

Jesus is Risen

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Great Vigil of Easter
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Alleluia, Christ Is Risen. The Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia.

You might be thinking to yourself, or I hope you are, “What did we just say?” Did we say Jesus is risen? A dead man risen? Do you mean it? Can it be true? If so, no wonder the women ran from the tomb in fear and amazement. Tonight, of all nights, if this man we know as Jesus is really, really risen from the dead, then tonight of all nights it is meet and right that we pay heed to some wise words from that great lay theologian, Annie Dillard.

No pretty Easter bonnets will do for us, for as she says: “On the whole, I do not find Christians outside of the catacombs sufficiently sensible of conditions.” Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it. The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning or in this case a Saturday night. “It is madness”, she says, “to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church, we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares, they should lash us to our pews.” So says Annie Dillard.

Now, though I wasn't in the vestibules tonight, I didn't see the ushers issuing life preservers or crash helmets or seat belts to lash us to our pews, but it might be a good idea. Kettledrums and trumpets are not the half of what we need. Hold onto your seat friends, Easter is always an amazing and bumpy ride. If like me you are terrified by those rides at amusement parks that other people find thrilling, they are child's play compared to the ride that we are in for tonight throughout the Great 50 days of Easter, and yes, forever more.

Were you outside this afternoon for even a brief moment? Did you see it? Wasn't it amazing? Just as I was driving along Commonwealth Avenue, lost in my thoughts about visiting a couple of people in the hospital, there it was blazing as amazing as any burning bush. As full of life as anything ever has been or will be. A single tree in full bloom. Various hues of pink and red shading in and out of one another, as if they were calling out to one another. Life, Life, Life, death has not held us, winter is over, spring is here. And the creation account says that God spoke all that into being with a single word, a word, a creative, loving, everlasting word. That word was Jesus Christ. There at the beginning and from before the beginning. Its time to put on your crash helmets friends, this is more amazing than anything we could ever concoct, even with our most sophisticated chemistry sets, in the most complex labs over at MIT. And, best of all, as I Isaiah reminds us, its concocted for you, for me, for anyone willing to be in covenant with God, and its absolutely free. And it's concocted from just one ingredient, divine love. And for only one purpose, that we might know ourselves loved, loved by God.

Jesus Christ, the Living Word, blazing from the beginning of creation in every atom, every particle, every blossom and never defeated by winter or death. Alleluia, Christ Is Risen. The Lord is Risen Indeed, Alleluia.

But wait, it gets even better. Because life isn't always about the blaze of new life in spring but also includes deep, dark wintry days that feel like death. Because of that we get our second explosive story of the night. For those times when we have to face that we might lose the liveliest and most precious blazing blooms of our lives, we have the amazing and gut-wrenching story of Abraham and Isaac.

I like what our Jewish brothers and sisters call this story. They don't call it the sacrifice of Isaac, because, of course, he isn't sacrificed. They call it, the Binding of Isaac. This story has layer after layer of deep truth to it, but tonight lets focus on just one.

In a situation of deep loss, your deep loss, have you ever thought, God took this from me. Have you ever gotten lost at an altar of sacrifice, trying to make sense of why God would ask you to give this over? Of course you have, we all have. This story is for us. Not only does this story say a final and definitive, NO, to thinking that our God is a god who works that way, who demands sacrifice from us. But it gets even better. Its time to put on your crash helmets again.

Not only does God not demand this kind of sacrifice of us, lest we have any lack of clarity or any lack of belief about it, God steps in, not only to provide the sacrifice for us, but to be the sacrifice. God is the sacrifice. That ram caught in the thicket; there is the Christ again. The lamb, the ram of God. So, if tonight, you bring here any doubts, let Christ be the sacrifice and let light and life dawn in the place where you were afraid that something or someone precious to you or you yourself had to be the sacrifice.

