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Easter Sunday

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

I sense, as I'm sure you do, great excitement in the church this morning as we gather to celebrate this feast of Easter. We sing out with great joy, we clap, we rejoice, and that's the way it should be, because we celebrate the most extraordinary event in all of human history -- a unique, one-time-only event. And even though we have the spirit of excitement and joy, I think that very often, we really do not reflect on how extraordinary it is, what we celebrate.

Today's Readings
Acts 10:34, 37-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-9
Full text of the readings

Hundreds of years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed these words: "It is now when my servant will succeed, talking about the servant of Yahweh, whom we know is Jesus, "He will be exalted and highly praised," just as many had been horrified at his disfigured appearance: "Is this a man? He does not look like one? -- Jesus hanging in ignominy, tortured on a cross. So "nations will be astounded. Rulers will stand speechless, for they will see something never told of. They will witness something never heard of." What Isaiah is talking about is what happened on that first Easter Sunday morning.

I think we are so used to the idea that Jesus rose from the dead and we celebrate it, that we really don't have a full awareness of how extraordinary, unbelievable almost, this is. We think of Jesus coming out of the tomb, sort of like when Jesus brought Lazarus back, but that was so different -- Lazarus was resuscitated. He continued to live an ordinary human life and he died, like everyone else. This is different; Jesus is not resuscitated. It's totally new. Jesus is fully human, but it's a spiritualized body. It's a whole new experience, something that had never happened before and has not happened since.

I think we can kind of understand why we take it for granted, [such as] the disciples, like Peter, when he goes to the home of Cornelius (but this is quite a while after the first Easter), and by this time, Peter has begun to understand. Remember, at the end of the gospel, it said they did not understand that he was to rise from the dead. But now he had, so he speaks very clearly about the consequences of this new life that is given now through baptism.

But there's another account of the resurrection in Mark's gospel that is, in fact, the oldest account, written just a short time after these events took place. John's gospel was written probably, at least three or maybe four decades later, after the whole church had had time to reflect and begin to understand. Here's how it really happened: "When the Sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices, so they might go and anoint the body. Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb.

"They were saying to one another, 'Who will roll back the stone for us to the entrance?' As they looked up, they noticed the stone had already been rolled away. It was a very large stone. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right and they were amazed. But he said to them, 'Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised and is not here. This is, however, the place where they laid him. Now go and tell his disciples and Peter, 'Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there just as he told you. Now the women went out of the tomb and fled, beside themselves with fear, and they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.'"

These disciples, at the moment when they discovered this empty tomb, they're not aware that Jesus is alive. They're told that he is, but they're afraid. They don't understand, they're confused, and that's the way it was for those first disciples for a long time. They were confused -- what happened? Where is Jesus? And it was only gradually that they came to realize that Jesus is alive, that he has risen from the dead, that there's a new Jesus' spiritualized body, Jesus alive and living in our midst, even though we can't see him, we can't touch him. But he's real, he's there.

All the accounts of the resurrection have one common thing in them that is good for us to reflect on, and that is, the disciples did realize, because that stone was rolled away, that the realm of death had lost its power. You see, for those people, when they buried someone in a tomb like that, sealed it up with a rock, it was as though that person was in the realm of death forever. Now the stone is gone -- the realm of death has lost its power; they know that much and they continue to reflect on all of this.

So over a period of time, they begin to understand how Jesus is alive and in their midst. Probably the gospel of John is the one, because it's so much later, that begins to show us how we know Jesus is alive. The gospel of John, we often call the "gospel of love." It has that beloved disciple, John, who experienced a profound love of Jesus, a very close, affectionate love. Remember, he was the one who rested on the breast of Jesus at the Last Supper. He's the one who stood at the cross, the beloved disciple.

Mary Magdalene is also one who, in the gospel, the life of Jesus, is shown to us as a disciple of love. She is the one who wept and washed his feet in a very affectionate way. She is the one that, after Jesus is alive and she has left the tomb, having gone there early in the morning, experiences Jesus speaking to her, one word: "Mary." A word of love -- he calls her by name. Deep in her spirit, she hears this. She knows he is alive. That love cannot be broken.

What this gospel shows us is that God is love. Where there is love, there is God. Gradually, the people, the disciples, began to understand that, that wherever they could experience love, they would experience the living Jesus because he is the revelation, the visible image of the invisible God, the God who is love,

so where there is love, there is God. Jesus is alive in that love.

Peter later on experienced this, if we go to the twenty-first chapter of John's gospel. Peter remembers a time when he denied Jesus, a dramatic failure, broke a bond of love. He said, "I do not even know the man," but then he experiences Jesus saying to him, "Peter, do you love me?" and Peter is able to say three times, "Yes, Lord, I love you. You know I love you." Then in that experience of love, Peter knows Jesus is alive and that's how we will discover the risen Jesus as we experience love in our lives.

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Two weeks ago, we had a funeral here for Sister Rita Mary, one of our parishioners. The church was filled; some of you were here. A very sorrowful time, obviously, but also a time when all of those who had experienced her love, and who loved her, felt that presence of Jesus, as we often do at a moment like that. "God is love;" where there is love, there is God. Jesus is alive in that love, so we too, in our lives, must continue to try to cherish those moments when we know love is present in our lives, because that's a moment when we experience the risen Jesus, and we know the resurrection happened, Jesus is alive, he's in our midst.

The other way that those disciples came to understand all that happened that first Easter morning, that event that so extraordinary, it was almost unspeakable, is by reflecting on the scriptures. There's a beautiful passage in Luke's gospel in the twenty-fourth chapter, where disciples who had been at the crucifixion and were totally dismayed and in sorrow, had thought, "This is the one who was to restore the kingdom to Israel, and he's crucified," but then, as they're walking along, they're sharing the scriptures with each other, and they begin to hear God speaking within them.

In those scriptures, they go back over what the prophets had said about the Jesus who was to come, the Messiah. He must first suffer and die. They begin to understand, they stop at an inn, they break bread together, and in breaking the bread, they see the one with them is Jesus! He is alive! They have discovered him in the word of God. We can do the same thing. Some of you, I'm sure, during the season of Lent, have used that little black book every day, reading a passage of scripture, letting it sink into our souls, hearts and minds and reflecting and coming to know Jesus is alive.

Now we have the white books to carry us on through the seven weeks of Easter. When we celebrate every day this extraordinary fact, unknown before in human history and never happened again, one who raised from the dead. So we can take those scripture passages each day during these 50 days, read, let that word of God enter into our hearts, in to our spirit, and we will know more deeply, Jesus is alive, and that's what we will continue to celebrate.

So wherever you experience love, let yourself be aware, God is love. Where there is love, there is God, there is Jesus. Read each day something of the scriptures and discover Jesus alive in that living word of God, and rejoice, and then it will be far easier for all of us to carry out what St. Paul proclaims in our second lesson today, "If you are risen with Christ," in other words, if you know this risen Jesus in your own heart, "seek those things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on earthly things, for you have died and your light is now hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is our light, reveals himself once more, you also will be revealed with Jesus in glory."

Is there any truth that can give us greater joy than this truth about Jesus? Let us rejoice and celebrate this day, not just today, but for the rest of our lives, knowing that for us, Jesus is alive, he is risen, he has

given us a share in his life and we know him in love, we know him in the word of God, so we continue to rejoice every day.

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