

Easter Sunday
Matthew 28:1-10, 16-17

April 24, 2011
“Christ is Risen!”

The Rev. Michelle Slater

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 lightning, 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.’

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!)

It’s hard to say sometimes, isn’t it? I mean, it’s not one of our common church greetings, coming only once a year, as it does. But that’s not the only reason it might stick in our throats. I mean, we find it hard to talk about Jesus at the best of times, we liberal, progressive Christians. We who take great pains to explain that we don’t read the Bible literally, but with a more historical, critical, metaphorical lens. We who don’t want to be mistaken for “bible-thumpers” or “Jesus freaks” or “fundamentalists”. It’s hard, a lot of the time, for us to talk about Jesus.

And when we do, when we do manage to speak, out loud, about Jesus, we prefer to focus on the things that he did, like his healing of those who were sick. His including of those who were outcast. His feeding of those who were hungry. His touching of those who were untouchable. His raising up of those who were lowly. And we like to talk about the things that he said, even though they are hard, because they are at least, inspiring. Like, “love your neighbour as you love yourself.” Or, “Let the children come to me.” Or some of his parables like the one about the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son.

Because all the things that Jesus did, and all the things that he said, have come to be foundational for us in how we want to live our lives. We want to be good people. We want to be loving, and generous, and compassionate. We want to follow Jesus and we want to know “what would Jesus do,” so that we can at least try to do likewise.

But “Christ is risen...Christ is risen indeed”? That is a little harder to say. Harder to say because, well, that’s something that is a little harder to understand. Harder to grasp. Harder to explain and so definitely harder to talk about.

There are a few ways people speak about Easter, about Jesus’ rising to life three days after his death on a cross, to make it a little easier to swallow. There’s the butterfly analogy; you know the one. The one that says that Easter is a metaphor, just like a caterpillar building a cocoon. It looks like the caterpillar has died, but really, it is only sleeping while it undergoes a great transformation. Then the plain, boring caterpillar is revealed to actually be a beautiful and radiant butterfly.

Or, you’ve heard that Easter is just like a seed dying. (Hey, even Jesus used this image himself!) That a seed has to be planted in the ground, and give up its own life, basically die, in order to burst forth with new life.

The only problem with these explanations of Easter is that they don’t explain anything about Easter. Because caterpillars are supposed to turn into butterflies, and they do, reliably, season after season. Seeds are supposed to crack open in the earth and sprout and eventually be cast aside by the growing plant, and they do, reliably, season after season. But resurrection, someone coming to life again after they’ve died, is not supposed to happen and it does not happen, not then, and not now. Which is one reason it’s so hard for us to say that “Christ is risen.” Besides, nobody was ever moved to risk their lives, the way the early Christians did, because of a butterfly coming out of a cocoon.

Or maybe you’ve heard that Easter is really a story about, “the triumph of the human spirit.” You know the rhetoric, and it can be stirring and moving and powerful. We see it in movies, both fictional and those “based on a true story,” and we hear about it in the news. When someone overcomes almost unimaginable odds, to not only survive but to thrive. When someone triumphs over adversity and not only achieves success for themselves but also finds ways to give and serve others.

But that’s not Easter. Because again, this is something that we do know to be true, that we’ve experienced. It may not happen all the time, the incredible endurance of the human will, the amazing strength that some individuals can find within themselves in the face of real horror. But it happens enough for us to know that it does, that it’s possible, that it’s something we should strive for ourselves. And, sometimes, often times, it doesn’t happen. Sometimes, the human spirit is crushed, is defeated, is broken beyond repair. Sometimes our human capacity for goodness does not win out over our capacity for evil, and we have lots of evidence for that in our history. So Easter has got to be more, mean more, than a generalized hope for human beings to be good, to be better, than we are always capable of being.

Or maybe, you’ve heard that what Easter really means is that “love is stronger than death.” Now that’s a good one, and a powerful one, but I’m afraid, is just not close enough to the reality of Easter. Because the fact is, that Jesus didn’t just die. He wasn’t hit by a bus, and he didn’t jump off a cliff. He didn’t have a heart attack, or die of old age. It wasn’t just death that

Jesus experienced. It was crucifixion that Jesus endured, a brutal, shameful, torturous and very public execution by the state.

