

Sermon Easter Day, 2008
 March 23, 2008
 St. John's Episcopal Church
 The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

The Cornerstone

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightening, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."
 Matthew 28:1-10

Imagine trying to explain the significance of Easter to someone with no experience or preconception of the Christian faith. Now imagine trying to do so in a foreign language that you're just learning. That was the dilemma facing David Sedaris, an American writer living in France, as he sat in a French class with immigrants from around the world.

"It was Easter season and Moroccan student, a Muslim, raised her hand and asked in French, 'excuse me, but what is an Easter?' The teacher called upon the rest of the class to help explain. The Polish students led the charge to the best of their ability. 'It is,' said one, 'a party for the little boy of God who called his self Jesus. . . ' she faltered and swore, and one of her countrymen came to her aid, 'He call his self Jesus, and then he die one day on two. . . morsels of. . . lumber.' The rest of the class jumped in, offering bits of information that would have given the pope an aneurysm. 'He died one day and then he go above my head to live with your father.' 'He weared of himself the long hair, and after he died, the first day he come back to say hello to all the people.' 'He nice, the Jesus.' 'He make the good things and on Easter we be sad because somebody make him dead today.'" Part of the problem, Sedaris realized in retrospect, was vocabulary. Nouns such as *cross* and *resurrection* were beyond them, let alone the nuances of theology. "Faced with the challenge of explaining the cornerstone of Christianity," he writes, "we did what any self-respecting group of people might do. We talked about food instead. 'Easter is a party to eat of the lamb,' one Italian explained. 'One may too eat of the chocolate.'" ¹

We can all cut ourselves some slack here, even speaking in our own language, when we struggle to explain, much less understand resurrection. For resurrection transcends logic and defies common sense. We can't understand it until we've lived it. And even after we've lived resurrection, the experience is hard to describe in words.

So before I plunge in with an imperfect description of my own, let me first say that there is more to Christianity than resurrection. There are, for starters, the amazing

¹ David Sedaris, "Jesus Shaves," in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (New York: Little and Brown, 2000)

teachings of Jesus. His parables describe a God of unfathomable mercy and forgiveness, and his teachings are of our world the way God would have it be—a world in which there are no outcasts; a world in which there is no scarcity, no mean-spiritedness, and no war; a world in which the poor are lifted up, the hungry are given good things, and the merciful receive mercy in kind.

There is also in Christianity the power of communion and the gift of community, symbolized each week by a sacramental meal to which all are invited. There is in Christianity the promise of *Emmanuel*—God with us and for us. There is in Christianity the understanding that this world, for all its brokenness and pain, is fundamentally good, that we can know God best in and through the ordinary things of this life, and most especially, in and through one another.

All these things and more are part of the faith that this church and countless others like it across a broad spectrum of race, tribe, life experience, and language strive, in our imperfect ways, to embody and profess. And when we fail, which we routinely do, we pick ourselves up, ask God and one another for forgiveness, and remind ourselves of what St. Paul wrote to one of the earliest Christian communities: “We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus as Lord and ourselves as servants for Jesus’ sake. For it is the same God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” (2 Cor.4:5-7).

There is more to Christianity than the resurrection. Which raises an interesting question: is belief in resurrection necessary? Couldn’t we bypass the historical improbabilities and intellectual difficulties that resurrection evokes in our mind and focus instead on the teachings and good example of Jesus? Of course we can—but if we do, we miss the most important truth of that this particular path to God embodies.

Resurrection is, indeed, the cornerstone of Christianity, the foundation upon which all else is built. Without our ancestors’ first experience of resurrection, we wouldn’t know a thing about Jesus. If his story had ended with his death, he would have passed into historical anonymity amidst the thousands similarly executed in his day. Without whatever it was that his disciples experienced on that first Easter morning, there would have been no community gathered in his name, no recording of his words and deeds, no one to remember and give meaning to his death.² Without resurrection, we would never have known Jesus. And there is nothing that we know about him that hasn’t been passed on to us through the prism of resurrection.

We know about Jesus because what our ancestors experienced after his death. What they experienced was enough to convince them that Jesus was alive, that the forces of this world that killed him could not and did not have the final word. What they experienced convinced them that Jesus was like God, somehow, and with God, and a part of God. They felt his presence with them.

