

EASTER 2023 (Matthew 28:1-10)

The Resurrection

Easter: it's a moveable feast, like the Passover Seder in which it is rooted. To arrive at Easter we first look for the vernal equinox, a sky-defined event, and then we look for the full moon, a night vision. Easter follows these events. And so we look into the night to find this day. The resurrection takes place during the night. Dawn may be when weeping women and shaken men could not find the dead Jesus, but what had happened emerged in the hours of darkness. So, Easter, like Passover, rises in the night.

Jesus has always been about rejoining darkness and light. The shunned, the needy, the sick, the shameful, all those who had been driven away from the community of the day, were brought by him into a life he called heaven, where light and shadows mingle. The restored brought their darkness with them, as it had been their home, and now was part of their light. And finally, at Easter, Jesus brings his light out of the deep darkness of his death. Easter - the ultimate manifestation of God's love.

Diane, a young woman, was overtaken by the shadows and darkness. She became every parent's worst fear - their worst nightmare. By her own admission, she grew up in a good and loving home. There were family outings, birthday celebrations, dance classes and even church. But for some reason Diane never felt quite OK, and somewhere in high school, drugs, stealing, alcohol, staying out late, turned her life upside

down.

Her family suffered social embarrassment and endless crises as they tried to reach out to Diane, while struggling to maintain family life and values. They tried counselling, rehabilitation, tough love, tears and prayers. But the more they tried, the more abusive and rebellious she became. Finally, she ran away, living a life she'd rather not talk about. She was well into her mid-to late-twenties before healing and reconciliation began.

Diane said, "At first, I felt my parents' love was unnecessary. It was smothering. Then eventually, as things got worse, I began to feel unlovable. I resented my parents the most because I felt that if I were unlovable I could do what I wanted and it wouldn't matter. But as long as I suspected I was loved, even a little, I wasn't free to 'do my thing'. So I needed to destroy their love in order for me to be free."

"But," she said, "they never stopped loving me. Even when I got arrested and they refused to bail me out of jail, I could see the pain of love in their eyes. Now I realize how much I have needed their love; that it was probably their love and prayers that kept me alive all those years. But when I look back on those years what amazes me the most is that my absolute worst could not destroy their love for me."

This is what Easter is about for believers; it is about God's undefeated

love for us. Because of Easter resurrection we know our worst, no matter how terrible it is, can never destroy the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Good Friday represents the worst that humanity can do. It represents our effort to destroy God's offering of love: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever should believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Good Friday represents our rebellion against that gift. Quoting the Shema, Jesus taught, "Love God with all your heart, mind and soul." That is just as hard to do today as it was in the first century.

A philosopher once said, "We are to use things and love people, but in our world we love things and use people." So if we feel like objects we treat others as objects. We see commitment to God's love and commandments as entrapments; as death to our freedom. And so we give our loyalties and affections to these very things that rob us of our love and destroy us.

Like Diane's rejection of her parents, Good Friday represents humanity's primal "No!" Sometimes that "no" comes out of pain in our lives. Sometimes it comes out of a sense of unworthiness, or it may come out of anger that God has not "bailed us out" of the dilemmas in our lives or prevented tragedy in our lives. And so, the loving, life-giving God is held up to our anger, our rejection, and our defiance. Good Friday represents

our worst, for Jesus suffered not simply for our sins but because of our sins.

Not all of us reject the love of God in the same way. "Ah, mon cher," wrote the atheist Albert Camus, "for anyone who is without God and without a master, the weight of days is dreadful. Hence, one must choose a master, God being out of style." The masters we choose in rejection of God's love are not always dastardly things like drugs and violence. The masters we choose may be perfectly honourable things such as professionalism, political activism ~ things that consume all our attention, heart, mind and soul. Perhaps one of the most subtle masters is social correctness.

We are nice people with traditional values. We give to charities, work hard at our professions, volunteer, socialize in the right circles and pay our taxes. But our lives are so cluttered with "appropriateness" that there is no room left for God. Whether intentional or not, our lives seem to prove how unnecessary God really is.

Our lives may even be traditional enough to occasionally include church, where we read words and sing music we love yet have long since stopped believing. And so for us Christ is not risen. He is entombed in the sepulchers of our apathy, which are adorned with the garlands of our politeness and our social appropriateness.