Because when they crucified someone, the Romans were not just trying to kill the person. They were killing what the person stood for. They were killing any reputation the person may have had. They were killing any movement the person may have started. They were killing any possibility that anyone would remain loyal. They were killing any possible future. They were killing hope. They were killing Jesus.

But his trust in God...his hope...what he stood for. And God's faithfulness to him...God's hope...what God stands for — these were not killed. The Jesus who died on Good Friday was still dead on Easter Sunday. But the embodied passion of Jesus that did not hesitate in the face of humiliating, torturous death did not die on Good Friday, and was seen to be actually, factually, really alive on Easter Sunday.

So, it's not just that "love is stronger than death." It's that love, God's love, conquers violence. Absorbs fear. Subverts hatred. And...gives new life. Impossibly, unexpectedly, unbelievably: though Jesus died, God raised him to life again. That's Easter. That's what happened, and that's what it means. Of course, it's hard to talk about. Of course, those words sometimes come out hesitantly: "Christ is ... risen." Or doubtfully: "Christ ... is risen?" Or almost too afraid to hope: "Christ is ... risen."

Or maybe...maybe it's hard to talk about, to proclaim, to shout out, "Christ is risen!" because it's not about us. All our other metaphors, explanations, rationalizations of Easter are based in our own human experiences, of the earth, of each other, of our own lives. But Easter is not, actually, about us...but about God.

When you think about it, Easter is not about human capacities or possibilities. It is rather, entirely about God's capacity and determination and power. Easter did not happen because good people just kept trying hard. It happened because God acted at that boundary of life we call death, and did something altogether new.

Maybe that's why Matthew's story of that first Easter morning includes those dramatic elements, an earthquake, and an angel rolling away the stone to reveal the empty tomb. To make it clear that Easter confronts us, gives us, blesses us with, God's possibilities and not our own.

How did it happen? What did it look like? How can we explain it? I don't know. We can't. I do know that something happened on that first Easter morning, something that was "...exceedingly strange and unprecedented in the real world." Something that changed everything for Jesus' followers (Crossan and Wright, p. 19) Something that broke with their familiar patterns of living, and with their historical understandings of dying. Something that couldn't be filed into a recognized category of experience.

Something happened that was outside of human history, but was very much of God's story. It's not something we explain, it's not even something we believe, if by "believe" we mean a kind of intellectual assent. Rather, it's a gift we receive, a mystery we live into, an affirmation and a promise we entrust our life to.

What happened, in whatever way it happened, was Easter. The rising. The resurrection. The vindication of Jesus' life and actions and message. The triumphant proof that indeed, the way of Jesus is the way of God...the way of life. Easter says that, notwithstanding all the evidence in the sad story of humanity that manifests hurt and harm holding sway over healing and wholeness, God continually acts to overcome hurt and harm. Easter, the resurrection, says that God continues to work for a dominion of justice and peace and equity even when the domination systems of this world, whether political or religious or militaristic or ideological, perpetuate injustice, violence and oppression.

So, it turns out that Easter is about us, at least a little bit, after all. Because we have been claimed by God as God's own, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, we are offered, given the same unexpected and even impossible new life, in the face of all our hurts, all our losses, all our deaths. The resurrection, the rising again, is for us, too, this Easter and always, as well as for the rest of creation.

So...Christ is risen! **(Christ is risen indeed!)** Still hard to say? Don't worry...you're not alone. Did you hear it, what happens when the rest of the disciples meet the risen Christ in Galilee? "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted." But some doubted. Well, of course. I'd be surprised if they didn't. I'd be surprised if we didn't, from time to time. Luckily, thank God, the good news of Easter is not dependent on our right thinking or believing, but solely on God: on God's action, on God's goodness, on God's faithfulness, on God's love and power.

So, whether you say it with conviction...or hesitation...or doubt...or wonder...together, let us proclaim: "Christ is risen." **(Christ is risen indeed!)** Alleluia! Amen.

Source: "The Resurrection of Jesus,
John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue"