

EASTER SUNDAY, April 12, 2009 - No Stone Unturned (Already Rolled Away)

A 1EB Sermon, BCUCC, Dan Stern

"Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been: is come again."

And . . . can we even begin to take in all the love and the wonder? Can we begin to comprehend the scale of the incredibly GOOD NEWS that has come to us this day?

(For inspiring today's sermon, I thank the Rev Gene Robinson.)

In my 23 years of preaching Easter Sermons, I've never felt adequately able to express resurrection glory in words! The music does it better. The sounding brass; all our voices lifted in harmony, the old dust-gathering organ's cover lifted again, played as if new with all the stops pulled out...And the at-best muted praise of Lent's 40-day vigil is completely unleashed in a crescendo of joyful adoration, trumping that 40-day death watch with a 50-day season of awesome wonder. Ancient cathedrals tremble with the sound, stained glass windows glow in the bright sunlight; little country churches with gathered daffodils take up the song; every technique we know of is pressed into service: every wire, every wave, alive with alleluias. The song rises in a tide that overflows the walls of churches and cascades across a still-depressed and sleepy world, rousing the age-old longings of the human heart for life restored, reborn.

Though I never feel adequately able to give voice to it all, I do still surround myself, in my study, with the weighty words of great Christian thinkers: volumes of commentary, my treasured old theological tomes. I glance at books of poetry and of visual artistry too, seeking the winged, soaring loveliness of metaphor and image, as well as the magic word that might explode in the mind like a star in a velvet night. I keep hoping: there must be radiant rhetoric in which to cloth this message of unending Easter joy. Nothing seems to do it. So...I take the dog for a walk. I catch the fresh-full scent and sight of everywhere pink blossoming cherry trees - something about nature during Springtime - its faithfulness in returning, maybe is encouraging every year even if it does snow again in April - maybe - is encouraging. A brief burst of afternoon sunshine tempts me to linger longer outdoors. So I finish up some late Lent early spring gardening chores - pruning, and a clearing away of winter's dead debris. Doing so reminds me of ancient, organic, universal connections between various faith traditions and nature's own cycles of fertility, decay, and regeneration. In preparing the soil I feel better empowered to prepare my own heart for resurrection.

With sunlight waning, I go back to my study, and open my Bible to the resurrection Gospel accounts. Here again I feel at first inadequately resourced: I find surprisingly little music or poetry, no trumpets or trombones, no alleluias even, no soaring rhetoric or lofty theological argument; no senses aroused by Springtime's cyclical exuberance. Just a few words about some women bringing scented spices to a grave, worried as they go that they won't be strong enough to roll away the massive stone, but when they arrive, they find instead an empty tomb, the stone already rolled away, and an anonymous young man, who makes a mere eight monosyllable, two short sentence statement: "He is not here; he has been raised."

That's pretty much the entirety of how the oldest of the four gospel accounts speaks of it. And then it ends abruptly - the last words of the earliest manuscripts of Mark's gospel being only these: "They fled from the tomb, for trembling amazement had seized them; and said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

They flee in stunned silence. And that's it! That's IT?? Thus ends the gospel of Mark. So: how are WE to finish the story? What are we to feel, what to do with that sudden stop in the action? What exactly were those women feeling? Mark says it was a kind of trembling astonishment. Matthew's gospel speaks of fear and great joy. Aren't our own strongest and most motivating feelings richly mixed up in like manner? Don't we, like these women, set out to do what we can, to achieve our goals, however big or small, to make our little spice-bearing, death-resisting, garden-preparing, life still affirming gestures? Aren't we brave up to a point in doing so, like these women were - their going to the grave was, after all, no tiny gesture - it would have been dangerous for them to approach the Roman guards, to make some claim on the body of an insurrectionist. Don't we too worry, when we're only half-way through the process of achieving something of meaning and value, that maybe we can't do any good after all, that it will be too dangerous, that stones we'll have to move to achieve our goals will be too heavy?

Sure we do. We worry - a lot. (*paraphrasing Gene Robinson:*) "The stones that get in the way of living a fully abundant resurrection life are large, they're intimidating, seemingly final, and frightening, so we hardly look up; we obsess about the impossibilities, we assume the stone in our own path will be unmovable. So many have already lost their jobs, their homes, their health - won't you and I be next? So much torture and brutality has already occurred - how can we possibly hold any of society's cruelty in abeyance? Won't we be brutally beaten down too, or harden our own hearts and ourselves become brutal?"

One could argue that we have reason to worry. And yet I have heard the alcoholic say: "I believe in resurrection because I have experienced it." And I can stand here this morning and make the same claim: I know in my own lived experience that resurrection is real.

I knew it perhaps first in the great outdoors - at church camps and backpacking in high mountain places. I knew it once when I finally recovered after a difficult time early in my life in which I was deeply depressed, and could see no way out. I've known it in more recent years tending a simple backyard garden through seasonal cycles. I've experienced resurrection and wonder and empowerment here and there, in bits and pieces, all through my life. But it's taken me an entire lifetime to begin to fully recognize the scale and the grandeur of everywhere resurrection possibility.

When I talk to people in treatment for alcoholism, they tell me that abstaining from alcohol is actually the easier part of it. Learning to live a truly sober and conscious life every day and long-term, grateful to the God who makes it all possible - THAT is the really hard part! And yet it is real. It happens. It is the power of life trumping death, repeatedly and forever, resurrection!

God is always and forever moving mountains (and large gravestones), and simply to receive the life God wants for you and me is glorious, IS life trumping death. "You'd think we wouldn't need any reminding. But we're human, and forget from time to time that God has already accomplished the most amazing thing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus - something at a cosmic grand scale and yet highly personal... We have to, as those women did on that cold Easter morning, look up, and see and believe that the stone has ALREADY been rolled back." (*Gene Robinson paraphrase*)

And that, in and of itself, is fearsome, awesome, makes us tremble, because, dear God, if it is true, if You HAVE rolled away the stone in the pathway to a resurrected life, then there's no good excuse for letting any stones get in our way. The heaviest stone has already been rolled back. We can let go of fears and anxieties that have so easily, in the past, seized hold of us. The hard work of living an every-day conscious resurrected life, of doing courageous and mighty things in Jesus' name is ahead of us, but there's nothing left to DIS-empower us and longer. We can experience the joy of the resurrected life beginning right now. Thanks be to God.

What does it mean for us to say we are an Easter people? As we ponder and discuss our question of the month this morning, let's try to be as specific as possible. Let's lift up examples as to HOW we already ARE an Easter people.

Of course, Easter is just beginning. I Peter 1 says that we have been given a new birth into a living hope; that we have an imperishable inheritance, an indescribable and glorious joy, through resurrection. It all sounds pretty wonderful to me!

I did say in my Easter Sunday sermon last week that a lack of denial about death and despair is part of the whole story. I mentioned that I don't tend to be one of those Christians who believes God orchestrates every little detail in life. But even when it comes to some of the bigger and nastier events - earthquakes and cancers and so on - It DOES seem that God tends to know how to make blessings out of the worst of life experiences. And I wonder - Isn't believing THAT the essence of an Easter/resurrection mentality? Believing that God truly IS still speaking - still making blessings out of curses, resurrections out of crucifixions, right here, right now, with you and with me?

We are gathered here this morning with a question of the month for us to ponder and discuss is in large part simply because we need to keep telling our little hope-out-of-despair stories to one another. Then of course, we need to lift them to God in thanksgiving.

To paraphrase Emily Dickenson again, Easter truth, resurrection hope, must dazzle us gradually, or everyone be blind. Look for and name the ordinary, everyday miracles too.

Psalm 16:9 My heart is glad, my soul rejoices, my body rest secure. And Easter is about a living presence. An abiding hope.