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Second Sunday of Easter
8 April 2018

Scripture readings:

Acts 4:32-35 Psalm 133 1 John 1:1-2:2 John 20:19-31

Just yesterday I was engaged in a conversation with Donna who sometimes worships here. She's in Moscow today. I always tease her that she's going to worship at the pagan church, but I don't mean it - not really. Well, we know that this is the only true church, right? *[laughter]* As long as we're able to laugh at ourselves, we're in good shape.

The conversation was about Easter, about resurrection. It may have been related to the fact that we were observing three years since Al and James died. And the question was raised, *"How is it we come to these stories, particularly the post-resurrection stories of the appearance of Jesus, and everybody wants to take these things at face value, and then we find that they don't work for us."* I mean if Jesus is going to show up after he's dead 2,000 years ago, I need to see it now to get it the way it comes to us literally, or you can't ask me to believe that stuff. You just can't.

When I wrote to Carole McCallum on e-mail, I said, *"We will remember you at church today as we celebrate Easter, knowing that you stand at the tomb."* I've shared my frustration after forty-plus years of ministry of having celebrated more funerals than everything else put together and still not having the ability to say to a family in profound grief, *"I can get him back from the dead for you. Watch this!"* So what is it - a fairytale? Do you believe that that was true 2,000 years ago? that that happened?

The question was raised yesterday, *"How does this happen?"* And I put forward a guess. I said, *"Well, I think what happens is people go to Sunday School to about third grade and we get these stories on the flannel board from nice Miss So-and-So who teaches and loves little kids and communicates the myth which is there as a vehicle for the truth. And we all make this mistake from time to time of equating the myth with the truth."*

Recently I pulled off the shelf again a very dusty book from some of my first days in college. Do you all remember the name Marshall McLuhan and his book, *The Medium is the Massage*? It's very precious stuff. It's worth reading again because he's talking way back in the sixties about what electronic communication is going to do to us in our society. Of course there were a lot of ideas batted around philosophically about the medium being the message. And we see as we contemplate the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, killing the messenger in an attempt to kill the message, the truth. And of course as the Church develops its understanding about Jesus, we equate Jesus with the truth. We come to call Jesus the very Word of God which he communicated so beautifully and effectively. We're willing to collapse those two things - the messenger and the message - into one. And, therefore, we develop those extra theologies of the Holy Trinity and Jesus as a part of the godhead and all the rest of it. But my point was in response to the question, *"I think what happens is our theological education ends around the third grade somewhere."* We are taught these stories which are meant to communicate profound truth, adult truth, real truth which may come to us later or in bits and pieces as we age and mature, but without struggling with those ideas all through our lives, we end up as adults at a graveside somewhere and then wonder why Jesus can't work a miracle for us and bring that guy back from the dead. So what do we do? Get rid of the myth? Or do we re-visit it honestly as mature - even faithful - adults who look at these stories and say, *"What are they about?"*

Now listen to this because this is really important: *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah."* These are not written as history books, as a record of events, but these are written as vehicles for belief. These things are written so that you might come to believe Jesus is the Messiah, and that through believing, you may have life. *You may have life in his name.*

Now when we use the word Messiah, let's just go back to the beginning of that gospel with a word of caution. *"When it was evening - that's when it gets spooky, when it gets dark - on the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews."* Who do you suppose was in the room? *[laughter]* Can you perceive in this single sentence the early Church at work trying to distinguish itself from other religious traditions, from the parent from which Christianity was born? Do you get it? Do you see in that sentence the

early seeds of anti-Semitism? Can you be self-critical enough to understand how we as people in the 20th century got sucked into Germany, Hitler, the *St. Louis* - the ship that came to the borders of the United States filled with Jews and refugees who were sent back to be killed - as we build walls between us and Mexico? There is no acceptable religious foundation for hatred, prejudice, or phobias of other people because they are different. Sorry. Even though we disagree with them theologically. We must be careful about ourselves first. But let us also be attentive to ourselves and what it is we believe and how we are led to believe these traditions, myths, and stories.

“These things are written so that you might believe...” So that you might believe what? Well, here’s the foundational truth of Christianity: *that Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* But you’ve just shot that all the way down. Well, maybe I have, but maybe I haven’t. At the Easter Vigil we spent a good amount of time with the font because it’s important. We anointed the north, the south, the east and the west of the font. Fonts are traditionally eight sided. Check that out when you visit churches elsewhere. North, south, east and west, the four winds, all the corners of the earth. We anointed the font and dipped the Paschal Candle into the font and spilt the hot wax, the first hot wax from the Paschal Candle onto the water of the font. (There’s no sexual imagery there, is there? It’s all there is.) It’s universally understood sexual imagery of the impregnation of the Church by the Savior. The font is the womb where are born the sons and daughters of the Church, where we are incorporated into the Body of Christ.

So when we deal with the reality of our faith - the core, the center, the truth that Christ is risen, he is risen indeed - we may be talking about something a little more significant than Jesus raised from the dead for fifty days before Jesus finally ascends into heaven and is taken up at the ascension.

