

Easter Sunday- April 12,2020

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Jesus appeared to Mary at the tomb. She did not recognize him. She thought he was the gardener. How could she not know him? She did not expect Jesus to be up and about. It is like encountering a friend in an unfamiliar context. If I meet even a good friend in a location where he or she is not expected, I may not remember their name. I am temporarily taken aback and confused. The person is out of place. In a television commercial, two men crossing a desert are desperate for water. They are led to a wonderful area by a Fiat, an area with shade and food and drink. But the men insist it is a mirage. The Fiat has four doors, and they are certain from their experience that a Fiat has only two doors. In the Easter story Jesus was not where or how he was supposed to be. Mary expected a corpse. This living, breathing body could not be Jesus. Jesus was dead.

Today we celebrate an upset. We rejoice in the victory of a long shot, a dark horse, an underdog. Jesus rose. The odds against an Easter celebration were huge. Who has the temerity to bet against death? After all, Jesus had been arrested, beaten, ridiculed, convicted, sentenced to death. The death sentence had been carried out with a gruesome and gory crucifixion. The fate of Jesus was sealed, a foregone conclusion, a given. Even his supporters, his disciples, had thrown in the towel and conceded. It was over.

Only a fool would bet on an obvious loser. It would be like betting on a fight when the referee had already shouted, "Ten, you're out," above your prostrate boxer. It would be like betting on a horse after it had stumbled at the gate and other horses had crossed the finish line. Such uneven contests are often stopped prematurely in children's events in order to preserve fragile psyches. So a baseball team ahead by ten runs after five innings is awarded the victory without the indignity of a lopsided defeat. There are mercy rules, games that are "no contest."

Easter is remarkable in the triumph of Jesus over the grave. I remember a Mary Tyler Moore episode. The show dealt with the death of a co-worker on the fictional television show where Mary worked. Chuckles the Clown had been the grand marshal of a parade and was dressed as a peanut. An enraged elephant tried to shuck him, and the clown was killed. At first the staff was saddened, but then they began to joke. Murray, a colleague, said it was fortunate more people were not hurt. You know how difficult it is to stop with just one peanut. Mary was appalled at the intrusion of humor. But her boss explained, "We laugh at death because we know, down deep, that death will have the last laugh on us."

There are various ways of looking at Easter events. We can lift up Jesus as an example of integrity, willing to be martyred for the sake of love. We are familiar with this type of approbation. There are numerous instances where we applaud the lifestyle of someone while acknowledging that the virtue was not ultimately rewarded. We speak of "moral victories," noble attempts that has less than positive outcomes. The one who takes ethical short cuts may defeat the person who plays by the rules. The one who is honest may suffer defeat, coming in behind those who lie. Those who prosper are not always the ones who have been above reproach. So we toss a gesture of appreciation toward those who are good, with an acknowledgment that they were righteous. We congratulate their noble motivation and their erstwhile efforts. But we understand that those virtuous laborers were at a disadvantage. Most of us see virtue as a handicap. Nice try.

So we sing about Abraham, Martin and John as noble examples of integrity and bravery—but assassinated. We remember the Alamo where a small band stood against the superior forces of Santa Anna. The archives tell countless stories of courage among the Jews who were eventually incinerated by the Nazis. Sometimes we have an air of resignation, of fatalism, when we see the good against evil. Nice guys finish last.

Death is indomitable, inexorable. Jesus was dead—dead as a doornail. A goner. But he lives. What is expected, what is standard, what is conventional wisdom and common knowledge are overturned. Nothing is sure where God is involved. God likes underdogs. Biblical examples abound. It is Moses saying, “I can’t,” but confronting the pharaoh anyway. It is Isaiah saying, “I’m not able,” but speaking the word to the Jews. It is David saying, “But I’m so small and that guy’s a giant,” but going out to do battle. It is Abraham saying, “You expect me to just pick up and leave for somewhere unknown?” but going anyway. It is Noah saying, “I don’t see any clouds, but I’ll build the boat to keep you happy.” It is Paul saying, “I don’t believe in you,” and then becoming the greatest follower of all time. Resurrection people are those who respond incredulously, sometimes, “You must be kidding.” But they act in spite of the obstacles. They persevere against overwhelming odds.

And then there’s Easter—the big upset. Passover is another instance when God triumphed against enormous odds. The Jews, a subculture of slaves and servants, were up against the Egyptians. The Egyptians had chariots and horses and armaments. What would the odds be in Las Vegas for this tiny assembly? A few plagues later and the long shot won. And the Jews recount the story year after year in the Passover tradition. They remind themselves and others of the power of God and God’s goodness to them.

