

A Sermon for Easter Day, April 5, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia

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*'Tis the spring of souls today: Christ hath burst his prison.
and from three days sleep in death as a sun hath risen;
all the winter of our sins, long and dark is flying
from his light, to whom we give laud and praise undying.*

*Neither might the gates of death, nor the tomb's dark portal,
nor the watchers, nor the seal hold thee as a mortal:
but today amidst thine own thou didst stand, bestowing
that thy peace which ever-more passeth human knowing.*

Hymn 199 Stanzas 2 and 4

“. . .that thy peace which ever-more passeth human knowing.”

Last Sunday in his sermon, Harrison set the tone not only for Holy Week, but for today as well as we gather to celebrate the joy of this Easter Day. He shared with us a question he has often had in his conversations with God. It is probably a question that many of us have had as well. In one way or another we find ourselves asking, “God, do you know about me? Do you love me?” In the contemplative music of the Taize community, there is the simple hymn in which the words are simply sung over and over, “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” Harrison’s question to God and the words of this hymn speak to the longing you and I have for the presence of the living God in our hearts. Today, as we celebrate our Lord’s resurrection from the dead, God bestows upon us that peace which passes human knowing. It

is a sacred mystery that passes our understanding yet it is a mystery that empowers us to have faith and to live in hope.

Last Sunday, Palm Sunday, was a day of festivity mixed with sorrow. It began with the festival procession reminding us of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Then came the reading of the Passion Gospel reliving Jesus' trial, execution, and death. On Maundy Thursday we gathered to remember the night Jesus had supper for the last time with his disciples. On Friday we remembered his crucifixion as a large wooden cross was carried into this space and place before us. Then on Saturday morning we gathered for the simple service in which we remembered that those who loved Jesus were simply in grief. Even though he had told them that he would be killed and would rise again, the meaning of that for them had not registered. Jesus was dead. That was all there was to it. They were feeling the grief that you and I feel at the death of a loved one. Now this morning we proclaim with joy the Easter proclamation, "Christ has risen!" Something Harrison said last Sunday has stayed with me all week. He said, "As we go through this week, ask God, 'Do you know about me, do you love me?' and simply sit in the presence of this story and see what happens." Now this morning, as you and I rejoice in this sacred mystery of Christ's being raised from the dead, let us simply allow ourselves to be in the presence of this story and see what happens.

Life, as we know all too well, is a mixture of joy and sorrow. There are those times when you and I ask, "Where is God in all of this?" And we might also ask, "What does Easter have to say to those who suffer and grieve?" Last Sunday we sang the words in the refrain of *"All glory laud and honor"*, *"to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring."* And yet I cannot help thinking, for example, what does Easter say to the families of those children and teachers killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut as they come upon their third Easter after that unspeakable tragedy? What does Easter have to say to the families of those 150 souls who died when the plane in which they were travelling was intentionally crashed by the co-pilot into that mountain side in the French Alps last week? What does Easter have to say to so many who have suffered a great loss or who face a diagnosis that has turned their life

upside down? What does Easter have to say to you and to me where you and I are in your journey today?

On that first Easter we see Mary Magdalene as she comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. There follows a lot of commotion involving Peter and the other disciple. It was the other disciple who reaches the tomb first. As he goes in he sees that Jesus' body is not there. He believes even though he does not yet understand what the scripture had said. Then, Mary weeping, responds to the two angels who say, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She tells them that someone has taken the body of the Lord and she doesn't know where they have taken him. Then she turns, and sees a man who at first she thought was the gardener, but when he addresses her by name, "Mary," she recognizes him and she responds, "Rabboni" which means "teacher." This brings us back to the question Harrison posed when we find ourselves asking God, "Do you know about me, do you love me?"

What in the world does Easter have to say to us in the midst of all that we face in life, some of which is suffering and loss? At first, Jesus' command to Mary to go and tell others that he is ascending to his father and to her father, to his God and to her God may not sound like much of anything important. This moment, however, marks a turning point in the relationship between God and us. Now, at the empty tomb that relationship moves forever into a new level of intimacy. The Very Reverend Gary Hall, dean of the Washington National Cathedral put it this way when he said, "Easter is about many things, but perhaps its deepest meaning has to do with this divine persistence in search of you and me. Do what we will to avoid, betray, even kill the One who comes toward us in Jesus, that One will not be stopped even by our rage, denial, and fear. Jesus is alive at Easter not as some kind of cosmic magic trick. Jesus is alive at Easter as a sign and symbol and witness of the relentless persistence of a divine love that refuses to let us go." I find his words to be helpful as we celebrate today and throughout this Easter season what is a sacred mystery that is ever-more beyond our human knowing—beyond our understanding. I hope you do too.

Easter does not erase the tragic loss of precious innocents, the loss of those whom we love, the tragedies that occur in our midst, nor does it make our suffering, whatever it may be, go away,

yet God's relentless persistence will continue to seek us until God finds us where we are in our journey. God's search for us will not erase or undo our suffering and loss but it will find us in a place where we will experience hope once again.

Easter is about new life that emerges from death. It is about the glimpses of joy that begin to emerge from sorrow. It is about the courage we begin to have that emerges from fear that has crippled us. It is about hope that rises out of despair. As you and I celebrate this Easter Day, may we simply allow ourselves to be in the presence of this story and may we have the faith to see what happens. The risen Lord will appear to us when we might least expect that to happen, for

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And now, in the assurance of hope given to us in the Risen Lord, let us proclaim our faith as we stand and say together,

We believe in one God. . .