

Easter Day, Year A, 2011  
John 20:1-18  
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Today is the Sunday of the Resurrection, without question the greatest day in the Christian year. For Christians, this is the most important day in history. On this day, some two thousand years ago, God turned the world of sin upside down. God redeemed us from the bonds of sin. Jesus our Lord, the only Son of God, who died because of humanity's sin, rose from the dead victorious over death. On this Sunday of the Resurrection, God lifted Jesus from the grave. God gave Jesus victory over evil. Those who believe in him, who have become his disciples through baptism into his death and resurrection, now share in his victory. God gives us his promise of our own resurrection, eternal life in the presence of God.

The Church sometimes calls Jesus the "New Adam." This sounds strange to us, for we are not used to thinking of him in this way. However there is a reason for talking about Jesus as the new Adam. Our Lord is the new Adam because through him humanity has a fresh start, a new beginning. Easter allows us to walk free from sin and turn to God without fear. We can do this because Jesus took the penalty for our sins upon himself, and suffered for our sake. Jesus died for us that we might live, clean and righteous, before God. By his death and resurrection, Jesus gives us a fresh start, a new beginning, and so we call him the new Adam, the obedient Adam. Because of his obedience, we who are baptized into his death and resurrection discover that his resurrection truly is our new beginning, our new birth. In faith, as the Book of Revelation tells us, Jesus is our *Alpha* and our *Omega*, our first and our last, our beginning and our end, for we end our days in his love and his resurrection and enter into eternal rest with God.

If we would understand this, and truly accept God's offering of eternal life, we just have to do so in the context of the continuum of Good Friday and Easter Day. It is impossible to understand one without the other and our hope for salvation exists only within the context of both. You cannot have Easter without Good Friday, and the way that our Lord died tells us just how insidious humanity's sin really is.

Consider the plot to execute Jesus. If Jesus was a threat to the established Jewish order, and in the minds of the Jewish leadership Jesus was such a threat, the easiest way to deal with him would have been to simply ambush him and murder him. That way, our lord would have been out of the way and the blame could have been shifted to others. But, simply murdering him would not do, because Jesus was not an ordinary man. Jesus claimed to be God's son, the Messiah, and many believed this. So, the authorities had to come up with a manner of death that would forever disallow this messianic claim.

In Torah, the ancient Mosaic Law, there is a very chilling statement about death. The statement is found in the Book of Deuteronomy. It is Deuteronomy 21:23. The passage reads, "Accursed is he who hangs from a tree." Jewish law held that if a person died by

hanging, even God was powerless to redeem him. If a person died by hanging, then that person was doomed to hell. Regardless of how righteous someone was, if he died by hanging he went to hell. The rabbis said that crucifixion, as practiced by the Romans, was an extension of this and the rule applied. If you were crucified, you went to hell - period! Now, it does not matter that this is crazy and that we don't believe it. It does not matter that rarely does one have a choice about the way one dies, and that one's afterlife is determined by righteousness in life and not the manner of death. What we believe about this does not matter. If we want to understand our Lord's crucifixion, what matters is the thinking of his people in this matter. When you accept this logic, then you can begin to understand what happened and why. The best possible way for those who conspired against Jesus to rid themselves of him was to get Rome to crucify him, because Torah said that those who died this way were accursed. Any claim to be God's son simply would not stand, and any blame for his death could be shifted to the Roman government.

Now, I tell you this so that you can grasp the hopelessness of Good Friday and therefore understand what was going on in Mary Magdalene's mind and in Peter's mind and in the minds of our Lord's other disciple when they went to the tomb on Easter Day. They did not expect Resurrection because in spite of what Jesus had told them, they had seen him die. He hung from a cross. On that Easter morning, it is likely that not a single one of our Lord's followers were a still true believer. Their hope was gone because they had seen him die on the Cross.

Now following John's account and it varies in some detail from the others, as each gospel reports the oral tradition upon which it is based, we hear the story of Easter morning. One of our Lord's friends, only one, and a woman to boot, did the honorable and appropriate thing by going to anoint Jesus' body. Her name was Mary Magdalene. Jesus had made a difference in her life and she would not forget that. Mary was determined that she would treat our Lord's body with love and respect even though her heart was broken.

Dejected, emotionally ripped asunder, Mary approached the tomb located in the outskirts of Jerusalem. In the first light of morning, Mary saw what her eyes could not believe and her heart could not accept. There was perpetrated the final, the unbelievable, the incomprehensible injustice. Even in death, Jesus was denied her. The tomb was open; the body had been stolen and no doubt had been defiled.

There is an old spiritual, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Let me ask you, now, if in your mind's eye, you can be there at the tomb with Mary? Angels said to Mary, "Woman, why are you crying?" Mary said, "I'm crying because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

And she turned around, and a man that she supposed was the caretaker asked her the same question, "woman, why are you weeping?" "If you've taken my Lord away," she said, tell me where you have put him and I will go get him and move him." Jesus said, "Mary," and in that moment Mary's eyes were opened and she recognized the Risen

Lord. And, she ran, as fast as her legs would carry her, and told the others, “I have seen the Lord.”

This morning, I have talked about the scandal of the Crucifixion; but for many today, Resurrection, not Crucifixion, is the stumbling block. We’ve seen enough injustice, enough murder to know that bad things happen to good people, but resurrection, coming back from the dead, is not something that is part of our experience. Yet, if life is not more than a terminal illness, where can there ever be meaning? What is the logic of creation, if there is no resurrection? What is the purpose of life if it only ends in death? You can whitewash Christianity, but if you throw out resurrection, then there is nothing left. Life is only a brief moment of light, to be born, to grow, to become old and then to die. There is no more without Easter.

Our faith is that in Christ there is more. In Christ, there is eternal life. In Christ, we find redemption and an eternal place in the family of God. *Amen.*