

Easter Day, Year B, 2009
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Easter is the greatest day in the Christian year. The Easter experience, the realization in faith that God raised Jesus from the dead, is singularly the most transforming experience in history. No event has ever had greater impact on humanity and human history, nor can any event ever approach it. The number of people whose lives were forever changed because they believed that God overturned this sentence of death is simply innumerable. And frankly, the count of believers, now over two thousand years in the making, is just beginning. As long as this world exists, as long as God continues to let our sun burn in his heaven and bring new life by the moment, Easter will challenge, convict, convert and transform. The man that we hail as the Son of God, Jesus of history nailed to the cross, on the day of Easter rose from the dead. We who are the Church believe that all that are baptized into his death and Resurrection believe in him and accept him as the Christ, are bound to him in life forever. His Resurrection is our resurrection. His eternal life is our eternal life. His love is our love and our hope.

The stories that we have about Easter, found in the four Gospels, but also mentioned, one way or the other in all of the New Testament writings, tell us that Jesus of Nazareth, executed as a common criminal, was placed in an opening, in the rock formations that surround Jerusalem, and that this served as his tomb. The burial party covered the opening with a large, roll-away stone. Unfortunately, not only had the Jewish Sabbath begun, but it is possible that this Sabbath coincided precisely with the feast of Passover, the holiest day of the year. In any case, the normal honorific preparation of the body for burial could not be done, because of the Sabbath. It was against Jewish law. So, the women tasked with preparing the body had to wait until the Sabbath was over. The Sabbath ended Saturday at sundown, but nobody in their right minds went to the area of these tombs at night, certainly not women, so they had to wait until first light the next day, Sunday, by our calendars.

All of the Gospels tell us that the women heading to the tomb wondered how they would manage to move the stone, since all the men among the disciples were hiding. The men were afraid that they too would be arrested and killed. All of the Gospels tell us that the women, when they got there, found that the stone had already been rolled away. All of the Gospels tell us that the women went in, but did not find Jesus, and something or somebody, that the women decided had to be an angel or some spiritual apparition, told them that this Jesus of Nazareth, that they were looking for, had risen from the dead and, according to Matthew and Mark, gone back to Galilee. "You'll find him there," the angel said.

I've always found it remarkable that what on the surface seems an improbable tale was so widely and immediately accepted by so many people. Some wag once said that it would have been nice if the women had a camcorder. The only way that a camcorder would have proven anything is if the angel had it. All the women could have captured would have been an empty tomb. The point is that no one saw the Resurrection. But hundreds of people, in very short order, became so absolutely convinced of the reality of the

Resurrection that they would bet their very lives on it. No movement in history spread as rapidly as the Resurrection movement, the Easter movement - the Christian movement. Those who refuse to believe can argue that there is no proof. What no one can argue is that Easter was not convincing, and transforming. And, it continues to be transforming. It will continue to be transforming forever.

It is not for us to explain the Resurrection. God himself explains the Resurrection. The explanation is this. God loves us so much that he became one of us, in the form of the man, Jesus. He taught us that loving him and loving others as he loves us is the greatest expression of holiness and that we should be holy as he is holy. When humanity rejected God's call to love and in loving be holy, they acted out the rejection by killing the messenger. God overturned this sentence of death and Jesus lives forever in the hearts of believers, empowering us to live out his message of love, to do his work in the world, proclaiming that the true God is a God of peace and love, of kindness and mercy, of forgiveness and reconciliation. In living out the love, our lives are transformed. God sets aside our shortcomings and considers us holy as he is holy. Ultimately, when we can go on no more, God brings our spirit to himself, united to him in his risen Christ. We share in his eternal Easter. *Amen.*