

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | John 20:1–18

Date | Easter Day, April 4, 2021



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Happy Easter everyone! What a glorious gift it is to be able to celebrate this day the story of Jesus' victory over the grave. It's the apex of the Christian tradition, the good news we get to tell the world that love is indeed stronger than death, greater than anything we might fear could separate us from the grace and peace of a loving and liberating God. So, Alleluia, praise be to God for Easter and for this opportunity we have to worship together today.

I wonder if I might begin with a story. It was a little over two years ago when I first had the opportunity to visit the place where tradition holds the events we have just heard about in the Gospel of John occurred. Of course, 2000 years later and one or two things have changed. Although I knew full-well there'd be not be the stillness and solitude of that morning when Mary Magdalene and Jesus encountered one another outside the empty tomb, the scene inside Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre could hardly have been more of a contrast.

On one hand, for a Christian it is an awesome, one of a kind setting. To be there is to stand at the very fulcrum of the story of our faith, a space where you can almost feel the entirety of Christianity pivot. Within that one church you can literally place your feet between Good Friday and Easter Day. Just beyond the church entrance is Calvary, the site believed to be where Jesus was crucified. A short distance from it is the Aedicule ('ed-i-quool'), the small church within the church that holds the tomb of Jesus. Vast mosaics adorn the walls, ceilings are crowded with paintings of scenes from Christ's passion, ornate candle chandeliers hang from above, and everywhere you look there are centuries-old icons and gold-leafed altar frontals. The sounds of liturgies of the four Christian traditions that have care of the church echo off stone walls throughout the day. It's a living church and an ancient site of extraordinary historical and theological significance.

On the other hand, if I had been heading there in hopes of some time for quiet reflection to soak it all in, I would have found that challenging. Think less stillness and calm and more something like an ecclesiastical jamboree. People are everywhere. Guides lead small bands of pilgrims from each corner of Christendom and some rather stern clergy of varied stripes try to keep order. It's a living carnival of Christianity's vast global reach, and the chaos of it all adds a beauty all of its own.

Like so much in the Christian faith, then, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is pregnant with paradox - as it was for me as the endless swirl of those hours of waiting gave way to the stillness of the moment when I finally got to be alone. When at last my turn came and I squeezed my way into the tiny shrine of the tomb, getting down on my hands and knees to bend beneath the altar, I reached my hand down into the opening in the ground, and in that briefest of instants my flesh touched the stone that tradition holds Jesus' flesh touched as they laid his body in the tomb. It's hard to describe what I felt as I did. All of a sudden, out of the thoroughly impersonal pushing and shoving of hours in line, I sensed a surge of intimacy, of closeness, a presence of something more than I could see. And then it was over.

It's the kind of story that speaks to so much of what it can be like to follow a Savior whose appearing in our lives often seems so fleeting.

John's gospel account of the resurrection captures that too. It's one of the most deeply personal moments in all of scripture. That after all of the anguish of the hours following Jesus' death, Mary and Jesus could now reach to one another with heart and body. 'Mary'. 'Rabbouni'. I see you. And then it is over. 'Do not hold onto me', Jesus says to her. 'Go and tell'.

I wonder, what fleeting glimpse of that risen Lord might you have been gifted with through the course of this pandemic? I know that there have been many times when I have reached out for that same Savior who met Mary in the quiet of morning all those Easter Day's ago. At those more challenging times I have needed to know, to feel within me that the light that dispels the darkness of night does indeed exist, that it is a power my life might also touch. And I know that many of you have been through those times too.

Yet the great, good news of Easter tells us that as we reach for God, our reaching will not be in vain. And so, we are called to be an Easter people, a people who can proclaim Alleluia anyhow to a world that is so often in need of hearing a word of hope.

What then might your story be as one of God's Easter people? How might your life proclaim the good news of God in Christ even as the journey ahead remains uncertain? For that is the nature of a life that is lived by faith more than by sight - that it is often only possible to see where we've been heading after enough of the race is behind us. Yet holding onto faith, especially when times are challenging, is so essential, for we may never know how our Easter people story might become a gift for others, like the story of Dick Hoyt, who died just a few weeks ago.

Dick competed in over a thousand races with his son, Rick, an astounding feat by any standards. What makes Rick's achievement truly extraordinary is that for each of those thousand plus races, Dick Hoyt pushed his son Rick in a wheelchair every mile of the way. Rick is quadriplegic and has cerebral palsy. For several years, Dick and his son were told they didn't belong in racing, that they couldn't compete together. Yet Dick wouldn't give up because he knew what racing meant to his son, who told him, '[dad] when I'm running, it feels like my disability disappears'. It was as if to say, when you run, we live. I imagine that there were many times when Dick might have given up. Yet Dick's faith saw him through, and only he would have known just how much he ran by faith before he was able to run in plain sight of what those races achieved to lift up the lives of others like his son Rick.

The invitation this day is so very clear: be an Easter people. Walk by faith. Trust that whatever is to come, you can believe that as you reach for the God who loves you, your life will touch a mystery, and the risen life of Christ will become your own. Faith calls us onward, unbound by the past or the challenges of the present moment. 'Go and tell my brothers' and my sisters, go tell all the people, was Jesus' word to Mary, that first witness to the promise of Easter. It our Savior's word to us now.

So, happy easter dear saints of God. And may your life speak loudly of the God whose love will never let us go. For Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.