

April 4, 2010

The Feast of the Resurrection – Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

Last year I was in Ecuador and I learned something interesting about the people there. They are a “Good Friday” people. On Good Friday the churches are packed everywhere you go. On Easter Sunday, however, one can stroll right in to Church and easily find a pew. My friend down there told me she was surprised when she first moved there and her Ecuadorian friends skipped Church on Easter Sunday in order to play soccer. Equally, they were surprised at her surprise. After all, they already went to Church on Good Friday. Context has a lot to do with this. They have suffered in many ways as they have grown, trying to catch up with the so called advanced societies; they have reflected much on their difficulties in a theology that focuses on sin and repentance.

In a way, we can identify with that. We have spent a lot of time in self-reflection during Lent. This past week in Holy Week, leading up to and including Good Friday, we reflected on the Last Supper and the death of Jesus on a cross, where it seemed all was lost. The Light of the world seemed to be put out, exterminated, leaving us to wonder how we came to be abandoned, how the powers and principalities of bondage and sin wound up with what we believed was the final word, the word that love does not prevail and we have no hope for a future in this world that God created for us. Sin and hopelessness seemed to have won out in God's creation.

But, something completely unexpected has happened. God has indeed done something new. It is a new day, a new day in the creation of the world that God has provided for us, in this world, in this present sphere.

Surely, we could not have predicted this. No one did. Dead people stay dead. Death is final. That is clearly what the first disciples of our Lord believed when they visited the tomb of Jesus.

Mary, Peter and the John visit the tomb, probably reeling with grief, knowing their teacher, the one they thought was the Messiah is inside. He is not there. It is empty, a stunning development that sends Peter and John back to their homes, one believing something wonderful has happened, the other not knowing what has just happened. Confusion sets in. Mary stays behind weeping, clearly not expecting any type of a resurrection. Someone has taken the Lord, a cruel ending to a cruel story. Now, the unexpected turns into the incredible. Mary notices angels, then a gardener, not at all what she expects, and she is still weeping, wondering who has taken away her Lord. It is not until she hears the voice of the

gardener that she recognizes it is the Lord Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. She clutches him, affirming his reality. God has done something new indeed! Humanity is found in a glorious new kind of body, although I am quite sure at that moment in time, Mary had no idea what to make of it. I imagine she was floored, as we all should be.

As incredible as this seems, this passage affirms a physical resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, as does the rest of the New Testament dealing with the idea of resurrection. This is an important detail, because it affirms that God is doing something new through Jesus Christ in God's creation. Because of this resurrection, we now have hope for a new future, where God's created order is finally restored and there is hope for a life that is redeemed and valued, a life that no force of darkness can demean or diminish.

This resurrection affirms that the love God will not be defeated by death. The love and the Light in the world still exists and can not be extinguished. But, there is more to this wonderful news than that. Not only is the original Jewish hope for the resurrection affirmed in Jesus, but our hope for the future is affirmed. God is recreating the world.

Jesus is given a new body, so new and fresh and with a different kind of physicality that Mary now, and others later, have a hard time recognizing Jesus at first. This new physicality is part of a new creation delivered in the resurrection. It is physicality imperishable. This new physicality is promised to us too.

Paul mentions the first fruits of the resurrection as that of Jesus. However, there will be more fruit, and it will be those who are in Jesus Christ. God is recreating the world, breathing new life into it and one day this world we be recreated and those in Christ will share in that creation. It will be a physical realm but death and decay will be no more. Because we are in Christ, we will share in this new creation.

The resurrection of Jesus does more than validate the hope for life eternal, it has given our lives real meaning and purpose. We are not lounging around waiting to die and float off forever. We are to help bring about this new creation. The love we give will remain; the work we do, the lives we touch, the order we restore to this good earth will be validated in this new creation. We have a purpose, not to trash things before we depart, but to help put the house in order. The idea that trashing the earth is OK, because we will simply die and go away has no merit. This new creation affirms what we have always said about God, that God cares about the world, the world is good and God will redeem it. It has already begun.

Resurrection, new creation affirms we are valuable. The lives we touch are valuable. The powers that tell us that we do not matter, no longer have any sway. Humanity matters. Our lives have value and purpose. How many people need to hear this? How many battered, addicted, abused, depressed, diminished and defeated human beings out there need to know that they have value and are loved

and they don't have to wait until they die for something better. Rather, they can experience and contribute to something great right now?

This is why we and all of Christendom are Easter people, not Good Friday people. This is why our baptismal promises carry so much weight, particularly on Easter day. They affirm the great and meaningful purpose we have been given because of the resurrection. The resurrection affirms that our promises have teeth. We can have faith that when we carry out our promises, they will be validated in God's new creation. Our work of love will remain. No one can kill off love and we need not give in to the forces of the world, which try to undermine the fundamental goodness of creation, humanity included. The wicked forces, which were in full view on Friday, have been defeated. We need not give in to them, but plow ahead. The resurrection changes everything.

We have a purpose and a hope for a real future, one in which we can participate now and forever, because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! A new creation has begun!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!