

Easter 2008

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Easter Sunday
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It is wonderful to be here with you today. I look forward to this morning all year long and I hope you do, too. There are many things we can count on as we come to Easter: the music and the flowers and the energy that fills the church. The sorrow of Good Friday has been replaced with joy. It is a happy day and I see plenty of smiles on Easter morning. Go ahead, you just can't help yourself. We look forward to all of this and count on our beloved Easter traditions.

And then we stop and remember that on the first Easter, no one could count on anything. There were no traditions, there were no hymns, and there were certainly no Easter egg hunts. In fact everything that we count on was turned upside down on Easter morning. It was all a huge surprise: a boulder was mysteriously moved and a tomb was found empty. Nothing was the way it was supposed to be. The gospel account begins with "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark" and that's the last predictable statement in the story. Everything else takes us by surprise. The fixed line between life and death has blurred. Our understanding of reality is tested and comes up short, like Mary Magdalene's. There is going to be a new reality and the question is, "do we want it?"

I am recalling a story about a different reality change. The year was 1874 and all of Paris was abuzz in anticipation of one of the biggest events of the year. The annual exhibit of the Royal Academy of Art was as popular as today's Oscar night or the Super Bowl. Art patrons did not just buy a new suit or a new dress; they bought entire new wardrobes for the grand opening week. Artists were anxious to have their work accepted and competition was stiff because of the rigorous technical standards.

The top entries were of nature scenes or classical figures painted in fine detail with tiny brushes. The figures wore dark somber clothing, typical of the era. Landscapes were meticulously defined and tucked away neatly into their gilded frames. These paintings were predictable: the greens were greens, the reds were reds, and you knew what you could count on. It was important to color within the lines. And the truth is that most of us here today have never heard of any of these artists or their paintings and probably never will.

Meanwhile, down the street in an old photography studio, a group of rejected artists decided to have their own show. Their paintings were very different: they were filled with broken lines and shimmering light. Color was used extravagantly in ways that no one ever expected. Visitors who peeked into the old studio were stunned, not only by what they saw but by what they felt. They experienced a rush of nostalgia, or maybe surprise, or delight, or even melancholy. It was so... unpredictable.

This art invited the viewer into the picture. It was not enough to observe technical proficiency, now the observer was required to see an ordinary meadow with new eyes. It was a scandal. The paintings were considered an outrage by the art establishment. A famous critic dismissed the artists by saying they were nothing but “impressionists.” The insult took hold, as did the art, and today you can see the paintings in the most popular rooms of the Museum of Fine Arts. Impressionist reproductions are also found in waiting rooms, college dormitories, on decks of cards and even Kleenex boxes. We love this art because it evokes our feelings and shows us how our ordinary world shimmers. It invites us to see reality in new ways.

On the first Easter, the friends of Jesus race to his tomb to see what has happened. Peter goes inside the small cave that has been dug into the side of the hill and he begins measuring things. He counts the linens and looks around and when there is no more visible information, he goes home. Another disciple is the fastest runner and when he peers into the tomb, the text says, “he believes.” However, it does not say what he believes but whatever it is it does not compel him to stick around. He also goes home.

It is not lost on me, and perhaps it strikes you, too, that the miracle of Easter is not evident while everyone is running around. Do you see that the disciples are so busy that they miss it? When the evidence does not add up to their understanding of reality, they drop out of the story.

Mary Magdalene, however, lingers at the tomb. She weeps and worries about the body. The body of Jesus is battered and dead, but it is all that she has left. It is all that remains of the most important time in her life. She desperately wants that body so she can have a tiny piece of herself back.

Mary is distraught but she stands still and is present to the moment of revelation. She assumes that the death of Jesus has changed her life forever. But the great surprise of Easter is that the life of Jesus is changing her reality for eternity.

Mary is the first in the gospel to witness God’s power of life over death. She discovers Christ in the one she thinks is a gardener and learns that God has trumped Good Friday. God insists upon life even when Caesar insists upon death. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the Lord,” according to Isaiah. In other words, God colors outside the lines.

Our theme on Easter is always God’s power of life over death. We do not know all that happened between God and Jesus on Easter morning before Mary’s arrival, but we do proclaim that the God who creates life restores life, too. It is power that belongs only to God. It is a new reality that upsets all other realities. As C.S. Lewis writes, “Every idea of God we form, God must, in mercy, shatter.”

The question of Easter is not about what God does, because that is already clear. The question is about what we do with the new life God offers.

I am not speaking now of our life after this one, although I do believe that we, too, shall be reclaimed by God at the moment of death. The life that hangs in the balance today is the life that God gives us now.

Everyday you have the opportunity to choose God as the center of your life. If you do, your reality will change. You can count on that. It will include concern and love for others that you never thought much about before. Your heart will be stretched like a canvas waiting for God's art. When you choose God's life, you discover generosity and want to spread it around. You will see outside the lines that divide human society and discover color and beauty like you have never seen before. From time to time, your life will shimmer.

This life, with all of its possibilities, is the gift of Easter. It is not just for individuals like you and me, just as the Easter story is not just for Mary Magdalene. In fact, choices between life and death are being made everywhere in our world. While we assume that everyone clings to life, I am continually amazed by the ways we insist upon death.

Every generation is swept into war as if discovering it for the first time: inspired at the beginning, and traumatized by death and brutality by the end. Generation after generation insists upon death over life. Drew Gilpin Faust of Harvard writes about the American Civil War and its unprecedented mortality rate. It set a standard of violence that continues to haunt us. Faust says, "We still live in the world of death the Civil War created...It introduced a level of carnage that foreshadowed the wars of the century to come...We still struggle to understand how to preserve our humanity and our selves within such a world."

Even in peacetime, death lures us with negligence disguised as simple solutions. In education, housing, and community services where life can be enhanced and protected, often there is not sufficient will to insist upon life. The most vivid example is seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast. Poverty and devastation continue to rule 2 ½ years later. Miles of houses lie in ruins, their people scattered as if the storm occurred yesterday. We have not insisted upon life, and so death is winning by default.

Easter challenges us to find life in the midst of and in spite of death, not because of who we are but because of who God is. When the needs of the world do not match our definitions or self-interests, the solution is not to turn around and drop out of the story. The invitation of Easter is to linger before the unexpected revelation that God places before us. And the revelation is this:

Christ is alive. He lives and goes on before us, now and always. It is his life, a shimmering Christ-filled life that God offers to us today. We could not predict it, we have not earned it, but we can count on it.

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