

Easter Day 2013

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

There was no such acclamation when Mary's went to the tomb and found the stone rolled away. She ran in alarm to tell Peter and the beloved disciple that the tomb was empty – the body gone. They didn't trust her report – they raced to the tomb and saw that Mary was right; now they believed that Jesus's body had been moved. But having no way to make sense of it, they went home, leaving the empty tomb to Mary and her tears.

The disciples probably carried a good deal of emptiness within themselves that morning: the emptiness of grief at having lost a friend and teacher to a brutal, shameful death; the emptiness of losing all their hopes and aspirations, the emptiness of shame and embarrassment for having been gullible enough to leave nearly everything behind in order to follow a would-be messiah who, to all appearances, was a fraud.

They wanted to believe what Jesus had told them about God. But now Jesus was dead. God had left Jesus and them in the lurch. The Romans were probably looking for them, they were in danger of being punished for their relationship with Jesus. Best to just go home.

But Mary stayed. She looked into the tomb and saw two angels – messengers -- dressed in white, who asked her why she was crying. "Because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." We might ask ourselves why neither Peter nor the other disciple had seen these angels...

Perhaps Peter and the others were primarily concerned about what Jesus was able to do for them in the future. When the messiah came their life of oppression was supposed to change, and they would have important places in the new scheme of things. In some of the gospel accounts we read about disputes among the disciples – who would be most important in the new kingdom? They undoubtedly expected their lives to change for the better as soon as Jesus made his move. And now there wasn't going to be any change.

But Mary's life had already changed for the better. Jesus had healed her, driving seven demons from her. Jesus talked to her, treated her like a person – a friend, with respect. Mary's life was already upside down in breathtaking ways. She had already experienced the reign of God which Jesus proclaimed in his own actions toward her. Jesus had already done more for her than she could have imagined – and now she wanted to do what she could for him - tend to his dead body.

When she turned and saw someone standing behind her she did not recognize him as Jesus, but he spoke her name and it triggered recognition in her. Jesus sent her to tell the others he

would be ascending to Abba - to God - who was theirs as much as his. So Mary went and “announced” to the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and gave them the message he had entrusted to her - becoming the first witness to the transformation Jesus had undergone, and which he intended to share with them.

The world had not changed. Jesus had changed. Jesus had died and been transformed – not immediately recognizable even to his closest friends. What kind of change would come to them?

Peter and the others eventually became fearless in bearing witness to the things Jesus had done among them. They became convinced that Jesus was the messiah after all – anointed by God - because like Mary they recognized him as he appeared to them, called them by name, shared food with them, and sent them out to share the news, just as he sent Mary on that first morning.

Saul the persecutor became Paul the Apostle, on fire to spread the message that in Jesus the Christ God has overcome death – and all who join themselves to Jesus are able to share in both his death and his resurrection.

Now, I have some really good news, and some really hard news. Let’s take the hard news first. The really hard news is that Resurrection only works on dead things. If it isn’t dead, it can’t be resurrected. It might be resuscitated, and there are times when resuscitation is exactly what we need. But if what we need and long for is to share Jesus’s resurrected life, something will have to die. And we’re not always in control of what that something must be.

Like the first disciples we may long to have the world transformed by a wonder-working teacher who has a truly special relationship with God. Zap! Like all good beauty pageant contestants we would ask first for “World Peace!” Human sinfulness would disappear, and we would have the life God intended for us at the beginning of the world – when we had not yet marred and disfigured the image of God in ourselves or rejected it in others. Zap! No more hunger, no more debt, no more disease.....just like that!

The only problem is that in that kind of arbitrary, instant change human freedom also disappears, and without freedom we cannot ever truly choose to love God or each other; and that’s what the kingdom Jesus preached is all about. It is about us choosing to love God above all else with everything that is in us, and loving each other as Jesus loves us.

Resurrection only works on dead things....so what must die in order for us to discover the reign of God in our midst? Even the death of Jesus did not “fix” the world. And apparently God is not about to work that kind of transformation without our willing cooperation.

So maybe it’s time for the Good News – here it is -- in Christ, every death is followed by

resurrection. When we give over something of ourselves to death – to be sealed in the tomb, we enter into the very place in which transformation occurs. Not an instant, wholesale re-ordering of the world, or even of our own private lives, but transformation enough to render us in some ways unrecognizable to those who have known us before.... a transformation which renders us unwilling to collaborate in the mischief and evil of the past.

