

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
April 12, 2020
Feast of the Resurrection, Matthew 28:1-10

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

In the apartment complex not far from Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church in fair Lafayette, Louisiana, lived Sam and his sister, Nora. Though Sam was quite senior – much older than he either looked or admitted – he rode a bicycle everywhere, and he rode it to church every time the doors opened, attending everything from worship services to barbecues.

Not long after I arrived to that congregation he announced to me, “Father, I’m a Catholic, but I don’t drive.” He said this as though driving were an essential, but suspicious element of Catholicism. He continued, explaining that his bike would not reach a Catholic church, but that some years ago he; his sister; and the Lord; had discussed the situation and determined that in the absence of a “real” church, our Episcopal parish would serve as a satisfactory substitute. “Father, is that okay with you? The priests before, they always said it’s okay.”

“Of course, Sam, of course. We will be very glad to have you. And bring Nora, too.”

Well before dawn one Sunday, I readied for the day’s services when I heard a commotion outside the church: there was the clanking of metal, something that sounded like a small crash, and then the *thump-thump* of the exterior doors having opened and closed. As uncertain as those poor guards at Jesus’ tomb, I gulped and peered around the corner, unsure if I would greet the risen Lord or one of his adversaries. While he bore no angel’s wings, I was relieved to see my friend, Sam, walking down the center aisle, tucking a ballcap under his arm, and carrying a Mason jar with a rusted lid.

“Well, Sam, good morning. You know, you’re a little early for church.”

“I know, Father, but you can bless me some holy water?”ⁱ

“I’m sorry?”

“Holy water, Father. In my jar. You can bless me some?” Sam asked again, beaming like a sunny spring morning. I did not want to disappoint him, and, though I was not sure how to do what he asked, I also wanted to prove to him that we *were* a “real” church.

“Come on, Sam,” I replied. “Let’s do this.”

Sam and I walked together to the Altar Guild sacristy, and I filled his jar with water at the sink.

“Father, a little more?” Sam asked when I stopped the water just below the threads.

“Of course,” I said, and filled the jar to its very brim.

Slowly, he processed the jar to the altar. I scooted the Eucharistic “stack” – the vested chalice and paten – to give us room on the corporal, the small, Communion tablecloth. I then snagged two Prayer Books from an acolyte’s pew and thumbed to page 299, the beginning of the Baptism liturgy. I handed Sam one of the open books.

“Oh, no, Father: I don’t read. You can do it.” *You can do it*, he said, encouragingly.

And so I did, and we did: At Sam’s side, I prayed over the jar of water”

*... We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism.
In it we are buried with Christ in his death.
By it we share in his resurrection.
Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit...ⁱⁱ*

After we finished the prayer, Sam declared an emphatic, “Amen!” He then carefully tightened the Mason jar’s lid, thanked me with wide eyes and a wide smile, and headed back down the aisle. Standing at the altar rail, I watched him, silhouetted by the first light of the new day. He stood his bicycle, carefully laid the jar in a nest of bath towels he had prepared in the bike’s handlebar basket, returned his ballcap to his bald head, and pedaled away.

Later, Nora explained to me that her brother kept that Mason jar on the dresser in his bedroom, and with the silver baby spoon his parents had received at his birth, every morning he would carefully draw himself a drink, cross himself, and announce aloud, “Thanks be to God.”

“It keeps him well,” Nora explained to me. “It keeps him well.”

Even these many years later, how I still long for the immediacy and seeming ease of Sam’sⁱⁱⁱ faith! To believe that with only a simple sip of water we, too, could be “well” and receive our share in Christ’s Resurrection!

For I realize that even while we gather for our Easter worship this morning, Good Friday clings to us – and we to its dark crosses. In the deep weariness of these distancing days, the suffering of this life seems so much more believable – more present – than the Grace of God, so we huddle among the crypts and their lonesome dead. Rather than risk disappointment in hopefulness, we come to prefer the routine of our ruby-red COVID-19 maps. Conceding the endlessness of our mortal struggle before believing the Love of God, we ask the Lord if we can bring into Easter *just one* well-founded fear – we petition to keep coddled *just one* precious sorrow – all as a Resurrection hedge. And pressing our Lent close to our broken hearts, we accept the cold comfort of familiar miseries as the best we can hope for ourselves and our hurting world.