But Easter still manifests the faithfulness of God's enduring and steadfast love despite the worst we can inflict. It waits until, like Diane, we come to the place in our lives when we realize we need, *really need*, the fullness of God's love. It waits until that moment when we realize that "the weight of days" is too dreadful without God; that the masters we have chosen cannot give us peace or redemption.

It is then, like the women at the first Easter, that we search the places where our faith has been entombed and hear the faithful voice of the loving God saying, "Why do you seek life among things that are dead? My love for you is alive! Alleluia! Christ is Risen!"

It was these expectations and anticipation the women elicited that, in part, made it a special day. We tend to assume that when the women came to the tomb, they were completely unprepared for what they encountered. But this isn't the way Matthew tells the story. In fact, Matthew takes great pains to suggest that the women are waiting and watching with a sense of anticipation. The surprise may be for us: that all of a sudden we have been invited to follow these women from the cross to the tomb - women who, up until a few verses earlier, have been both silent and unseen.

When the women are first introduced in Matthew, we learn that they have followed Jesus from Galilee and have "provided" for him. The word "provide" (Greek: *diakonei*) reveals a good deal about these women.

After Jesus has been tempted in the wilderness, angels come and “provide” for him. The next person to “provide” for Jesus is Peter’s mother-in-law, after she has been raised from her sickbed. Later, the sheep are those who “provide” for Jesus by tending those who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick, or in prison. And then there are the women from Galilee. Surprisingly, the disciples, the men, never come near the word “provide.”

The only other person associated with the word is Jesus himself, who declares that he has come not to be ‘provided for’ but to ‘provide’. The women, are obviously not latter day tag-a-longs. They have been intimately bound to Jesus, from the very first days in Galilee, and in following him, have pursued the path of discipleship that Jesus himself models.

These women, who have watched the crucifixion from afar, and sat opposite the tomb where Jesus is laid, arrive at the dawning of the first day of the week to see the tomb. Matthew should not be confused here with Mark or Luke, where the women come to the tomb with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. In Matthew, they do not bring spices. Rather they come to see, a Greek verb that means not only to perceive visually, but also to gain understanding. When the women approach the tomb, it is with a sense of anticipation, a sense of expectation. If they have followed Jesus from Galilee and “provided” for him, they have also heard him say that he will die, and that he will be raised on the third day. This

is not surprising! After all, we readers have also heard these words.

And when Jesus breathed his last, as we read on Friday, the earth shook and the tombs were opened, and the bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. As we approach the sealed tomb, we come with a sense of expectation that we are about to see something; not only see but also understand.

When the women arrive at the tomb, the earth shakes once again as an angel descends from heaven, rolls back the stone from the tomb, and sits on it. The guards, posted in front of the tomb, clearly are *not* expecting this and 'fall to the earth as if they were dead'.

There is no small amount of irony in this: the living become as the dead, while the dead are revealed to be living. Unlike the guards, the women don't faint. Instead, they hear the angel tell them that Jesus who was crucified has been raised, just as he said. The movement here is not so much from sorrow to joy as a movement from anticipation, even expectation, to ***understanding*** arising from what they have both heard and seen. The women have come to the tomb to see and now they know.

The silent women are given a message from the angel that they are to carry to the disciples: Jesus has not only been raised from the dead, he has gone ahead of them to Galilee where they will see him, just as we

heard him inform his disciples in the passion reading. The women, filled with both awe (fear) and joy set out immediately. Then, suddenly, Jesus himself appears in front of them: before he arrives in Galilee, and before the disciples see him.

This moment shows what can happen when you anticipate on the basis of what you have seen and heard, and believe, or at least seek further understanding. Regardless, the women fall down and worship Jesus - like the magi did so long ago. When Jesus does finally appear to the disciples, some worship, while some still doubt. But, apparently, and fortunately for us, this is never a barrier to discipleship.

We never actually hear the voices of the women. The emphasis, is on their action - what they do, not what they say. They follow, they provide, they watch, and they wait, and they go in order to see. And when they are told to go tell the disciples, wherever they have been hiding, that they are to go back to Galilee where they will see Jesus, the women depart quickly to carry out the task.