So with Easter. We need to celebrate and narrate the story to remember the goodness and power of God. It is more than a memory, more than a memorable event. It is a precedent. The same God that raised Jesus from the dead can overturn our defeats and beat the odds at any time.

And the Jesus who was raised remains alive to energize and mobilize us to stand against the forces of death and sin. We have not been left to battle on alone, given a word of encouragement and some words of support. Jesus is more than an inspiration to those who battle better-equipped enemies. He is more than a fallen hero. Jesus is accessible to believers as a partner in our service, our servanthood, our sacrifice, our ministry and our mission.

Today there are innumerable arenas where some feel powerless. There seem to be clearly defined laws that are immutable. The order seems unchangeable. But the unthinkable is potential with God. Everything is up for grabs if you have faith. God can overcome crises and challenges. God can turn the tables on any situation. Easter is a constant reminder of the power of God. God works through seeming defeats and apparent failures

For some, the Easter celebration is like a party. The party is in honor of someone else. To honor their achievement there are festivities. But we are mere spectators. Our function is to offer congratulations and give praise. But that role is not that satisfying. We have a good time, but we are not involved. We are appreciative of the accomplishment, but we are onlookers. Easter can be similar. We celebrate the victory of Jesus. We are willing to be in the party, but it is Christ’s day. We cheer and we commemorate the victory. We rejoice at the recollection. It reminds us of what happened long ago, and we still get a boost from its remembrance. But it is a past event. It was his resurrection, and we are only celebrants.

Our Easter celebration may also be akin to a magic show. The magician dazzles us, and we applaud the feats. The tricks are mind-boggling. But we sense that there are gimmicks. We admire the skills of the magician, but we are looking for slight of hand. We are merely audience. Our Easter celebration may resemble that. We applaud the resurrection. It awes us with its mystery. The trick is appreciated, but we attribute it to the divinity of Christ. We are left out of the experience, except as onlookers.

Or many of us celebrate the hope for the future. The resurrection gives us a new perception of death. The empty tomb holds out the possibility of our own resurrection. The risen Christ seems to portend the potential of everlasting life for us all. Our own mortality is seen in a different light.

And so we may be looking joyfully at the past or hopefully at the future. We are congratulating Jesus or gazing wistfully at our own prospects. But what does the resurrection do for us now? What if we discovered that the Easter event was not an achievement at all, not a big deal? The God who was responsible for the resurrection is the same God at our disposal today. And if that God can raise Jesus from the dead, then that God can do powerful things with us.

The disciples became aware that they could tap the same resource that had enabled their Lord to do great things. Jesus, himself, told them they would do greater things than he, if they believed. The disciples, who had been wimps in retreat, became aggressive in their testimony. They became witnesses to what they had seen and heard. Their lives conveyed the truth of the resurrection. When they preached, they did not offer proofs or slides. They were the exhibits for the authenticity of the resurrection. What people saw in them could only be the product of a risen Christ and a powerful God. It must be true. He lives.

We, too, must disclose the power of resurrection. Resurrection is not a former occurrence, but a present happening. It is not a previous event, but an ongoing activity. Each of us struggles with concerns that we may perceive as hopeless. We face issues that give us feelings of helplessness. Easter empowers us to confront those troubles with hope and a confidence in a God who can overcome. To be in the new order is not to be resigned. Things can change. We can transform them. The old order worships weapons and wealth, is apathetic toward misery and alienated from God. The new order has an intimate relationship with God. The old order is calloused, cynical, acquisitive. The new order is positive, compassionate, selfless and spiritual. There are new possibilities and fresh potentials. Where do we sense death in our time? Has enthusiasm flagged? Have we become tired or bored or frustrated? What rocks are keeping us interred? Is it other people; circumstances; negative thoughts and doubts? What stands in the way of your resurrection? Society's standards; peers? What keeps us from rising and becoming new? Routine; lack of imagination; cowardice; apathy; inertia; lack of will power?

Resurrection is for today. Surrounded by a populace overwrought by doubts and depression, that wallows in worship of days gone by, that pities its impotence, the Christian perceives a future of salvation, of possibility and potential. The Christian works to rekindle hope, values, relationships, community. The Christian is alive with new perceptions, new insights, new revelations that speak of the risen Lord. Easter has something to say to us. We are not onlookers or bystanders, observers or witnesses. The God who raised Jesus is not to be outdone. And that God is yours if you want. Resurrection is a lifestyle that begins when we enter into a relationship with the risen Lord.

Though we fight many battles, the victory is assured. Do not be resigned to the status quo. We have seen God respond after the last word has seemingly been spoken, after the matter had supposedly been closed. What are the odds? Easter is the great upset. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. All bets are off. Our rebirth is just a stone throw's away.

Pastor Kelly