

Sermons at Christ Church

A rise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Easter Sunday

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You arise to shake the earth, open our graves and give us back the past, so that all that's been buried may be freed and forgiven, and our lives may return to you through the risen Christ. Amen.

Easter is about victory, it is about the glory of being human and the joy of being home. Easter raises lots of questions, did it really happen? What difference does it make if it did, and who cares? There are personal questions too, does my life amount to anything? Why did he have to die? Where are we heading, and is there any hope? Easter is about hope. Hope when we are at the end of our rope, hope when we cannot worship together because of the Corona Virus.

We don't need to be lost in the question of what we can or cannot believe, making Easter part of an intellectual exercise. Easter poses a much deeper question. The Easter question is, what dare I hope? There is a story about the kind of question we might face at the last judgement. The Messiah would ask, not so much about faithfulness in your dealings, but the real question would be, did you hope for the Messiah?

And so the question is, how alive is hope in you? What's holding you back? What's holding you prisoner? Why are you only half alive? Is there a dead thing inside you infesting your hoping? Do you feel numb inside because of some fear or obsession? Have you lost touch with your glory? The glory of being fully human.

In the midst of this pandemic, a difficult story out of New York City is the mass burial for those whose loved ones cannot claim their bodies. Easter's question then is, who am I really? Do I amount to anything? Yes, you do. Easter is about us, it is a love story and a victory for humanity. And the victory is this. We are not hated or abandoned, our faith is not an argument but a love affair.

On Easter morning something stupendous happened, and that re-forged human imagination, introducing us to a whole new way of being human. The resurrection changed everything, and is therefore a threat to our present arrangements. We are captivated by joy and secured in a victory that will not accept the cruelty and indifference of the world. The victory makes us subversives committed to fight and undermine all that will hurt and diminish human flourishing.

We need to recover this sense of victory, particularly today, in the face of a pandemic that has rendered us hopeless, defeated and diminished.

Early Christians understood that victory had to be human, even if it was beyond our powers, and only God can win it. And so they came to see that the glory of God is a human being fully alive. When we read the documents of the early Church, the theme for the resurrection was always about victory, triumph of life over death, triumph of justice over oppression, flourishing over diminishment.

That is why they loved old stories of Ezekiel's vision in the valley of dry bones, Jonah and the whale, Daniel's rescue from the lion's den, and above all the deliverance from slavery in Egypt. They saw these as resurrection stories which helped them have hope in a world that was cruel and difficult.

Easter, if you like, asks some strange questions, what whale has swallowed you? What savage beast terrifies you? What burning ordeal awakens you? What prison suffocates you? Which virus or illness threatens you? What kind of thing diminishes you, your struggle to be perfect, your struggle to be ambitious? So, talk of wild beasts and bellies of whales might seem quaint but think about your ordinary experience-they are common. These diminishments tempt you to sell yourself short.

One great example of the victory of the resurrection at the heart of our experience is the story of Judith Hearn in Brian Moore's novel the *'Lonely Passion of Judith Hearn*. The novel tells a story about Judith's resurrection. Judith is a very gifted, respected teacher and attractive. But she had one problem-she's getting older, unmarried and has no children. She's lonely and feels trapped in the fiery furnace of failure. All that she has, talents, friends and family begin to count for nothing. She wants a husband and children, and she's restless and desperate. She meets a man and falls in love. He isn't interested in her romantically but he's under the impression that she has money, and thinks they might open a restaurant together. But Judith, desperate to get out to the fiery furnace of her sense of failure, takes the initiative and proposes marriage. He rejects her offer and tells her his real intentions.

The rejection is the final straw. She snaps and goes on an alcoholic binge. There's a dramatic scene where she ends up in church cussing God and trying to touch the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle.

She's hospitalized and eventually recovers. Just before she leaves the hospital, the man returns with a dozen roses, telling her he's been wrong all along and proposes marriage.

Judith rejects his proposal. Her response to him lays out the dynamic of the Easter promise—a pattern of suffering, death and transformation. It is the heart of the human story. Judith hands the roses back, and tells the gentleman, thanks but no thanks. I am not interested in marrying you. And to tell you why, I need to tell you a story.

When you are a little girl, you dream of the perfect life you will have, grow up and have a beautiful body, meet a perfect man, marry him, have wonderful children, live in a wonderful home in a wonderful neighborhood and have wonderful friends. But as you get older and the dream doesn't happen, you begin to revise downwards. You scale down your expectations and begin to look for someone to marry who doesn't have to be so perfect until you get to be like I was—where unconsciously you get so desperate, you'd marry anyone.

Well, I learned something, by losing myself, and re-finding myself, I learned that if I receive the spirit for who I am, it doesn't matter whether I am married or not, I can be happy either way. My happiness doesn't depend on somebody outside of me, but upon being at peace with what is inside of me. Human wholeness might be more useful to God than any exhausting goodness.

Fact is, you learn something vital by losing yourself and then re-finding yourself. You learn to receive the spirit for who you truly are. How glorious to see that we are loved and accepted for who we are. So often, we like Judith, come to grief when we try to live our lives with someone else's spirit, we get stuck either in the valley among dry bones or in the belly of the whale, struggle in the lion's den or enslaved in the Egypt of our fears. But that shouldn't be the case for humans made for God's glory. Remember, becoming fully human is the highest honor we can pay to the risen Christ who showed us how.

So, this Easter, allow your life to be a resurrection victory—a way out of the prison in which you are trapped into a new kind of life. This Easter, allow your heart and mind to be liberated from trusting the things that do not count in the end.

Wherever you are, my prayer for you this Easter morning is that you would be delighted and proud to be a human capable of watching grace in action, a human capable in our capacity to enjoy each other, and a human capable of protesting on behalf of those who're left behind.

Remember, Easter invites you to a dance, the dance of love, the dance of caring, the dance of making music, the dance of friendship, the dance of justice, the dance of God's daring hospitality, the dance of hope—for which the world longs. If you feel unqualified to be a part of the dance, then you know you are in the right place.

Easter invites us into a community which nourishes us in this new vision of human victory. So, what whale has swallowed you? What savage beast terrifies you? What burning ordeal awakes you? What prison suffocates you? Which virus or illness threatens you? Easter is about human victory and flourishing. And so it is time to come out and come home. As far away as you may be, this is home-your victory center. Welcome. Amen.