That sense of Christ’s presence is what has defined Christian spirituality from the earliest days to our own. We, too, can know his presence with us and for us. We can. We can know him as close to us as our own breath, a presence of unconditional love and mercy. His presence can take many forms, some quite dramatic, others grounded in the ordinary things of life. These experiences are a mystery. We can’t evoke them on

² See Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, for a further elaboration of this idea.

command; we can't insist that others know Christ precisely as we have known him. Often Christ is hidden, what the theologian Carl Rahner called "an anonymous presence," unnamed and unrecognized. But when we become feel the personal connection—Christ with us—then we know first hand the experience that has sustained hope and made faith possible from Jesus' day forward.

St Patrick speaks of the presence of Christ this way: *Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*³

That would be enough to celebrate on Easter morning: how Christ being raised from the dead enabled his first frightened disciples to experience his presence with them, and enables us to experience him in the same way. But there is a deeper truth here. For resurrection is not Jesus' experience alone; it is ours as well.

It isn't easy to talk about this dimension of resurrection, for to do so, we must first acknowledge its context, which is death. To know resurrection, you have to die. To know resurrection before your physical death, you have to live through the death of something else—a cherished hope, a way of life, a connection to someone or something you have loved. You have to face the loneliness of failure and grief, the humiliation of defeat, the soul-shattering reality of all you cannot control. To know resurrection, you have to let go of any illusion that life as you once knew it is possible. This isn't something we would seek out or wish on anyone, because the initial cost is so high.

But on the other side of death, God is there with the promise and the path of another life. On this side of death, the promise of a different life is no consolation, certainly not worth the crossing over of suffering to attain. But once you're there and there is no turning back, resurrection is what makes living possible again.

Here are some things to know about life after death. Its beginnings are tentative and ambiguous, and our first response to life rising out of the ashes is typically like that of the women at the tomb—one of fear and hesitation. It can also feel at first like betrayal. This is particularly true after a prolonged period of grief, because we've adjusted to the emptiness. When the feeling of being alive returns we aren't sure if it's all right to experience joy again.

Life after death is also something we must choose. The educator and author Parker Palmer writes with excruciating honesty of his descent into clinical depression in a small book entitled, *Let Your Life Speak*. As the depression at last begin to lift and he could imagine embracing his life again, he realized that a part of him *didn't want to*. "One the most painful discoveries I made in the midst of the dark woods of depression was that a part of me wanted to stay depressed. As long as I clung to this living death, life was easier; little was expected of me, certainly not serving others."⁴ He had to choose to live again.

There is also an incremental nature to life after death. Life comes back one breath at a time. At the Easter Vigil last night, I spoke of a man who was determined to re-enter his family's life, long after his adult children had become accustomed to his absence and

³ Taken from Hymn 370 *St. Patrick's Breastplate*, The Episcopal Hymnal, 1980.

⁴ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 71.

his grandchildren had forgotten him. It wasn't easy at first—he wasn't very good at being reliable and loving; they weren't all that keen on letting him back in, after all the pain in their past. But he persevered and got better at showing up, helping out, and loving in small ways. Which is not to say that there weren't a few dramatic moments in his relationship with his family, but those moments were made possible by a long journey of small steps.

This is also in life after death a link to the past we feel is lost to us forever. Jesus told the women to send the men onto Galilee where he would meet them. To send them to Galilee was to send them home, to the place where they first met Jesus and where their life with him began. What seemed irretrievably lost from their former life was in fact going to be called upon in a new way, just as the pieces of ourselves that lost forever can come back years after we had let them go to aid us in a new context. With God, nothing is lost. We may never know how the loose ends come together, but as a weaver as the ability to transform the flaws of her raw materials and her past mistakes into a work of art, so God can take the seemingly haphazard chain of sorrows and joys we have known and make a life of meaning.

This is it. This is the cornerstone of Christian faith: Jesus is alive and with us, a sure presence of love and mercy. This is it. This is the cornerstone of Christian faith: out of death can rise a new life. We may never find the right words, in any language, to adequately describe what this experience means. But the experience itself is what makes joy and peace possible in an uncertain and anxious world. Christ is with us always. And on the other side of death, however death comes to us, there is life. There is *life* for us to choose and to live and to share.