

On Eagle's Wings

Epistle: Acts 10:34-43

Gospel: John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday

Alleluia, Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia

Don't you just love it when, after four months in cold storage, energy comes pouring out of the ground into every blade of grass, every flower bud and every tree in sight. Soon the swallows will join the robins, as the days lengthen and the sun fills the sky; and all around you can feel the joy of spring. Not only that, with vaccines rolling out there is new hope for release from lock-downs, masks and zoom.

But suppose, just for a moment that April had never come. Suppose the earth had somehow been knocked out of orbit and was heading further out into space. Suppose we were to remain gripped forever in the cold darkness of winter. Not only would that be an awful prospect, but according to St. Paul, it's a good analogy for human affairs without Easter. Putting all his Easter eggs into one basket Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile" (1 Cor. 1 5:17).

And this is what we come face to face with today: the central claim at the heart of Christian faith - that God has raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. Because of this there is nothing in the world – not evil, not cruelty, not illness, not loss, not even death, that can ever be the last word for us. Ours is an audacious faith, and it always has been.

Do you find the Easter story hard to believe? If you do you are in good company. For one thing, the world today looks much more like Good Friday than Easter. It certainly does in the neighbourhood of Clapham Common, after the abduction and murder of an innocent young woman. It does in the streets of Myanmar, in Belarus, Yemen and other places. It continues in hospitals and intensive care units throughout the world. And on a more mundane level, individual pain and loss are an inevitable part of all of our lives. By all appearances, ours is a Good Friday world.

But for many, Easter is hard to believe for more fundamental reasons. The whole idea goes against our understanding that death is final. That is what physics, biology, chemistry and too often personal experience tells us. Pain is real, but love is little more than a feeling, a survival mechanism. Life is but a few years to enjoy before we die.

The dark shadow of death is real, but the light of this Easter morning brings another message. Yes, the body may die, hopes may fade, but love never

dies – with God and ultimately never with us. So the Easter message is that all of Christ’s goodness that we saw beaten and hung on a cross, is once again alive, and will be through eternity. Christ is alive today, working to bring about our own resurrection from all the forces that corrupt life and ravage the earth.

But, you may ask, “Can you prove it”? To which I am quite happy to say no, God will not supply cast iron evidence, any more than he will restrict our freedom to make our own decisions. As so often in this life, - to believe or not to believe - the choice is ours.

But while the resurrection cannot be proven, it can be known, and, experienced. I have never seen a person rise from the dead, but I have seen new life rise out of trauma and tragedy, hope emerge from despair, faith from doubt. That is what the world witnessed following the first Easter, as a group of frightened and dispirited disciples rose from the wreckage of the crucifixion to become ten times the people they had been, bursting with enthusiasm, so “afame with faith and free”, ready to gladly live and bravely die for their experience of the living Lord. In fact, had there been no resurrection of Christ, there would have been no gospels, no epistles, no New Testament, no Christian church.

I would like to share with you a resurrection story which I heard several years ago. As you may know from recent news stories, in the western United States, wildfires are a regular and dangerous occurrence. Among the many firefighters are teams of tough and courageous professionals known as “Smoke Jumpers”, who parachute from aircraft into remote areas to deal with the fires. One such smoke jumper told of a time when she parachuted into one of the National Forests in California. The area had already been “damped down”, and her job was to snuff out any smoldering embers. As she approached what had once been a beautiful mountain oak tree and was now nothing more than a burned out pole, she saw a large blackened mass resting at its base. She had no idea what it was, so she went over and gently poked it with the tip of her shovel. As she did, the outside blackened layers peeled off and inside the mass she found three live baby eaglets. With further probing she realized that the blackened mass at the base of the tree was the remains of a large female bald eagle. She had apparently stretched out her wings to cover and protect her babies from the raging inferno that had passed through that part of the forest. Either from a raptor’s instinct or a mother’s undying love for her children she had given her life that they might survive and live to one day soar, graceful and free, high above the trees as she had once done.

The smoke jumper knelt down, picked up the eaglets and gently placed them in her back pack. They were taken to a sanctuary where they were raised to adulthood and released back into the wild, not far from where they had been

found. The smoke jumper concluded her story: “Whenever I am in the forest now and see an eagle gracefully soaring, wings outstretched, catching the thermal currents high above the tree tops, I am reminded of the miracle of the resurrection, of love, sacrifice and new life. In my own way”, she said, “I have experience the resurrection”.

I am sure that there are many such resurrection stories among all of you here today, just as I am sure that the day will come when people will emerge from the wreckage of covid 19, to a resurrection made possible through the hard work and sacrifice of scientists, doctors, nurses and other workers, many of whom have given their lives that others may rise up with wings like eagles, giving thanks to God for health, freedom and new life.

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The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia

Martha Taft Golden
St. Mary’s, Holmbury
and St. John's, Wotton
4th April 2021

“The Parable of the Smoke Jumper” was taken from an Easter sermon by Bishop John Chane, Washington National Cathedral, 2010.