

Sermons at Christ Church

Building Relationships through Love.

Easter Sunday
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

It was dawn, a time of the day when darkness recedes, giving way to sunlight. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary set out in the dark with heavy hearts and made their way to the tomb. They didn't carry lanterns with them. They carried with them their disappointment of a life cut short, anxiety, grief, heartbreak and pain. The man, the son, the friend, the teacher and Lord had been brutally executed and was now a martyr.

Amid their grueling pain was the question, who would roll away the stone for us?

Without any clear answer, they walked in the dark to the tomb—they walked with the deep conviction that the Lord who always provides may very well provide. But as to what exactly the Lord would provide, they did not know. When they arrived at the tomb, the question they were confronted with was no longer about who would roll away the stone, but what happened to him? They themselves didn't anticipate that they will encounter the risen Christ. But the message of the angel was clear. He had been raised from the dead.

Their grief turned into wonder and amazement. Their tears of sorrow turned into tears of joy. Their fear turned into excitement. Their worry turned into calm confidence. The women who were walking in the dark had now been turned into running evangelists carrying with them the light of the good news that Jesus is alive.

While on their way with the light of the good news, they meet the risen Christ. Jesus was no longer the corpse of a martyr that they had planned to visit at the tomb, Jesus is alive. The Easter story is

such that it does not even allow Jesus to be a consoling memory or a past hero. Listen to the angel, he is not here, for he has been raised.

Indeed, he is not here because he is risen, his life continues and his life is not to be sealed off with a martyr's death. The suffering and disillusionment of Good Friday pales in comparison to the excitement of the Easter proclamation that Jesus is alive.

There is at Easter, a Jesus who awaits to be encountered-not only by his friends, but by you and me and every single person who desires a transformative new life in God. Just as the women encountered the risen Christ, Easter's question is, are you open to an encounter with the risen Christ?

I believe that the resurrection of Jesus was a seismic moment of transformation. It wasn't a resuscitation. It wasn't about someone waking up from coma or waking up from anesthesia. I once had surgery on my back but after the surgery, I wouldn't wake up. I wanted to continue my eternal sleep, but the medical staff had different plans for me. They proceeded to administer an electrical shock which obviously woke me up, otherwise I wouldn't be standing here. I don't consider that to be a resurrection.

For me, there is nothing mythical or incomprehensible about the resurrection of Christ. To make the claim that Jesus Christ resurrected from the dead is to say that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all creation and life. This is a unique truth claim which can only be accessible by faith-the kind of faith which transcends our most passionate reasoned analysis.

Leo Tolstoy was a Russian novelist, philosopher and moral thinker. He wrote a little book called Confessions. In the book he talks about his childhood in Russia and his understanding of faith and religion. Tolstoy reflects on how he experienced some existential crisis around the age of 50. Like his friends, he didn't believe in God.

He asked his friends this question, “What happens when you die?” His friends responded that, well, when you die, you just don’t exist anymore. According to them, there is no God, and when you die, you just stop existing. The sun will burn out, and everything will go away.

But Tolstoy wasn’t convinced, and so he asked this question, if that’s the case, why go on? Why should I keep writing books? If everything is meaningless, it means that in the end it doesn’t matter what I do. In the end nobody is going to be around to find out what happened. It doesn’t matter whether I am cruel, or whether I am good. In the end, whatever I do doesn’t make any difference. Everything is meaningless. Why even go on?

His friends accused him of over thinking-just enjoy your life, they said. But the insufficiency of their answer to just enjoy life, reminded him more of where the meaning of life lies. It lies with an encounter with the risen Christ.

This is the question that took him back to Christianity ‘What kind of view of the world is only livable if you don’t think about the implications of what I believe about the world?’

Tolstoy concluded that only faith can provide meaning to all our lives. And in so far as he was willing to open himself to encounter God in the risen Christ, he felt secure.

When last did you encounter God? When last did you open yourself up to encounter the risen Christ, even at the dark, scary moment of your life?

A few weeks ago, I shared with you that over the last several years, five of our parishioners have had successful transplants. And we give great thanks to God for the miracle of life. We must always remember that it often takes another life to have life.

Here's the truth, in my interactions with the parishioners, the one word that I heard over again is the gratitude for their new lease of life. Each moment felt like coming alive because they encountered the risen Christ.

Each story felt like being resurrected from the dead. It felt like their lives had been given a new definition, meaning and purpose.

Reason is, they used to stare in the abyss of life, they heard death knocking on their door, they heard their own footsteps amidst the noise of a cascading wall, and they walked in a dark valley like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. And then they encountered the risen Christ.

It isn't a small task to feel resurrected or to come alive, especially when you have been beaten by life. But know this, unless you haven't been dead before, confronted with your own mortality or found yourself in the abyss of life, you wouldn't understand what it means to come alive. Unless you have never been lost in the quagmire of depression, addiction and a broken life, you wouldn't understand what it means to be brought back to life.

Our Christian experience confirms that we can only come to know the risen Christ when we have experienced some kind of death, some disillusionment with ourselves and others, some loss, bereavement, sense of fear, hopelessness or meaninglessness and have not tried to anaesthetize against it.

Our deep challenges or Good Friday stories often reveal to us our poverty and our need of God. And the story of these five parishioners simply reminds me that God comes through for us, the resurrected Christ shows up in glory and assures us not to be afraid. Do not fear because he lives.

William Shakespeare in his play “As You Like It” wrote this ‘*Sweet are the uses of adversity.*’ What he meant was everything that happens to you—suffering, challenges and difficulties—could be used for your personal growth, it can produce something good.

When you encounter the risen Christ, you will find out that life and meaning resides at the very place where reason ends and faith takes over. And when you are enthralled by faith in the risen Christ, you rise, you fly, you soar like an eagle.

I once heard a story about a king who was given two eaglets. He gave them to one of the best bird trainers in the kingdom to raise them. These eaglets grew up to be mighty and strong. One of them would take off, fly majestically and then come back home. The other didn’t move an inch. It always sat on the branch. The king was disturbed and frustrated about the situation, and so he invited anyone who could help the bird fly, but no one could. One day, a poor farmer came to the palace and told the king that he could make the bird fly. Within two minutes, the bird was flying. The king was amazed. How did you do? Well, I just cut the branch on which it stood, and it flew because it had no option but to fly.

Many of us are sitting on our branches afraid to fly because to fly would mean to encounter the risen Christ. Many of us are comfortable where we are because to encounter God would mean to change the way we look at life and the world through the prism of justice, peace and love. Many of us are afraid of being resurrected ourselves because to be resurrected is to assume the responsibility of telling others about what it means to encounter the risen Christ and to come alive through his transforming grace.

Easter wouldn’t be worth our joy without an encounter with the risen Christ. And so, this Easter, the risen Christ is asking us to walk in the dark like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to the tomb, not to glorify the body of a dead martyr, but to surprise ourselves and the world with the good news that he is no longer in the tomb. He is alive, and because he is alive, we also have life. Happy Easter. **Amen.**