

Easter Day
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We Start at the Resurrection

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. Luke 24:1-12

Happy Easter! Christ is risen!

Once upon a time... before streaming -- Netflix, Prime, and Hulu -- there was a magical place called Blockbuster Video. It was a Friday night destination for the whole family. An event. It had everything. Rows and rows of videos. You could even buy popcorn and the same overly priced candy that you find at the movies. This was the time before DVDs, so the videos were rather large clunky VHS tapes. What I remember was the sticker on those tapes. It said: Be kind: Rewind, which suggested that the last person to watch the movie to please rewind it the beginning as a courtesy.

If you were asked by someone who knew little to nothing about the Christian faith, where would start to tell this sacred story of salvation? We all should, in our way, be able to share what it means to believe and follow Jesus Christ. How our faith shapes the way we live and pray. What it is we care most about and how we try to trust in God even when the future is unknown.

Where would we begin?

We could start in the Book of Genesis and the Old Testament? Page one of the Bible: our origin story. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

We could start in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve -- after all Christ would be considered the "second Adam" -- reconciling God to humanity once again after paradise was lost. Would we rewind to the pivotal story of Exodus? Christ was a new Moses who rescued his people. We share Easter with Passover this year with our Jewish siblings. We are reminded to never forget where our stories began -- how God heard the cries of this people and liberated them from slavery in Egypt and led them to a Promised Land. It seems to be an all-too-common human trait, that once we have arrived to a place of safety and even prosperity, we can too easily forget where we have come from -- our humble roots or the leg up we received the day we were born.

Be kind: rewind. Do we start to Bethlehem? The birth of Jesus. That's a great story. Who doesn't like Christmas? Shepherds, Wise Men, Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger. We have a Christmas pageant every year on Christmas Eve that always turns out to be the best pageant ever.

The author John Irving, who was born and raised here in Exeter and was a student at Philipps Exeter Academy, created a memorable character in his 1989 novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. We here at Christ Church like to believe that the over-the-top Christmas pageant scene in the book was inspired by our pageants at the old church building located on Elliot Street just across from the Academy. Owen, who is a combination of angel and prophet, was a remarkable boy. It was Owen who said: "Anyone can be sentimental about the nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas." There you have it.

So many options of where to start our story. Jesus' baptism. When a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' It can take a lifetime through to truly believe that those words can be spoken by God to each person here this morning. I am delighted with you.

The Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes. 'Blessed are the poor, 'Blessed are the meek, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 'Blessed are the merciful. Showing mercy is not easy nor without its challenges, yet it is far better than giving into cruelty to make a point or save face.

On Good Friday, we recalled the betrayal, the trial, the suffering, the crucifixion and the cross. There can be no resurrection without a death. The act itself is beyond understanding – how God could seem to abandon God. Yet something had to give to unsettle the world as we knew it. Without a death, how could there be new life?

If I were to share the story of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, I would rewind and start at the empty tomb. Easter morning. "On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away."

Here's the challenge: for most of us, emptiness not a positive. Think of the phrases we use: empty promises, empty gestures, empty calories. Churches are often measured on the size of their congregations and largely empty churches are signs of decline and concern.

The first Episcopal priest I ever knew was my chaplain at the Florida State University. Father Bernie Dooly, a native of West Cork in Ireland, would say: "the problem with Easter is that we often see it from the wrong side: we're on the outside looking into the darkness of the empty tomb. We encounter absence before we experience presence."

How can we start looking from the inside out into the world?

Where can experience the presence of the Risen Christ? What did those angels say: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen." I.e. You are going to have to look somewhere else. The tomb is not a shrine. The work is on the road before us.

I have changed a few things in my twelve years as rector here in Exeter. But one part of the Sunday bulletin has remained the same. At the very end we read: The worship is over: The service begins.

We can experience the Risen Christ as he become instruments of God's peace. With the gifts that have been given to us, to work to heal the wounds, right the wrongs, call out and confront injustice, to stand up for and with those Jesus himself would have seen and protected: he always saw and pulled in those on the margins.

We can seek and find presence in community. Christ Church is a community.

The Episcopal Church believes in the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist. We don't know exactly how He is present, other than the power of the Holy Spirit, because it is mystery.

Easter is the day when the followers of Jesus Christ proclaim his Resurrection. There is a reason we don't just remember and recall it: we shout it. Well, Episcopalians really don't shout, we're too polite for that.

The Apostle Paul was consumed with the Resurrection and believed that it changed everything. He wrote about it to the church in Corinth: how the risen Christ appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died." He was like: go ask them. They're still around. Don't believe just me!

So today we sing hymns of victory and triumph. God's seeming silence on the cross led to something much more. Death is conquered. Darkness will not prevail. Love wins. The old things have passed away. New life is possible.

Again, I quote the fictional and unfiltered Owen Meany: "Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer." "If you don't believe in Easter," Owen said. "Don't kid yourself—Don't call yourself a Christian."

The Resurrection continues to unfold as we listen for God's voice and experience God's presence. The hope that centers this day means that we don't just get our lives back the way they were. Each day is a new day. The sun rises and the sun sets. This day is about a new way of living and believing.

