

EASTER 2015

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

This proclamation resists reduction to anything less than testimony to an extraordinary, world-changing event. We've all heard plenty of speeches in which someone is attempting great and inspiring oratory and failing. We are in for a lot more of it as another presidential campaign season begins. "Imagine!" says Senator Cruz, sounding a little like John Lennon as he seeks to inspire us by his vision of America. Some will be hearing graduation addresses before too long and others will hear College Presidents and Heads of Schools welcome students in the fall with speeches that draw on foundational stories of their institutions. For a number of years I tried to offer something like a State of the Parish sermon on the day of our annual parish meeting which will take place next Sunday and for which I hope you will all come back! But it didn't work. The business of the parish is not the stuff of a sermon. I'm sure we've all heard less than inspiring sermons. I know I have offered them myself. But unlike all other discourse, a sermon is founded on, and draws from the extraordinary proclamation of this day: Christ is Risen! And it is a proclamation that resists being made smaller than it is in order to accommodate our limited imaginations.

Efforts to domesticate resurrection, --the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead—have given rise to all kinds of analogies from nature in general and spring in particular. We think of butterflies emerging from their cocoons and bunnies proliferating with procreative abandon, -- natural events that point to the irrepressibility of life for sure, but not really images of resurrection. As I drove Allyson to her school bus last Monday we actually caught a glimpse of the Easter Bunny in an Emory neighborhood as he jumped out of some daffodils in front of our car and then made a hasty retreat. Certainly such things can put us in mind of resurrection but are not the same as the truly unnatural event we gathered to celebrate this morning.

Even some theologians have offered ways of understanding Jesus' resurrection by reducing it to a grand story of some natural occurrence, --a rumor that began among dispirited, mourning disciples for example. One of our members recently visited Chapel Hill in North Carolina and reported to his parents that the whole place went quiet when Dean Smith walked into the room. The legendary basketball coach had died earlier in the year, so I'll bet the place went quiet. Turns out it was the current coach, Roy Williams who left our friends awestruck, and that is certainly how some rumors get started after all, but not so with Jesus. The ancients were not stupid and while the idea of resurrection was not new with the Christian movement, the claim

that a man who had been executed was now appearing to those who loved him was and remains fundamentally different. Unbelievable even.

Even some of the deepest theological minds can appear to reduce the importance of what we proclaim and celebrate this day by their efforts to make the violent nature of Jesus' death redemptive in some way. There is nothing about Jesus bloodshed, agony or sweat that is redemptive in any way that makes sense save perhaps that it reveals the consequence and depth of the human sin that led to his death on the cross in the first place. If all the real work was done on Friday then today becomes nothing more than a divine pat on the head for a job well done, --not really something essential for those who desire abundant life today and for ever.

No one really knows what happened on that first Easter morning. Certainly there are clues: this was not resuscitation, not Lazarus *redux*. Jesus was not recognized by his looks but in characteristic acts, --calling those who knew and loved him by name, standing in their midst, interpreting scripture and breaking bread, breakfasting on the sea shore and so on. Whatever happened that morning this much is clear: death is not the last word in life. Death is not our ultimate horizon and we can begin to live as though death were not the end-all of life.

It was the forces of death that sent Jesus to the cross –those same forces that are revealed for what they really are in his story: nothing more than violent, coercive human mechanisms for managing our anxieties, trying to dominate our environments, providing a measure of certainty or securities and anything and everything else that leads us to spend billions of dollars on fascinating military hardware. You might have seen the articles in the *New York Times* a week or so ago on how we treat maximum security risk prisoners and, separately, how the Norwegians do it. I became quite aware once again that I'm glad we have aircraft carriers and submarines and I'm glad that we have the means to lock some people away even while I think we resort too easily to war and have too many people behind bars. In other words I became aware of my own anxiety about invasive or unregulated individuals and governments who I'm happy to see constrained in some way. At the same time I know that such coercive constraint is not the stuff of real life and does not partake of the reality we celebrate today. This celebration is about our sure and certain knowledge that even when we fail to live up to it, the truth of the resurrection is that love is stronger than death, that love is the last word in life and that when we know ourselves beloved we can face anything, even our own fears, even our own sin, even our own compromised integrity and begin to live anew. Easter life is just that: life in the assurance of love. Yes, we are going to die and yes, we can and do experience loss and challenge, but at the

same time yes, we can respond to challenge with grace and yes, we can live in ways that bespeak the truth that love is stronger than death. We can find ways not to use those submarines and carriers in war and find ways to incarcerate far fewer humans than we do today. We can bear witness to the extraordinary fact of Jesus' resurrection in how we live in personal life and in public policy because we put our trust in the One who raised Jesus from the dead and because we say:

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