

Easter Day: April 9, 2023

Acts 10:34-43

Colossians 3:1-4

Matthew 28:1-10

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

The Rev. Nat Johnson

Last night we ended the liturgy of the Great Three Days. The liturgy is a single service that takes place during the last three days of Holy Week, beginning with Maundy Thursday and ending in the Great Vigil of Easter. On Thursday we heard again the new commandment Jesus gave to his disciples: “love one another,” Jesus told us, “as I have loved you.” Love with a love that inclines the whole self toward another, love with a love that satisfies hunger and eases burdens. On Friday we listened to the passion of God as we recounted the arrest, trial, torture, and execution of Jesus. We were invited to sit at the foot of the cross without rushing through the discomfort, without tamping down the longing that gives shape and depth to our hope. The cross stood then, as it stands now, as an indictment against humanity’s quest for power and control, and the violence through which we seek to grasp and maintain it. But the story doesn’t end there. Yes, the cross is the object of God’s judgment but also the site of God’s forgiveness and liberation.

On this day, Easter Day, we proclaim as a gathered community that death could not extinguish the Life that enlightens all people. We bear witness to the power of God to break open the finality of death and proclaim that life will always have the last word. Bewildered as we may be, we stand today as a testimony to the new creation that God is bringing about in and through us. The hope that Jesus elicited in his followers, which had been devastated by the crucifixion, has been ignited anew in the resurrection of Jesus.

In our present moment, I wonder if it is possible to feel the shudder of hope deep in our bones from that proclamation. I wonder if it is possible to feel the twinge of awe and bewilderment that comes from being enfolded in this mystery. I wonder if it is possible to imagine the new creation that is coming into being because of the uncontainable life of God that bursts open in Jesus’ resurrection.

We come to this celebration today steeped in stories of death: we’re three years past the start of a global pandemic; millions have died across the globe. Millions of others around the world contend with manifestations of evil as they bear the weight of cruelty and violence, war and political strife. We come to this celebration today in a society where division and difference are negotiated from a place of fear. We come to this celebration today in a country that has birthed a national religion under the guise of Christianity, but which is steeped in racism, xenophobia, and white supremacy. Perhaps some of us come to this celebration today holding grief and sorrow and anguish from our own losses. I wonder if the weight of all these death stories has trapped us in the confusion and cruelty of Good Friday or the numbness of Holy Saturday.

Are we able to experience the joyful (albeit, terrifying) promise of hope and renewal this Easter Morning? Can we recognize in the empty tomb as the womb of new life, life no longer tethered to death’s claim of the inevitable end of created life, but tethered instead to the very life of God, the source of all that is seen and unseen?

If you are struggling this morning to make sense of Jesus’ resurrection; if you find yourself caught up in mental debates about the plausibility and possibility of resurrected life; if the signs of death that surround us have beaten down your conviction and faith; if you’ve never experienced the transformative power of God-with-us through the love of Jesus, I invite you to hear anew the promises of resurrected life.

Resurrected life is marked by difference – it is not resuscitated life but *radically transformed life*. As we will hear in the coming weeks, there is something different about the Resurrected Christ – he appears and disappears; the laws of nature seem not to hinder him as they do us. And yet, there is continuity between the Resurrected Jesus who shows himself to his disciples and the one who just days before had been laid to rest in the now empty tomb. Recognition comes to them, each in their own way, that the one who appears to them is indeed the Crucified One, because his body still bears the marks of his torture.

Resurrected life is not simply about what happens after death, though. The resurrection life is a kind of life to which we *now* have access. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks about being baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection; and by this he is not offering a figure of speech. In saying this, Paul is not spiritualizing or sentimentalizing the resurrected life. He means what he says – in baptism, we not only recall Jesus' death and resurrection, but we are caught up into it; it is made present to us in this moment, in the here and now, and we receive the benefits of God's saving work through Jesus Christ. The new life that is forged in resurrection is a present reality signified by baptism and renewed every time we gather in eucharist, in thanksgiving. It unfolds within us as we strive to follow Jesus to the cross, as we ourselves become disruptions to the status quo, as we align our lives to the kind of love that Jesus commanded us to practice.

It is a false dichotomy that makes earthly life and resurrected life a binary, as if one had nothing to do with the other. Rather, the resurrected life is *both* about the kind of life that is possible now, in the becoming of the new creation. *And*, it is about the expectation of God's faithfulness to bring about the completion, the fullness, of resurrected life, when we will finally be fully united to the love that creates and sustains all that was and is and is to come.

Resurrected life opens us up to new possibilities. It frees us from the tyranny of death's shadow, from the domination of the world's violence, so that we might become bearers of new life. The transformation we experience in the resurrected life becomes transformational in the world. As we obey Jesus' command to love as he did, as we care for the poor and the marginalized, as we feed the hungry, as we strive for mutuality and equity, as we foster communities of healing, the resurrected life is made tangible in our world.

The crucified and risen Christ is standing before us today, just as he stood before his first disciples then. He is extending to us the invitation to a different way, a different life, a risen life. He is calling your name and my name – do we recognize his voice? Can we feel his loving gaze upon our tear-soaked faces under the weight of the grief caused by so much of our collective and personal traumas? Will we take the risk to hope in the One who promises life – not just beyond death – but here and now?

Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal Priest who lived in in the 19th-century, once preached: "Let every person count themselves immortal. Let them catch the revelation of Jesus in his resurrection. Let them say not merely, 'Christ is risen,' but 'I shall rise.'" Perhaps this year, as we continue to emerge from a global pandemic, as we begin to see signs of new life, of new relationship, we might learn to say not just "I shall rise," but, "I *am* risen!" This is the hope of the resurrection, the seeds of new life that burst forth in the new creation in Jesus Christ. Today, dear People of Grace, as we celebrate and experience anew Christ's Passover from death to life, let us boldly accept the invitation God offers us to the resurrected life!

Christ *is* risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!