

Easter Day  
April 21, 2019  
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## Walking in the Light of the Risen Christ

On Christmas Eve, I shared the story of the founding of this faith community. You may remember or have heard: it began on Christmas Day in 1864, near the end of the Civil War when three Phillips Exeter Academy students walked eight miles to Epping. Here's how the story is recorded: "The Academy permitted one day's freedom at Christmastide. William Waters persuaded another student Frederic Thompson to walk with him to Epping to receive Holy Communion on Christmas Day. At this time there was a church (St. Phillip's) in that town, eight miles from Exeter. On the road Waters and Thompson came upon another student, Francis Rawle, who was undertaking the long, cold journey for the same purpose."

I believe this foundational story is somehow imprinted on the spiritual DNA of this parish.

To test this theory, I ask you on this Easter Day, the day that we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, the day when we hear the account of the Risen Jesus consoling a weeping Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb -- what might it mean to you to set out on a journey and encounter others along the way who share the same longings and purpose? To know that you do not walk alone. To discover that the journey is as important as the destination. So, we will test the proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

Thinking more about that long walk in 1864, where have we heard hints of this story before?

The gospels tell us that on the first evening of Easter, two of Jesus' followers headed out from Jerusalem to walk seven miles to a town called Emmaus (not Epping!). And they were talking about all that things that had happened. It was then that the risen Jesus joined them, yet they did not yet recognize him. They went on and talked about Jesus of Nazareth. How he was handed over and crucified -- how on the third day some women went to tomb early in the morning and saw angels who told them that Jesus was alive.

As the story goes the eyes of those walking did not open until the stranger was invited to share a meal, and then he took bread, blessed, broke and gave it to them -- then they knew.

It can take a while for our eyes to be opened to the presence of God right before us. We are prone to fixate on what and who are absent in our lives to the point that we miss what and who are present. For some of us, it can take the proverbial wake-up call: a health scare, a close call, or the loss of someone at the center our lives. For others, it may be a growing, nagging sense that even in a land of great abundance, there is an emptiness and restlessness that settles in for a time and goes unanswered. For some it may take a lifetime for eyes to open.

Where do we start or begin again this journey?

Maybe we should just start out at the Empty Tomb, huddled with weeping Mary Magdalene. We can draw inspiration from her faithfulness and learn from her love of the one she thought was gone forever.

You know: I get how many believers struggle with Jesus. We can profess in a God of creation and nature and morality, a God who gives us life and who waits to receive our spirit and soul once again when it is our time. But Jesus is hard for some because he was one of us, and it's hard to imagine God as one of us. One who lived, walked, laughed, wept, rebelled, and one who was betrayed by one of us and suffered. We want a powerful God not a suffering God. But how he was loved by those who shared his days. And how we loved them and the world in return. That is, for me, the way into knowing where I belong.

Let me let you in on a secret of preachers. There is no way that I or anyone else can explain the Resurrection of Christ. We can never know the logistics or the physics of how the stone was rolled away and how Jesus ascended to the Father in heaven. So we don't even try. The how matters little for those who believe.

What we try to do is to point to the consequences of believing in the Resurrection.

Let me take you back to your school days. There were a couple of test formats that I remember. Multiple choice. True or false. Fill in the blank. I always liked multiple choice best because I figured that the true answer was right there in front of me. True or false made me think that every question was a trick question. Fill in the blank left no room for guessing.

I thought this Easter morning we could play a little fill in the blank.

Because of the Resurrection: fill in the blank.

For example: In the reading from Acts 10, Peter lifts up the bold claim that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Because of the Resurrection: God shows no partiality. That claim gets tested by every generation. Because of the Resurrection, God has no preferred people, race, clan, nation, language, politics or family. The message of new life and love is one to be shared and lifted up for all: outcast, stranger, refugee, president, judge, general and chief. It is universal and eternal.

The first believers took this expansive message of the risen Christ from that Empty Tomb and never turned back, but moved out to ends of the earth and the world was changed forever. Nearly 2,000 years later, we gather to proclaim what they experienced.

Because of the Resurrection, lives that were once thought of as lost, forgotten, squandered, or broken beyond repair have a chance to be re-imagined and re-made. We can live again – with God's help and the support of others -- after disaster, rejection, betrayal, and loss.

Because of the Resurrection, we can begin to imagine that there is a realm and place beyond what we can know – let's name it heaven or eternal life -- and far from unsettling us with this unknown, it settles us in a way. To live life each day with, just maybe, a bit less worry or caution about what will come so that we can more fully embrace what is now.

Because of Easter, the future may look different from what we have known in the past.

One of my go-to spiritual writers Ronald Rolheiser reminds us that there are two kinds of life: resuscitated life and resurrected life. “Resuscitated life is when one is restored to one’s former life and health, as is the case when someone is brought back from the dead. Resurrected life is not like this. It is not a restoration of one’s old life but the reception of a radically new life. Lazarus got his old life back. Jesus did not.” (from *The Holy Longing*)

As the world watched the great Gothic gem of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris burn into the night this past week – we held our collective breaths as it seemed like the whole structure might fall -- there were many who commented that when the great church is rebuilt it will be sign of resurrection.

Yet the true test of putting our lives back together after tragedy and loss is that life often does not look the same as it did before. Remember Mary Magdalene did not first recognize the risen Christ, nor did those walking to Emmaus.

Many times, God invites us to re-make our lives in new ways starting with each new day. Like this day.

And because of the Easter Resurrection, that is possible.

To become an Easter people we have to first decide if we are going to leave the comfort of what we have always known and what has always worked. Our first decision may be whether we will set out on this faith journey at all. I think often about those three young men on that cold Christmas morning: William, Frederick and Francis. They could have stayed in bed on that cold morning! Instead they walked.

And so do we. In the light of the Risen Christ.