There is something refreshing in this. It isn't surprising at all that the women are equated with those who tend the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the sick, those in prison, without necessarily recognizing that in doing so they have provided for Jesus. They are women who, filled with anticipation, have come to the tomb to find out what is next and then do it.

Easter is not just a holy event that happened almost 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem. It is a little Easter on whatever day we discover our need for the love of God. It is a little Easter whenever we respond to Jesus' call to provide - to serve the needs of our neighbour. It is a little Easter when we discover that all the Good Fridays of our lives cannot destroy the love God has for us. It is a little Easter when we respond to the unconditional, indestructible love God has for us by extending that love to others. And Today can be your Easter. No matter where you are or what you may be doing, maybe getting ready for Easter Celebrations, if you sense a need for God's love ~ for renewed faith, hope, for a sense of inner peace ~ know that the tomb in which you have buried your faith is now empty. It has been enlivened by the love of God, which endures forever.

To celebrate Easter is to cease the struggle against the way of God and accept the love we have so long resisted, yet so deeply needed, just as Diane finally realized and accepted that love. To celebrate Easter is to understand and to know as the women did, what to do next and to do it. As Paul said, "Nothing in death or life, in the present or the future, in this world, or the world to come, can ever separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus."

Amen! Alleluia! Christ is risen!

EASTER PRAYERS 2023

THE PRAYERS (*Each petition of the prayers concludes with:*)

God of Resurrection..... **Hear our prayers!**

God of the bright and morning star, God of the rising sun, God of darkness banished, we praise and worship you! For empty tombs: thank you! For disciples running with good news: thank you! For your presence, alive, powerful, resurrected: thank you! We celebrate your victory over death, over all the powers that would defeat us.

God of Resurrection **Hear our prayers!**

Help us to grasp resurrection; to understand its power, to see its force at work in our world, overturning evil empires, changing the hatred within us, moving the world slowly, forcefully, bending us towards love and truth.

God of Resurrection **Hear our prayers!**

On this day of great gladness empower us to be your ambassadors, proclaiming good news - good news in our kitchens and living rooms; good news in the offices and workshops; good news in the fields and factories. Help us to be that good news, walking softly on this good earth caring gently for all people, living hopefully into your kingdom.

God of Resurrection **Hear our prayers!**

Today we think of all who are grieving, all who are sick, especially....., all who are dying. We pray for places in the world that are torn by war and bloodshed and war, especially Syria, the middle east and Africa.

God of Resurrection **Hear our prayers!**

During these holy days, as 2.38 billion Christians celebrate Easter, 1.91 billion Moslems mark Ramadan, and 14.6 million Jews observe Passover, we prayerfully acknowledge:

The Vatican repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery, a 15th century pronouncement that legitimized the colonial-era seizure of Indigenous lands and formed the basis of some property law today.

Syrian peacemaker Ghaliaa Chaker beginning to apply her music composition skills to soothe the worries of Syrian children and refugees.

Israeli democracy advocates forcing the suspension of the overhaul of the country's judicial system, bringing different parties to the negotiating table.

Leaders from four women's religious communities in the Midwest United States signing a statement supporting mental health care for trans youth struggling in their communities.

Iraqis beginning to sleep more soundly and with less fear of undeclared United States aggression after the United States Senate approved the end of the Authorizations for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) by the United States against Iraq.

Iran and Saudi Arabia's top diplomats agreeing to meet before the end of the holy month of Ramadan to implement a landmark bilateral reconciliation deal that was brokered by China.

The small Pacific island nation of Vanuatu winning a major victory to advance international climate law after it persuaded the U.N. General Assembly to ask the world's highest international court to rule on the obligations of countries to address climate change.

Amid the glowing light of truth and new life, the reality of grace and hope for our world, we give thanks, not as we ought but as we are able, opening our hearts and hands, our minds and wills to your leading, Holy One, living in the assurance that in you there is indeed Resurrection and New Life.

God of Resurrection Hear our prayers!

And in this world of broken hopes and dreams we catch sight of your kingdom come, in the person Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns in us forever.

ALLELUIA! AMEN!

God in Community, Holy One, hear us as we pray: **Our Father**