

“Beyond Our Imagination”

Matthew 28:1-10

Rev. Rob MacDougall

4/24/11

Happy Easter morning to all of you and to all the world. Today we celebrate again the strange and miraculous gift of the resurrection. This is the greatest of all gifts, the divine act that has changed the world and is changing our lives. This is the heart of our faith, the event that makes the transformation of the world possible. It is Easter and we are proclaiming that life is stronger than death, love is stronger than fear, truth is stronger than lies, peace is stronger than violence, forgiveness is stronger than hate.

Today, right now, we raise our voices in song, we shout our alleluias, we tell the miraculous story and we believe without hesitation that God loves and frees us to love one another.

Easter, the resurrection, the gift of life and love are eternal. This day happened some two thousand years ago and has been proclaimed to every generation since then. Easter is for the young, old and everyone in between, it is for every race, every income group, male and female, gay and straight, baby boomers, gen-xers, millenniums and all who are yet to come.

I have been reading Matthew’s Easter account over and over these past few weeks. Each time I read it, it seems more simple. The two Marys walk down the dusty road to the cemetery and when they get there the ground rumbles like it did in Japan, and they find that Jesus’ tomb is open.

Sitting on it were some celestial beings dressed in bright white robes. These angels tell the women not to be afraid, the body of Jesus which they came to see is gone, he is risen. Then the angel tells the women to go to the disciples, tell them what they have seen and that Jesus will meet them back in their familiar place in Galilee. On the way to tell the disciples the women bump into Jesus and he says the same thing the angel said to them.

Even though Matthew adds the earthquake, the other gospels forgot to include it, the story is still very simple. There’s nothing about what actually happened to Jesus in the tomb, nothing about God and the angels orchestrating these events, there weren’t any “on the scene reporters” or legions of followers with cameras. It was, in so many ways, a low tech, unspectacular simple event. The body of a murdered man was not in the grave where it had been laid, two women speak to a stranger who says the man is risen-

whatever that means – the women bump into the risen man on the road, and the world has never been the same.

Without fanfare, social networks, vast sums of money, presidents or kings something globally transformative happened. It wasn't a scientific, economic, political or medical breakthrough – it was a spiritual, transcendent miracle that transforms the ways of the world. The resurrection of Jesus is a “heart and soul event” – it didn't feed the hungry but has caused people to be fed ever since, it didn't create a vaccine but it has caused people to be healed ever since, it didn't end the production of weapons but it has caused weapons to be put down ever since, it didn't write legislation but it has caused societies to care for their people ever since.

Aristotle had it right when he wrote: “Educating one's mind without educating one's heart is no education at all.”

I am a firm believer in the education of the mind and all that can be brought about through knowledge, but it is even more clear to me that educating our hearts and freeing our spirits is absolutely necessary for creation and people to flourish. Dag Hammarskjold wrote: “God does not die on the day we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.”

On Easter we are being illumined by a wonder whose source is beyond all reason. Today is not a reasonable day, it is not a day of being convinced, it is a culmination, a celebration, an exclamation point. The rest of our Bible stories and the teachings of our faith reveal the day-to-day elements of God's kingdom, on Easter the truth and fullness of God's kingdom is simply proclaimed. Love is true, life is true, peace is true, forgiveness is true, God's ways are true.

We have a most difficult time trusting what seems unreasonably true.

Not so long ago I watched a French film called “Of God's and Men”. The film tells the true story of a group of French brothers who live in a small monastery in Algeria. The monastery was located in a town that was at the cross roads between the Algerian army and guerilla group of freedom fighters.

The brothers were faced with the terrible decision of whether they should stay or leave. They were in danger from both military groups, but they knew that their presence and care for the people of the town provided the people with some level of safety and peace.

The movie focused on each of the brother's struggles to answer the question, "Was Jesus telling the truth? Was life really about love, peace, sacrifice and serving? Or was it about safety, fear, longevity, comfort and being reasonable?" The brothers prayed and worshipped daily together. As one watches these men of faith struggle you can't help but wonder, if they didn't trust that Jesus was telling the truth, who could?

Each man reached his decision in his own way, but the question they each needed to answer was "Do I trust what Jesus proclaimed as the truth?"

It would ruin the film if I told you what happened, but what I can say is that their struggle to decide was beautiful, human and inspiring, and it hinged on the value of the people's lives with whom they lived.

Easter morning is not so much about what life in eternity will be, it's really about whether we trust today's proclamation enough to live as Easter people. When we call Jesus Savior, it isn't so much that we are saved from all the trials of this world, but rather, we are saved for the gifts of life and love. To be saved doesn't separate us out from others, it moves us into deeper relationships and deeper into the whole human family.

The miracle of the resurrection is that Jesus comes back to life, it isn't that he disappears. With all the world did to him, including putting him to death, the world could not keep him from living. Jesus' story is a testament of life. It is the event that is to illumine all else that takes place in the world. It demands that we ask of each moment, what is life affirming here? Which is far different from asking questions like – how can we control what happens here? Or how can I work this situation to my advantage? Or how can we get rid of the people we call our enemies?

Easter takes us beyond what seems reasonable, even beyond what we imagine would be better. Easter transforms us from people who are constantly considering the ways of death, to people who are captured by the ways of life.

In his book, "The Dog Says How", the playwright and storyteller Kevin Kling describes the evolution of his prayer life. Kling said in his early years his prayers were mostly about what he wanted God to do for him or get for him. At one point he described an elaborate plan whereby he would pray to God for a squirrel monkey he had seen in the back of a Spiderman comic. He "prayed to God to ask Jesus to tell Santa about the squirrel monkey, hoping with all his heart that one of the three would take up his case." He goes on to tell of other prayers he offers up to get him out of bad situations, till finally he ends up in a

horrible motorcycle accident where he is hospitalized for over six weeks. During those weeks he eats little, he is on pain medications and one of his arms is permanently disabled.

When he is finally released from the hospital he has no interest in food because his taste buds have been anesthetized for so long and nothing tastes good. But when his girlfriend makes him eat an apple that she claims has wonderful taste he takes a bite and proclaims that the apple is the most wonderful fruit he's ever eaten. His taste buds had come back to life and he was astounded by the fruit. Spontaneously he prayed out loud – "thank you God!" and that has been his prayer ever since. He no longer asks for spider monkeys or to be extricated from difficult situations, now he just offers prayers of gratitude for the amazing gifts of life.

In this little story Kling describes the Easter transformation. He moves from focusing on what he doesn't have, to what he does; he moves from wanting a means of escape, to the joy of partaking; he moves from the ways of anxiety, to the ways of life.

Today we celebrate the Easter transformation. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and the power of life to overcome death. And we celebrate that we are Easter people, people who trust the proclamation that love is greater than fear, truth is greater than lies, abundance is greater than scarcity, peace is great than violence.

May the Easter transformation that illumines our hearts, minds, bodies and spirit this morning give light to all our days.