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Blazing in every blossom, sacrifice, God's sacrifice, in every moment of loss, Christ in both places. Can it get better? Yes, amazing as it seems, it can and it does. Now with our brothers and sisters we stand at the Red Sea and all of us have stood at such brinks in our lives. Places where we had to decide, do I stay, do I go? Do I stick with what I know and what seems familiar, even comfortable despite its tempting, enslaving drawbacks? Or, do I go forward into the unknowable? How can I go forward, for in times like these and questions like these, and brinks of decision like these; God gives us this amazing story. For what this story promises is that God goes in front of us, as Pillar of Light, Paschal Candle and Pillar of Cloud. We will not have to step into the unknown alone. God will be in front of us and behind us, protecting us and guiding us. God has a destination, a good and pleasant land, a new home, better than any goodness we have ever known. This step we take tonight will be one step closer to the kingdom. Because as we take this step we will be following, guess who? The One, who keeps showing up, we will be following the Christ. And so once more,

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So Christ is blazing in every atom and blossom, Christ shows up in every loss, sacrificing himself. Christ goes before us and beside us into every difficult decision we make. And now, I just bet you can't believe its going to get any better, but it does.

And for the rest of this sermon, many of my thoughts and even some of my words depend on the thoughts of words of a dear friend of mine. A fellow priest back in the Diocese of Maryland, Kirk Kubicek. Paul and Mark both tell us that Jesus Christ is not dead. Jesus is loose in the world, not a lifeless corpse, not a dim memory in the past; he goes ahead of us into the future, to meet us and to claim us as His own. We can no longer act as if He is trapped in a tomb. We encounter Him as living, as real. Put on your crash helmets, there is no escaping Him, there is no containing Him, there is no forgetting Him. It can no longer be business as usual, it can never be business as usual, and you'd better put on your crash helmets.

For the resurrection is not a one-time event in the distant past. It is a living reality, here and now, with the promise of even more surprising and even more disturbing encounters yet to come. For Mark's Easter story is not so much about what we so often call "the empty tomb" but as about an "opened tomb." And like an opened womb, Mark's opened tomb offers us an open invitation to experience new life. New life in the living Christ, the Christ who is not trapped by death or tomb, but who continues to go before us, encounter us and call us on to follow Him into new life as disciples.

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And that is what the open tomb calls us to be, disciples. For disciples are people who try to follow Christ and try to learn from Him along the way. But even in death He does not need us along the kind of way or in the kind of way we thought He would. Yes, it was costly to follow Christ to the cross, as any one of us knows who has tried. Along the way of the Cross, like every single person in Mark's Gospel we have fallen and failed and fallen and failed as we tried to follow. But here is the good and surprising news; it will be even more costly to follow Him into resurrection. You had better put on your crash helmets again.

For the Christ who surprised us in life, surprises us again here in death leading to new life. Because we might expect that it would be His band of first disciples, the twelve, which He would count on to carry the news of resurrection, but in Mark's Gospel its not. Every single one of them flees and they never reappear, never. It is not even the women, in the story we have just heard, on whom He counts. Because, as you heard, they fail as disciples, they are too afraid to go out to proclaim the resurrection as they were told to. But there is a hint of hope for them, for us and for the world. It not only said that they fled the tomb in fear, it says they fled in amazement. Now the word, amazement, in Greek is ekstasis, the word from which we get our word, ecstasy. Now it doesn't mean that they fled from the tomb with what we would call ecstasy. Ekstasis, in Greek, really means literally, standing outside yourself. To stand outside yourself. So here is the amazing hope for us, with the open invitation of Christ's open tomb in front of our eyes. That we can stand outside ourselves even in the face of death. No one remains at the end

of Mark's Gospel to proclaim the resurrection. No one. But if we, tonight, tomorrow, through the coming week, in the weeks and months and years that we have left in this life, can stand outside ourselves, standing in Christ, then maybe it is you and me that Christ depends on to proclaim the resurrection. Maybe it is you, maybe it is me that Christ says I am in every blossom and every atom, proclaim it. I'm in every loss that you've had, sacrificing myself with you, proclaim it. I am all around you, behind you and before you in your hard decision, proclaim it. The world needs to hear it. The world needs to hear it.

So will we be the ones who take this risky journey with Christ, will we? We say He is risen, is He risen in us? Know this my brothers and sisters in Christ, the world needs you, the church needs you, Jesus needs you. All of them need your light and your love, because there is something beautiful, something beautiful about the risen Christ that only you can do and that will bear much fruit. Let Jesus live in you, go forward to Him and go forward with Him. He goes before us to greet us, to claim us and to thank us for all that we do in His name.

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Yes, Christ is risen and so are we, so are we. Amen.