

Easter Day – Year C

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, Indeed!

Last night, many of us gathered here to celebrate the Great Vigil – lighting the new fire, symbol of the Resurrected Christ bringing light to darkness. And from that fire, our Easter Candle was lit. Its wick will burn with that light of Christ all through Eastertide and each time we celebrate new life at baptisms or requiem memorials. And although we did not even use all nine of the scripture readings assigned (THANKS BE TO GOD!), we heard again the story of God and God’s creation, the story of the relationship between God and God’s people. We listened to our “family” story of salvation history, much as we listen to family history when we get together and tell stories about grandma and grandpa, or what Alice did when she was little.

But this year we have heard a passage that, I think, we have not heard before at this Great Vigil. It is the reading from Baruch. The brief description of the passage is “Learn wisdom and live.” What I was most struck by was the early verses of the passage given: “Why is it, O Israel, why is it that you are in the land of your enemies, that you are growing old in a foreign country, that you are defiled with the dead, that you are counted among those in Hades? You have forsaken the fountain of wisdom. If you had walked in the way of God, you would be living in peace for ever...” In other words, why, O Israel, - and to us, why oh people of God now, when God has given you all that you need, why are you displaced? Why have you lost your way? Why are you still dealing with oppression and war and poverty and violence? And the answer is not that this is some kind of punishment from God. No, the answer is that we have failed to walk in the way of God. For if we had walked in the way of God, we would be living in peace for ever.

The difficulty, of course, is the part about walking in the way of God. For us Christians, especially on this night when we renew our baptismal covenant, the way of God is that way we see lived by Jesus. The early Christians were *first* known as “followers of *the Way*.” That “way” of Jesus was, as we have seen over and over again, a way of life that focused on the kingdom of God present here and now, God’s justice as mercy, God’s answer to violence or rejection being love. This “way” of Jesus is the way of the cross, but also of the resurrection. As Bishop Ken Untener used to preach, the crucifixion and the resurrection are really one. You cannot have one without the other in this Way of Jesus.

If we follow “the way”, then, we can expect both cross and resurrection. We heard in Paul’s letter to the Romans, “For if we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” But I think that often we envision the Resurrection only as *Christ’s* rising in glory. We display a single cross draped in the empty white shroud. Western icons of the Resurrection show Christ rising triumphantly but alone, except perhaps for the guards at the tomb now lying on the ground.

The Eastern or Orthodox tradition, though, sees the Resurrection differently. What we commonly refer to as “resurrection” is called instead, “anastasis” – meaning literally “up-rising.” And in Eastern icons depicting the resurrection or “anastasis” – one never sees Christ rising alone. No, the crucified Christ – identifiable by his wounds and the cross prominently displayed – this crucified Christ is shown with outstretched hand grasping and pulling from the realm of the dead those who have gone before. As John Dominic Crossan says, “The East, on the other hand, celebrates the *universal resurrection*. Here Christ also rises triumphantly and magnificently—but he takes all of humanity with him.”

And that is the difference that is at the core of what modern prophet and pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says in a recent post: “The Christian faith, while wildly misrepresented in so much of American culture, is really about death and resurrection. It’s about how God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small.”

In our Gospel for this morning, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, finds the stone rolled away, runs to tell the disciples, and Peter and “the other disciple” come back with her to check it out for themselves. And when they find the empty tomb and linen wrappings, confirming that indeed the body of Jesus is gone, we’re told they “returned to their homes.” What comes next is what I find most striking. “But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.” Mary Magdalene is the one first willing to face the dead body, and now she is the one willing to stay at the grave... to sit with the “not knowing” – simply to be with both her suffering and her questions. And by doing so, she is the first to see the Risen Christ. Christ comes to where she is, outside that tomb, to show her new life. Yes, this death and resurrection is not just about Jesus, but about us.

In those wonderful Orthodox icons of the Resurrected Christ, we see God indeed reaching into and pulling us out of our graves, those we dig for ourselves, or those dug for us by others, or those into which we have simply fallen... those seemingly inescapable pits of overwhelming and hope-defying grief, the graves of life-sucking addictions, pits of pain caused by family separations, our communal grief at seeing in the news every day more evidence of our in-humanity and injustice. Individually and corporately, we, too, are resurrected with Christ, those icons tell us. But here is the rub: We know well the refrain "Take up your cross and follow me." What we have yet to hear, to *really* hear, is the command to take up our *Resurrection*. Paul says, "For if we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Christ's resurrection was not for himself alone. Rather, as those icons show us, Christ's resurrection is glorious and magnificent, but it includes the resurrection of all humanity, indeed all of creation.

For us to take up our resurrection means to be willing to let all the barriers of separation be torn in two from top to bottom like the temple curtain. It means to let Christ pull us from those graves that hold us, but also now, as Christ's body in the world today, to pull others from *their* graves... for this Love of God that bursts forth in both the cross and the resurrection is all-inclusive. As we heard Peter acknowledge in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality..."

Someone shared a story with me recently that illustrates just *how* inclusive is the resurrected Christ: It seems that a priest was leading a school assembly and asked the children what happened to Jesus on Maundy Thursday. A girl knew he had supper with his friends.

"What happened on Good Friday?" "He was crucified" said a Boy.

"And on Easter Sunday?" "He lived a new life."

But said the priest, "what happened on the Saturday?" The children were quiet as they thought. Eventually a boy put up his hand. "I think Jesus went into hell to look for his friend Judas."

I think, perhaps, that says it all very well. The Risen Christ indeed pulls us from our graves, self-made or not – and then commissions *us*, newly Risen, to bring that same life out of all the death surrounding us – to those we love, and those we don't. In the cross – and in the Resurrection – Christ brings all things into unity. As we will hear in the choir's anthem, "We praise you, Christ! Your cross has made us one."

Bishop Desmond Tutu lived the mystery of cross and resurrection in his own life in South Africa, confronting apartheid and then engaging in the hard work of reconciliation. Out of his own experience and faith he preached, "Easter says to us that despite everything to the contrary...love will prevail over hate, justice over injustice and oppression, peace over exploitation and bitterness." That is the way of God to which Baruch called the Israelites. It is the Way into which we were baptized, the way we promised again today to follow. Remember that it is the way of the cross – but also the way of the resurrection. May we learn how to take up and live both.

Amen.

First Lesson: Acts 10:34-43

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 (with Moonie's psalm tune)

Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Gospel: John 20:1-18