What kind of transformation would it be? When we gather at the Great Vigil and light the fire of the Paschal Candle, symbolizing the light of Christ which darkness cannot overcome, we sing of that transformation in the hymn called the Exsultet.

“This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life. This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave...How holy is this night, when wickedness is put to flight and sin is washed away. It restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn. It casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord. How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and we are reconciled to God.”

This is the mission of the Church – to participate in this reconciling work of God. And it is hard work; reconciliation is often hard won. I think of the struggles in the early Church ...”What!?!? Gentiles are equal to Jews?!?!” I think of the struggles for equality all over the world today: racial equality, the right of girls to grow to adulthood without being sexually mutilated, to have equal standing with men in the economies and political systems of the world, the rights of GLTB persons not only to civil rights, but to life itself. The list could go on and on, and would eventually include something that would seem like too big a change to make....too drastic a shift...there are still those who will say, “raising others up will diminish me.”

Two weeks ago we heard our President addressing 2000 Israeli youth. He assured them that he stands firm in support of their desire to have a homeland which is safe and peaceful. He described such a life as their right, and they applauded him. He went on to say that these are basic rights, all people deserve them, including the Palestinian people – and most of those young adults applauded him. He told them, and they heard it – that it will be up to them. They must convince their elders that clinging to past hatreds and assumptions and prejudices will not get them where they want and need to go...President Obama did not say it just this way, but something of the old way of life must die in order for their lives to be transformed. They must learn to love the children more than they hate each other....what a transformation that will be!

But that’s what resurrection is; it is not just life stretched into eternity, it is life here and now transformed, rendering it in some ways, unrecognizably new. The risen Jesus was not immediately identified even by his closest followers. It took time for them to recognize him, to rejoice in his victory over death. As they began to understand what God had accomplished in Jesus their own hearts were transformed, and they became courageous witnesses to the mighty acts of God in Christ.

We expect to find the risen Lord in the Sacramental things of our faith – the water of Baptism, the oil of anointing, the pronouncement of absolution, the sacred meal of his Body and Blood. Jesus is also present to us in the grace by which all of this transformation is possible; the sacrificial love of God in which the ‘creator of everything that is’ allows humanity to do its worst. It is the love which allows itself to be closed away in a place of death....only to reveal the strength in its supposed weakness - responding to sin, evil, and death by rendering them incapable of having the last word.

God’s Word, in the face of human lust for power, our greed and ambition, our indifference and lack of compassion for the poor, our violence and cruelty toward the weakest among us – God’s Word, in the face of the hate-filled torture and death of Jesus is this..... “What you have done is not bad enough! There is no cruel, death-dealing thing you can do that will make me stop loving you!” God’s Word -- and it is the last Word – is love.

In Jesus - God Incarnate, crucified and risen - every death is followed by resurrection! But we must claim it. We must be willing to walk into the empty tomb and leave behind there all that just kills our ability to accept the astounding gift of God’s transforming, resurrection love. As amazing as the Good News is, God does not impose it on us against our will. We must choose it, desire it – and open ourselves to it.

Robert Capon, author and priest, uses this example: “Suppose I tell you that I had already buried, under a flat rock on a piece of property you own, \$1,000,000.00 in crisp, new \$1,000.00 bills. And suppose I were to tell you that I have no intention of ever taking this money back; it is there, and that is that. On one level, I have given you a piece of sensational good news: you are the possessor of a million bucks, no conditions attached, no danger of my renegeing on the gift. And if you trust me – that is if you go to the property and start turning over flat rocks – you will sooner or later actually be able to relate to the \$1M I so kindly gave you.

“But note something crucial. Your faith, your trust, does not earn you the money, not does con me into giving it to you: the money was yours all along just because I was crazy enough to bury it in your back yard. Your faith, you see, is in no way the cause of the gift; the only thing it can possibly have any causal connection with is your own enjoyment of the gift.”*

What we need and want most is already ours – a gift given to us by the God who has made us in the divine image and who wants nothing more than for us to live in the kingdom Jesus proclaimed – “It is already among you and within you,” Jesus said.

Can I prove it to you? No more than Mary or Peter or Paul or any of the disciples of Jesus down through the ages could prove it. I can only tell you that I have seen it. I have come to know it in the marrow of my bones – that I believe it with every fiber of my being. God’s word for you is love, and if you let it, it will be the last word in your life – a word you can live in and

share, bringing the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed into being for all people. Now that's resurrection! May it be so!

**+Catherine M. Waynick
Bishop of Indianapolis**

***The Mystery of Christ, and Why We Don't Get It**