



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

March 23, 2008

Easter
Rev. Donna Barr

Grace to you and peace from our Risen Lord Jesus Christ.
Good morning and happy Easter.

On behalf of Father Alan our Rector, myself and all our family here at St. John's, I want to welcome everyone, especially our guests, visitors and relatives who are here to worship with us. Whether you have been a guest before or this is your first time to visit.....We Are Glad You Are Here! Our church emblem reads "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." We offer our very special welcome this Easter Day!

Since this is my first Easter sermon, I thought the best place to start is by citing one of my favorite theologians Charles Schultz from Peanuts and the Gang. Lucy comes up to Charlie Brown and says, "You know life is like an ocean liner. Some people take their deck chair and put it on the stern, to see where they have been. And some people put their deck chair on the bow, to see where they are going. Charlie Brown, tell me, "Where do you want to put your deck chair?" Perplexed momentarily, Charlie Brown looks at Lucy and says, "I don't know. I can't even unfold my deckchair."

The Rev. Herbert O'Driscoll contends that there is a danger in Easter, and that danger is that we come to Church already knowing the outcome of the Paschal drama: Jesus rose again. Whether from the perspective of the stern or the bow we know what is going to be said and sung and we are hardly in awe of this unimaginable and unprecedented event.

But let us for a moment walk in the shoes of Mary that Easter morning. Like Mary, we have gone to the grave of our loved ones or friends weeping in grief, saying our last goodbyes, paying our respects, and trying to go on with our life as best we can. Maybe some of her thoughts were something like this: It seems like only yesterday when I was traveling with my Lord. When I was listening to his stories, not always understanding what he wanted me to know. I wish I had understood it all. I watched him speak to people and saw how he treated others with kindness. I heard him teach and preach and he taught me how to pray....I saw him heal the sick from many illnesses. Yes, it was only yesterday when I saw with my own eyes his compassion and mercy towards, not only me, but everyone. And it was only Thursday when he knelt to wash my feet. He told me to love everyone as he had loved me. He also took a loaf of bread....blessed it.....broke it and gave a piece to me. He then took a cup of wine and gave me a drink. I am just now understanding what I couldn't understand then. He told me to eat and drink as a remembrance of him. Then he said, "share this with others as a way of belonging and believing in my love for all people." Jesus told me what was about to happen to him. He told me he would have to suffer and be in pain. I did not want to believe what he said. I could not bear even the thought of life without him. But despite my denial, Jesus did come to that place he told me about on Friday. He did not give himself over to death without struggle and tears.....but he was courageous and truthful until the end. He suffered an unimaginable painful death. As I stood and watched how people followed the crowd by mocking him and

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shouting names at him, I realized how blessed I had been to know him. He never wavered from loving others. But after all he had taught us.....people still didn't believe him to be of God. Even when he told us everything about us.....the good and the bad and still loved us anyway.....well, this was just more than anyone could imagine. People were jealous and they were afraid of such goodness and love. My very special friend, Jesus, died on Friday.

That was all Mary was doing that morning-going to the tomb convincing herself that it was all true. It's important, I think, to experience Easter from the view of the stern – where we have been -where the burden and strain of Good Friday are never forgotten. Jesus was dead. Dead as Mary's hopes and dreams. Dead as her joy. Dead as the life she once felt. She came to the tomb to find him dead in her heart, but found instead the story of life. The tomb was empty on that Easter morning and now, equality important, is to see where we are going from the view of the bow. If you are wondering what Easter really is, it is despair moving over to make room for hope. It is joy suddenly crowding out your sorrow.

When Alan first asked me to preach on Easter, my first response was, "I have never preached on Easter before." But reflecting on my statement, I realized that while it was true I had never preached a sermon on Easter Day, I had preached many Easter sermons. As a deacon and hospital chaplain this is the service in our church I have been most familiar with. The service I refer to is the Burial Rite because every funeral is an Easter celebration. Jesus' victory over death is our victory as well. The Book of Common Prayer says it plainly: "To your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended. And when our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens." Many times at a funeral I will read again the rubrics from the burial rite of our prayer book. "The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all meaning in the resurrection.

Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we too, shall be raised. The liturgy, therefore, is characterized by joy, in the certainty that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is why we can say Hallelujah! And so our faith is centered in God's great gift to us for we are Resurrection people because the tomb is empty.

I recently read a most profound story about a boy named Philip which best illustrates our resurrection faith. Philip was a sweet and happy child but as he grew and was near his eight year old birthday he became increasingly aware of the differences between himself and other children, for he was born with many severe mental and physical problems. Philip attended a Sunday School class with nine other 8-year old children. The teacher of this class was a wonderful and creative person. He worked hard to help facilitate a good group and wanted desperately to help the children accept Philip as a member of that group. The teacher had a great idea for his class on Easter last year. You know those things that panty hose come in – the containers that look like great big eggs. The teacher had collected ten of these to use on that Sunday. It was a beautiful spring day, and the assigned task was for each child to go outside on the church grounds and to find a symbol of new life, put it in the egg, and bring it back to the classroom. They would then mix them all up, then open and share their new life symbols and surprises together one by one. Well, they did this, and it was glorious. And it was confusing.

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And it was wild. They all ran around, gathered their symbols, and returned to the classroom. They put all their big eggs on the table and began to open them. All the children were standing around the table. He opened one, and there was a flower and they ooh-ed and aah-ed. He opened another, and there was a butterfly. "Beautiful," the girls all said. He opened another, and there was a rock. And as third graders will, some laughed, and some said, "That's crazy! How's a rock suppose to be like new life?" But the smart little boy whose egg they were speaking of spoke up. He said, "that's mine. And I knew all of you would get flowers, and buds, and leaves, and butterflies and stuff like that. So I got a rock because I wanted to be different. And for me, that's new life." The teacher opened the next one, and there was nothing there. The other children, as 8-year olds will, said "That's not fair.....that's stupid....somebody didn't do it right." About that time the teacher felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down and Philip was standing beside him. "It's mine," Philip said. "It's mine." And the children said, "You don't ever do things right, Philip. There's nothing there!" "I did so do it," Philip said. "I did do it. It's empty – the tomb is empty!" The class was silent, a very full silence. And for you who don't believe in miracles, I want to tell you that one happened that day last spring. From that time on, it was different. Philip suddenly became a part of that group of 8-year-old children. They took him in. He entered. He was set free from the tomb of his differentness. Philip died last summer. His family had known since the time he was born that he wouldn't live out a full life span. Many things had been wrong with his tiny, little body. And so, late last July, with an infection that most children could have quickly shrugged off, Philip died. The mystery simply enveloped him completely. He was buried from that church where he attended Sunday School. And on that day at the funeral nine 8-year-olds, with their Sunday School teacher, marched right up to that altar and laid on it an empty egg – an empty, old discarded holder of panty hose.

In a few moments we will be invited to come to this altar with hands outstretched and share in the remembrance of our Savior Jesus Christ. Everyone is welcome to come. This Easter at St. John's we will also celebrate with those who have gone before us. The saints and angels and choirs of heaven – our friends and family whom we love but no longer see know that Easter is our destination, Easter is our hope. A wise priest friend of mine once said that to come to the altar for the Eucharistic meal is where heaven and earth meet. Come, come and remember what has been and come remembering where we are going with Christ.

Amen

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