Yet, it must be that *on this very day* and *during these fraught times* that the earth shakes ... that the cosmos trembles ... and that there is Resurrection.^{iv} *Resurrection!* Not far off, but right here – and not in some distant time, after the curve has flattened or a vaccine has been found, but *right now*. *Today*, Jesus Christ has defeated death. *Today*, God has declared “that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection.”^v Indeed, “even at the grave,” today “we make our song, *Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!*”^{vi}

Unlike the stories in Mark and Luke, Matthew doesn’t bother with hesitation: while in Mark the empty tomb “terrifies” the women and they “say nothing to anyone, for they were afraid;” and though in Luke, the disciples receive the women’s report “as an idle tale, and they [do] not believe them;” in today’s Gospel, the women leave the grave with awe and joy, and no sooner than they rush for Galilee does Jesus meet them with welcome and reassurance.^{vii}

This immediacy of Jesus’ appearance challenges our vain self-protection from beliefs we fear might leave us looking foolish or feeling naïve, breaking down the defenses of us who secretly hoped that the stone might be our excuse – us who secretly hoped that we would go to the tomb and find the stone still there, far too heavy to move, and so our worst fears would be validated and we could be proved so grimly wise.

Thanks be to God, with a flash of Easter lightning, an “angel of the Lord” *has* rolled back that stone, and, with it, all the frightful burdens of this world!^{viii} For us and for all, the risen Christ announces, “**Do not be afraid.**”

Now, be clear: there was no magic potion for Sam and there remains none available for us – no divine inoculation to protect us from every virus ... no sacred enchantment to restore jobs to the unemployed ... no ancient elixir to save us from the ravages of anger or anxiety, cynicism or grief. For no more was Sam’s faith and wellness the product of his “holy water” than was Jesus’ resurrection the consequence of the women’s oils and spices. Yet, while the fearful guards cower at the tomb, the faithful take to Galilee, and embrace the risen Christ^{ix} – and, in the mystery of *this* Easter morning, we, too, can be kept so well ... we, too, can be filled with Resurrection – in these days, not by Mason jars or ointments, but by devoting ourselves to the simple beliefs that God has not abandoned us, and we will get through this pandemic together.

This means, with an Easter heart, we commit ourselves to the daily devotions of setting one foot in front of the other ... that we commit ourselves to privileging the common good before our mounting restlessness ... that we commit ourselves to charging the children’s Chromebooks for their next weird day of school-ish-ness ... that we commit ourselves to Zooming it up with our colleagues and congregation from that same, curated corner of our apartment ... that we commit ourselves to being sensible with our pantry ... that we commit ourselves to taking good care and looking out for our nearby neighbors ... that we commit ourselves to staying on the phone – calling our mama and them, making sure they’re alright and, even if slowly, slowly, slowly, that we commit ourselves to shedding our fearfulness like an old, dead skin, and coming to trust that what God has declared is true: Jesus Christ has been raised, and we with him – new life filling us to our very brim, and overflowing.

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

ⁱ I considered affecting a Cajun accent when Sam speaks in this sermon, but I decided against it: these days – from our moves around the country? – all my affected accents (Boston, too!) end up sounding like old-school Yogi Bear saying, “Hey, Boo Boo!” It’s not a good way to make or keep friends.

ⁱⁱ From “Holy Baptism” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sam died about five years ago, and, I learned this week, his sister died just last fall. I debated the propriety of using their real names and chose to err toward the same generosity that Sam always showed me (and everyone). I give thanks to God for him.

^{iv} Matthew 28:2.

^v From the “Easter Vigil” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979. “O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*”

^{vi} From “The Burial of the Dead, Rite II” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979. “You only are immortal, the creator and maker of mankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. For so did you ordain when you created me, saying, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”

^{vii} Mark 16:8; Luke 24:11; Matthew 28:8-9.

^{viii} Matthew 28:3.

^{ix} Matthew 28:4, 8-9.