



The New England Church Pulpit

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EASTER IS A VERB

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John 20.1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. She ran to tell Simon Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, saying to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter and the other disciple set out running together to the tomb but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. When he bent down to look in he saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. When Simon Peter reached the tomb, he went in. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple went in, and saw and believed what Mary had told them; for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and there she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

He was quite sick, lying in his hospital bed with the many machines hooked up to his body, beeping and flashing lights. He didn't hear her come in but when he opened his eyes there she was, sweeping the floor and tidying up his room. When she saw that he was awake, she spoke to him, ever so softly, calling him by name, asking how he was doing, smiling at him with the most comforting smile. Others were caring for him, too, and were attentive to his needs. But she, the cleaning lady, whose job could have seemed menial compared to doctors and nurses, wanted to know how he was doing. She seemed like an angel to him, and though he never saw her again, that brief, sacred interruption stayed with him for the rest of his life.

She was sitting in a room filled with others waiting for her car to be repaired. She was depressed and overwrought with concern for her daughter who was fighting in Afghanistan. The man next to her asked if she'd like a cup of coffee. It was a small gesture of kindness; she had done it to others many

times herself. Why did this time make such an impression on her? They didn't talk; he just brought her a cup of coffee. But it was more than just a cup of coffee this time, allaying her anxiety in some strange way. It was a communion of sorts, a holy moment that allowed her to take a deep breath and let go of her fears, if only for that moment.

Mary was inconsolable as she sat in the garden wondering what it all meant, now that the one she thought was going to bring peace into the world was dead. She at least wanted to see the place where they had buried him, but someone had robbed the grave, adding insult to injury. Suddenly, the gardener asked her in a calm voice why she was crying, and as she told her story, he called her by name, and she recognized the voice. She didn't know him by sight, but something in that voice that called her name calmed her fear.

Nobody knows what happened on that morning between Jesus's execution and Mary's exchange with him disguised as a gardener. There were no eyewitness accounts of his resurrection. What we have are stories—stories then and stories now, stories of encounters with God dressed like a cleaning lady, in the guise of a stranger waiting for his car to be repaired, just when life seemed so very dark. The facts, the explanations, don't matter when we have stories. Mary almost missed him because she thought she knew who he was, and when she finally recognized him in the gardener, her story has been one of hope for two millennia.

I've come to think of Easter not as one big event that was so astounding everyone knew about it by the end of the day, but as a lifetime of smaller events which make a composite story that gives us hope. In fact, I read a statement by a seminary professor just this morning that said: Easter isn't meant to be a big day in the life of the church; it is rather to remind us that *every day is to be a little Easter*. Certainly, the disciples didn't get it on the day; it took them weeks, months, a lifetime of encountering Jesus's spirit in the form of a gardener, a stranger walking home with them, a fisherman on the shore, to get an inkling of what it was all about. It comes in snippets of experiences that encouraged them—and us—to going. It's sort of like driving at night on a dark road; we can't see any farther down the road than the few hundred feet illuminated by our headlights but we can drive all the way through the night that way.

Where did you see Jesus this past week? I'm sure you did, if your eyes were opened. He was standing there at the end of the checkout counter at the store, bagging your groceries. He had a name tag on; did you call this Jesus by his other name? "Carl?; Edward?; thanks for bagging my groceries." Did you see Jesus standing in front of you at the gas station counter trying to come up with the dollar she was short for the gas she pumped? Did you say, "Here's a dollar; I know what it's like to be caught short." Did you see Jesus in the person at work who annoys you to distraction, and realize that perhaps the resurrected Jesus was actually intentionally annoying you to get your attention, and to realize that he lives in the people you don't even like? You were certainly aware of the screaming baby on the plane because you wanted to sleep. If you had known that was Jesus crying, would you have been more gracious in your acceptance? Each of these moments are Easter moments, moments of hope and surprise, and opportunities for God to come into the world anew.

Easter is a verb more than an event. Perhaps we call it Eastering. I mean, if the president can make up words, so can I. When we are Eastering, we are bringing hope to a world gone mad with greed and sanctimony, with hatred and violence. We Easter 365 and one-quarter days a year, if we will be open to the possibilities. We come here each year to remind ourselves that Easter is a verb, it is something we do when we see the people Jesus cared for, loving our enemies and doing good to

those who harm us, as Jesus modeled for us. It is something that is done for us, to us, through us that renews our hope, that spurs us on to face the challenges rather than give up. It can happen in the smallest of activities that at the moment you wouldn't give a second thought, but then it dawns on you that that was a holy moment. Eastering brings hope. And, as Studs Turkel points out in the stories in his book "hope dies last." It is hope that keeps us going. And hope can come from the simplest smile, or from someone you've only met once who calls you by name, or from a conversation with a gardener.