By the way, I stopped in at St. Tikhon’s last night just to see what was going on there because you know today is Orthodox Easter. Jesus was still in the tomb. I wasn’t late enough, I guess, for the Vigil. There was a woman standing there in a virtually empty building, singing and chanting the entire gospel which was just humbly beautiful. And of course in the Orthodox tradition the icon of Jesus is laid in the tomb, and it’s customary for people in some traditions to crawl up the church on their knees. There’s profound proskenesis, bending of the knee and prostrating on the floor and the reverencing the icon with kisses. So I’m sure by now Jesus is risen, the tomb is gone, and the great celebrations have proceeded there as they did with us last week.

The great Orthodox icon of Easter is this. It was surprising to me in my little Protestant and Western imagination when I first encountered it because in this icon it’s very clear that Jesus is not going up. Jesus is going down. This is known as the harrowing of hell. You know it in the creed. *“He was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father.”*

Well, this is that part, *“He descended into hell.”* In the Orthodox understanding of Easter, Jesus’ first job when resurrected from the dead is to reach into two graves - one of a man and one of a woman, surrounded by prophets and saints of pre-Christian scriptures. He reached into the graves of Adam and Eve, essentially going behind all of time throughout all of history with the message of God’s love for all people everywhere right back to the first sinners - Adam and Eve, those apple-eaters - and taking this message that he embodied of God’s love for God’s created people to those who existed before he did in time. I like the idea of Easter indicating that God’s messenger comes down to us because if it relies on me to get up to God, I don’t have what it takes. And I hate to tell you this, but no matter how deeply you bow, no matter how many times you cross yourself, no matter how many Sunday School classes you attend, or whopping huge offerings you give, or masses you go to, you can’t save yourself either.

So I’m glad that somewhere in Christianity there’s this idea of God coming down as the first act of Easter, down behind history, behind people (and I’m sure there’s some kind of theology that he was only saving the righteous who would have been saved anyway if they’d known about it. I’m not going to go there.) There’s this business that the resurrection of Jesus has something to do with an eternal reality which is universal and not particularly individual with Jesus. Ooooh, that sounds heretical. Are you nervous now? We’re just willing to be anti-Semitic for fear of the Jews, but we’re also willing to make him into the Messiah. What in the world is going on with the bifurcated egos of the early Church? Were we Jews or weren’t we Jews?

Let’s talk about the resurrected Body of Christ and Easter instead. There is a perceived reality that when this group of people gather - even when the doors are locked - and share a meal, they know that the sum is greater than the parts. They sense, believe, and feel God present with them because they share a meal and because in the middle of

their grief, because in the middle of Jesus' absence, because in the middle of their inability to understand, and because of the failure of their religion, they are able to look each other in the eye and, nevertheless, perceive God present with them. Not in spirit, but in flesh. Whose flesh? Each other's.

So there's Thomas. I like him. I like Thomas and I like Judas because I can identify so easily and quickly with both of them. They're really human people. They don't run around automatically with haloes on their heads. They are flawed like me.

Thomas comes and says, "*Ok, you've seen Jesus. I haven't.*" And they're glad to have seen him. "*We saw Jesus. Nah nah nah nah. We saw Jesus. You weren't here. Nah nah nah.*" So they gather again, and the doors are closed, and they look each other in the eye in the midst of grief, in the midst of loss, after great hell in their lives, and after having participated in that hell - because every last one of those guys betrayed the Savior. They all walked away. "*I do not know this man,*" followed by the crowing of the cock. And yet when they gathered, they knew he was there as they shared a meal and dealt with each other.

Christ lives today because you in your imperfect, flawed self, your sinful self, your apple-eating self, come together in this room around a truth-bearing myth, a reality that the messenger, in fact, in some way *is* the message. And you are incorporated, by virtue of your baptism, into the Body of Christ which we spend energy and every Sunday celebrating as resurrected, as long as you live and breathe and do what he did. And that means taking it on the chin. It means being nailed to a cross. It means being stabbed, not only in the side, but in the back. And it means being the Word of God alive and present in the world today. Now that truth becomes for us as Christians, really undeniable because we participate in it. And it may not be that the rest of the world will know or understand or care about what we believe. After all, they gathered in a room and locked the door. But you can believe it, friends, they didn't *stay* in the room with the door locked. And they went with the same truth, to the same power, to the same authority, to the same injustices, the same world in which Jesus lived, with the same message that he bore, and that's where we start to get martyrs in the Church. They suffered the same consequences because they believed what Jesus believed - that God was, in fact, love. And that made them know that every other louse and sinner in the world was a brother and sister, and that God comes down to them with love, and if they had to go to God on their own merits, they'd fail before they began.

And so it is 2,000 years later our practice becomes the business of gathering in a small room and sharing a very minimal meal. Nobody will get fat on communion - except with faith. And in the sharing of that meal we believe and teach and confess that Christ is really present in, with, and among bread and wine - and don't ever say that's the end of it - but in, with, and among us. And that's why at the front of this church there's a huge sign in big, crooked, nasty letters saying the most beautiful thing in the world: WE WELCOME ALL PEOPLE TO EMBODY THE LOVE OF CHRIST - to make Christ's love a physical presence in the world with us. That is the resurrection of the body. We're not talking about spooks or ghosts or spirits or anything else. We're talking about God alive as Jesus was alive in a person and breathing and living and participating in the affairs of the world with a simple message of truth and love for all people at all times in all places forever. To some people that will seem radical. To us it's just normal because we believe that Christ is risen, the Lord in risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

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