

Easter Day

St Martha's. Bethany Beach

April 4, 2021

Acts 10:34-43

Psalm 118

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

John 20:1-18

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It been two years since you were last in church to celebrate Easter, the most important day of the Church's year. For this reason, I want to say again: "Alleluia! Christ is Risen!" [The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!"] A lot has happened in two years. You lost your priest at the same time as the coronavirus came. You know, one of those things would have been traumatic enough, but you had two of them. Do you remember lockdown? We were locked down in our homes and unable to worship together.

At times like these the priest scratches his or her head and asks themselves, "how do we go on? How do we continue being the church?" Except, at the time, you didn't have a priest to ask that question - all you had was your faith and, fortunately, some devoted and able members to lead you. You never stopped being the church, but at the same time, the comfort of religion was denied to you.

I'm amazed at how well you survived. You have come a long way in two years, and today I want to celebrate you as much as Jesus, because you hung in there, and kept the faith, and trusted in God to get you through. When I came to St Martha's, I found the beating heart of a church which was, in a way, wounded, but in other ways, hopeful and trusting in God.

You have been through a dark time, and so today carries an extra charge as you can now come to church on the day of resurrection and re-affirm the faith into which you were baptized. As you look back at the past year, I wonder what this whole experience has meant to you, individually and as a people of faith. Did you ever wonder why God drew you into that darkness, and tested your faith? Entering into the darkness is an inescapable part of our life of faith. Yet, it's not one we willingly embrace. If I opened the door onto a darkened room and said enter, you probably wouldn't. But, in a way, that is what God has done.

I want to turn now to our gospel reading this morning. In darkness Mary Magdalene approaches the tomb on the third day. She notices that the stone has been removed from the tomb. She runs and tells Peter and the other disciple. They arrive, and see that the tomb is empty, save for the linen wrappings which once covered the body of Jesus. The disciples returned home, but Mary stayed outside the tomb, weeping for her Lord. Mary had arrived early in the morning, while it was still dark. The darkness contains both her and the resurrection. Later, she looks into the tomb herself - what is she looking for, if not Jesus?

Let us spend a few moments with her in the darkness. All who are committed to the spiritual life will be familiar with the darkness. A modern saint such as Teresa of Kolkata experienced prolonged periods where she felt only the absence of God. Did these extended periods of darkness cause her to abandon her vocation and renounce her

faith? No. On the contrary, she learnt to live in the darkness, trusting in a mysterious God and being held in love by the one whose life was love personified.

Few of us experience spiritual darkness as acutely as did Saint Teresa, but we all have experience of darkness in other areas of our lives: it may have come during the year when you felt unsafe in coming to church, and questioned how much church, religion and Jesus really mattered. During the pandemic you may have lost your job and your livelihood. You may have lost a friend or a loved one. You may have been unable to be with family at a time when you needed them the most.

Try as you might, these times of darkness are impossible to avoid. They can, if you are not careful, make you depressed or despairing. There is, however, a path that you can take which will help you to avoid falling into that trap. That is the way of true religion. Now, there are two types of religion: true religion and false religion. The one you don't want is false religion, which is sold like this: "Fear not; trust in God, and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you." And then there is true religion, which sounds a little different: "Fear not; the things that you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of." The path of true religion leads all the way to Easter, past Good Friday and all the other hard experiences of life. No one is ready for Easter unless he or she has spent time in the darkness and known that hope sometimes hangs by a thread.

In darkness, what we need most of all is light. A light that offers us a way out of the darkness. As Mary Magdalene knelt outside the tomb and wept, she leaned forward and looked inside. What did she see? Two angels, who ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And then, in a short while, a man appears who asks her the same question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" The man who asks the question, whom she mistakenly thinks is the gardener, is the risen Christ. In the darkness of her sorrow, the light of Christ appears.

Listen to these words from the Gospel of John, when Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is to come. He says:

"Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy...I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." (*John 16:20-22*)

The darkness eventually gives way to light. The night gives way to the dawn. The darkness of the past two years gives way to Easter. If we have spent a long time in the darkness, we may have become used to it. Now we must learn to welcome the light once more. The light is a healing balm for our souls, which have shrunk in the darkness of isolation and fear. But now the darkness yields to the light. Jesus the light now calls us to stop our weeping and let go of our fear, because he is risen. Jesus comes to us as we are, and loves us, and brings us hope.

This is the day of joy unbounded, of Jesus who breaks the chains of sin and death and bursts forth from the tomb. Jesus leads us from death to life, from sin to salvation, from sorrow to joy, from darkness to light. We celebrate his victory today, and rejoice at what

God has done. May the light of the world shine in your hearts and light your path to guide you onward. Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford