

Easter Day 2017

Luke 24: 1 - 12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5 The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 Now it was Mary Mag'dalene, Joan'na, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12 But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

The women come to the tomb expecting to find Jesus' dead body. But when they get there, they find that the stone which had covered the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away. They are "perplexed" by this. Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes appear beside them, and they are terrified. The two luminous men tell the women that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and the women go and tell the other disciples what they have seen and heard. But the other disciples do not believe them.

First puzzlement, then terror, then disbelief – *this* is the story Luke's Gospel tells of that first Easter morning. In fact, if we read the accounts of the resurrection in all four Gospels, we will discover that **no** one, in **any** of the Gospel accounts, *expects* the resurrection.

And it's no wonder! As one author puts it, "If the dead don't stay dead, what can you count on?"

What *can* we count on? That's a question that goes to the heart of the meaning of Easter. What does the death and resurrection of Jesus tell us we can we **count** on in life?

Is the message of Easter that despite all our hardships in life everything will come out all right in the end? Can we count on **that**? No. For that's the fairy tale version of Easter, and the skeptics of this world are right to dismiss it as "an idle tale." No one who walked alongside Jesus these past three days, when he was betrayed and denied by his best friends, mocked and spat upon and flogged, and suffered the most excruciating death imaginable – no one who has, in his or her

own life, suffered *similar* betrayals, shaming, and profound pain, grief and suffering could believe an Easter message that said, “It’s OK; everything will turn out right in the end.” Easter is not just a happy ending to a sad story.

But if the message of Easter is NOT that “everything will turn out alright,” neither is the message of Easter that of the **cynic** who says, “The world is going to hell in a hand basket,” or as *master cynic* George Carlin said, “Life is tough, then you die.” Everything about the resurrection of Jesus, everything about Easter, proclaims that such a cynical viewpoint is **wrong**.

So what **can** we count on?

Maundy Thursday and Good Friday tell us very clearly that **one** thing we can count on in this world is suffering. Easter does not come without Jesus first being betrayed, abandoned, and crucified. **He** did not avoid suffering and death; nor can **we**. Suffering is a reality of life, and sometimes a corollary to love. We grieve when our children grow up and move away from home because we love them and miss them. We grieve and suffer when our parents die because we love them and miss them. Grief is a corollary to love: we can’t have one without the other.

What can we count on? We can certainly count on suffering.

In his long farewell message to his disciples the night before he is crucified, Jesus tells them, “In this world you **will** have suffering.” But then he quickly adds: “Yet take heart! I have overcome the world.” (*John 16:33*)

Jesus tells us we can count on suffering in this world; but he also tells us to count on this: that suffering and death will not have the last word. And Jesus is not just speaking about going to heaven when we die, though that is certainly one of the truths Easter proclaims! Rather, he is speaking about the New, Resurrected Life that exists as an Easter *reality* in *this* world, **now**. In our Epistle reading from our Easter Vigil service earlier this morning, we heard St. Paul say to the Romans, “If we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (*Romans 6:5*)

But what does that *mean* – to unite ourselves with Christ in his death and resurrection?

I think it means we are called to enter into the flow of divine life which was so strong in Jesus that death could not overcome it. To be so open to and identified with Christ and the Spirit of Christ that our mind and heart become one with his mind and heart. In my Good Friday sermon, I quoted Paul’s hymn from his letter to the Philippians, wherein he says: “Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to cling to, but emptied himself...” Uniting ourselves with Christ in

his life, death, and resurrection means emptying ourselves of our small life, our petty life, our selfish life, our ego life, in order that we might be filled with new life – the life of the resurrected Christ. “[I]f anyone is **in** Christ,” St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, **everything** has become new!” (2 *Corinthians* 5:17)

Now that *sounds* wonderful! But *what*, exactly, **is** the “everything old” that has passed away, and *what* is the “everything [that] has become new?” What is Paul talking about when he says, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation?”

We cannot answer that question if we are looking **only** at Easter – **only** at the resurrection. We have to look back to Jesus’ life: his teaching, his healings, and how he responded to being betrayed and unjustly crucified. And when we look at these things, the backstory behind Easter, we clearly see how Jesus’ life and teaching, suffering and death are characterized by a mind and heart and soul that is **breathtakingly** new, *poles* apart from the old, “normal” way that we humans have lived and related to one another.

When we look at the backstory of Jesus’ life leading up to Easter, we clearly see what Paul meant when he said, “everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” For Jesus taught that we must love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us. How new is **that** compared to our normal **old** way of *hating* our enemies, and *striking back* at those who persecute us? He taught that when someone hits us on one cheek, we should turn the other, also. How new is that? He spent an inordinate amount of time with society’s outcasts – lepers, the poor, prostitutes, tax collectors, foreigners; and he made these outcasts heroes of his parables. How new is that? A renegade but repentant *younger* son becomes the hero of his parable, while the *faithful, obedient* older son, indignant in his self-righteousness, cuts himself off from his father and family. A respected Jewish priest and Levite show no compassion to a beaten, dying man, while a *hated* foreigner from a *hated* religion is held up as an example to all. How different is **that** from the old way we customarily treat foreigners and those of other religions? Jesus washes the feet of the disciple whom he knows will betray him, and from his cross he prays for the forgiveness of those who crucified him. How **new**, how *far* from our normal, old human way of living and relating is that? My friends, **this** is what St. Paul means when he writes, “If anyone is **in** Christ, there is a **new** creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” In his life, his teaching, and the way he responded to those who betrayed, denied, and crucified him, Jesus shows us a **new** mind, a **new** heart, which characterize a *new kingdom* – the kingdom of God come on earth as it is in heaven. In today’s reading from Colossians, Paul instructs us, “If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is... Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

If we have been raised with Christ, we have **died** to our old self, our old mindset. We have set our minds not on things that are on earth – where everyone looks out for themselves, hates their enemies, turns away foreigners fleeing from war, carries grudges for years on end, turns a blind eye to the homeless and poor and those in prison, continually points out the speck in their neighbor’s eye while ignoring the log in their own eye. If we have truly been raised with Christ, we have set our minds on things that are above, where people who offend us are forgiven 70 times 7, the hungry poor are fed, the naked clothed, those in prison are visited, and we empty ourselves for the sake of the other.

If Easter is true and the dead don’t stay dead, what can we count on?

We can count on the kingdom of God coming on earth as in heaven. The **old** passing away so that a **new** creation, *infused* with the life of the risen Christ, might **spring** forth *within* us, *among* us, and *through* us.

That’s what we can count on because Easter is true, and Christ is risen indeed.

Alleluia!