If Easter resurrection is to mean anything it has to be a verb that we enact, and not just a past event that we sentimentalize. It is not a static event that happened only in the past but a dynamic infusion of new life into the dead facets of life today, and this not only for those who are followers of this Christ but for the whole world this Jesus loved. Jesus never predicated his love on anyone's religion, or lifestyle, or beliefs. He responded to their needs by offering them hope.

Easter is the faith that comes from building bridges rather than building walls. It is the hope that comes from treating the earth as a sacred Eden rather than a mechanism to exploit. Easter is made real in the way we treat animals, domesticated and wild, not stealing their habitat so we can have more land to make more money. In the way we treat people of other religions, and alternative lifestyles, for all of God's creation depends on our Eastering.

Easter isn't something we just believe; it's something we actuate. Easter isn't something that eliminates death; it is a practice of hope to keep death from having the final word. When we pay attention to the trees around us and the children making noise and the immensity of the sky and the blessedness of rain and the joy of sunshine, we internalize something holy that breaks open the tombs that dull our senses. By giving and receiving cups of coffee and calling people by name, and hearing our own name invoked in prayer, God comes alive. There are gardeners and room cleaners and people sitting right next to us in waiting rooms who are God in the flesh. When we practice Easter, every day will be one of resurrection from tombs that encase us.

Tony Campolo, Baptist minister, author and sociologist, tells of the time a few years back when he visited Haiti. As he walked to the entrance of his hotel, three young girls, the oldest of which was no more than 15, propositioned him. "Mister, for \$10 I'll do anything you want me to do. I'll do it all night long. Do you know what I mean?" It startled him, but he knew what she meant. With his mind racing quickly as to how to respond, he turned to the second one and asked "What about you; could I have you for \$10?" After she said yes, he asked the third the same question. She said yes, too, but with a forced smile that tried to mask her contempt for him. Campolo comments: "it's difficult to look sexy when you're 15 and hungry."

An idea came to him, so he said to them: "I'm in room 210. Be up there in just 10 minutes. I have \$10 for each of you and I'm going to pay for all three of you to be with me all night long." He then rushed up to his room and ordered every Disney video that the hotel had in stock, and called down to the restaurant to order banana splits with extra ice cream and extra toppings.

The young girls arrived on time just as the ice cream and videos arrived. Campolo said that they all sat on the edge of the bed and watched the videos and laughed until about one in the morning. That's when the last one fell asleep across the bed. He comments: "As I saw those little girls stretched out asleep on the bed, I thought to myself how tomorrow they would be back on the streets, selling their little bodies. Ultimately nothing's changed. And yet, I recognized God's spirit deep

inside them and me, telling me that for one night, for one night, they got to be little girls again. It was a little Easter that dawned upon him—and perhaps them—early one morning of an ordinary day.
Amen. (Context, July 2010, Part A, page 7)

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Spirit of life that sings in the face of death, we come once again to this place to connect with all that is holy and good. We do not come in response to some magical Jesus who takes away our sin or death, pretending that death is not painful or its sting not great. We come to give thanks for all that life offers us even in the midst of death. We come to find a song to sing when we hear no music; we come to find the rhythm of life when the pulse of hope has been stilled; we come to find strength in the little things that bring joy. And realize this is Easter.

We are children of a day, our sun rising and setting, the cycles of the seasons constantly changing. Yet deep within our beings is the instinct of immortality, and the yearning of our souls is beyond the grasp of our finite minds. So we come together to touch something eternal. We know the seasons to be trustworthy, moving slowly but steadily forward, yet always making a circle to start again. And so we know something of resurrection. We know something of the history of our species that good eventually triumphs over evil. We know something of the eternal, at least enough to come here today with hope, even amid wars, and bombings, and daft political activity that seeks to destroy rather than protect. For we are people of resurrection and new life.

The life of Jesus is comforting for today and instructive for tomorrow. We come here to celebrate that he did not back down in the face of discrimination; that he did not succumb to the political powers of his day; that he did not run away from the helpless and hopeless people who needed his care; that he did not yield to the temptation to give in so that he could save his own life. His death as a criminal by society's standards encourages us to sacrifice on behalf of those who need what we can give as well, knowing that in this is new life, a resurrection from our selfish, death-laden lives that entomb us.

Come close to each one of us, and beyond the power of any human prayer, meet us in our secret inner needs. Make your spirit radiant today in the places where we least expect it, surprise us with hope that we had dared not harbor, bring life to our dead spirits and deliver us from the grave of self-defeat. Let there be a resurrection of love and joy and strength today and for all the tomorrows. We ask in the spirit of the Christ, Amen.