Homily for Easter Day

S. Stephen’s, Providence,

April 4, 2021

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Alleluia. Christ is risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

Happy Easter to all of you this morning.

This is the day the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This is indeed a joyous day,

made all the more so by the fact that none of us were gathered in this building

this time last year.

I remarked in my notes to the parish over the weekend

that in many ways,

we experienced an Easter last year

that was more akin to the first Easter.

We are told of disciples huddling inside of their homes for fear of death,

unsure what the events unfolding around them all mean.

That was, without a doubt, the state many of us found ourselves in a year ago.

And yet the joy of Easter could not be contained or diminished even then.

The truth and the fact of the Resurrection were unchanged,

whether we gathered together or not.

And that would have been the case this year as well.

But by the grace of God, here we are this morning.

Thanks be to God.

There is a beloved Easter hymn that begins

“That Easter day with joy was bright,” – and it was,

but the Gospel stories all begin very early –

in fact, John goes out of the way to tell us it is still dark out

when Mary Magdalene sets out to go to Jesus’ tomb.

This part of the Resurrection story has always resonated with me.

This is one of my favorite times of day.

I am usually up around 5:00 most mornings,

sometimes a little earlier, sometimes later –

but I love the quietness and the stillness.

I love that quality of light in the sky

that exists before the first rays of the sun have actually begun to touch anything.

The only thing that hangs in the air is the sound of birds chirping away,

their songs likewise beginning in the dark and heralding the dawn.

And so, I can easily imagine the light and the air and the sounds

as Mary Magdalene set out on foot to go to the tomb,

the birds in their chirping already proclaiming the great Resurrection

which has taken place,

but that Mary and the rest of humanity has yet to discover.

It is hard to know exactly what is in Mary’s heart and in her head:

is she still racked with grief?

Is she still traumatized and in some state of shock

from the events of two days prior?

Is she simply trying to stay busy with a task

because as long as she has something to do,

she can avoid being overcome with her grief?

The answer to all these questions is yes.

Awaking in the morning there would be a brief moment

when she might not remember all that had happened.

And then after a few seconds it would all come flooding back –

and the horror and realization that it was not a dream – that it was all very real.

Perhaps that state of numb bewilderment

can help us appreciate what next unfolds in the story.

There is essentially a frantic series of foot races back and forth

between the tomb and where the disciples are staying.

Upon seeing the stone rolled away and the grave laying there empty,

she runs and tells the other disciples.

They in turn run and in various intervals all take turns looking into the tomb

to try and process and understand what is happening.

The obvious explanation, of course, is that someone has stolen his body.

However, something doesn’t add up.

Each time that the disciples look into the tomb,

John’s Gospel gives us that detail about the grave clothes which remain.

In fact, they are in two separate piles, having been neatly rolled up.

What kind of grave robber leaves behind something of this kind of value?

And what kind of grave robber takes the time to stop and neatly fold linens

that they had no intention of taking?

And so, while the other disciples return to where they’re staying,

Mary Magdalene remains at the tomb weeping,

as she tries to make sense of this bad dream – this nightmare that won’t end.

She stands there, persisting in her state of grief and confusion.

As John’s Resurrection account unfolds,

the suspense and the power come not through a dramatic fanfare

heralding Jesus’ resurrection,

but from our waiting for Mary Magdalene to realize through her tears

that the very person she is looking for will be right in front of her.

As she looks into the tomb again,

this time there are angels in white,

and she repeats her panicked line when asked why she is weeping,

“They have taken my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.”

Now I know from experience, as do you,

that when we are panicked or grief stricken, we can become singularly focused –

myopic to the point of absurdity.

She can think of nothing else but recovering his body.

She hasn’t even had time to process the fact that there are angels

sitting in front of her when she turns around

and there is who appears to be the gardener.

Perhaps he can help her. Maybe he saw something.

Maybe he knows where they have taken Jesus.

Of course, you and I know already that this is Jesus –

again, we wait for Mary Magdalene to come out of her grief and anxiety,

and then it happens:

“Mary.” He says her name.

“My sheep know my voice,” John’s Gospel tells us.

“They know me, and I know them.” “Mary.”

And then she understands – and she believes.

Naturally, she goes to embrace him –

this beloved companion who is not dead but is alive!

But Jesus tells her to not hold on to him.

Though there is a physical body before her,

and it is the Risen Jesus, in the flesh,

he is no longer the Jesus she knew before.

Resurrection is not the same as resuscitation;

it is not a return to things as they were.

Instead, for John’s Gospel,

the Resurrection marks the beginning of Jesus’ ascent to the Father,

his earthly ministry being thus concluded.

Why does any of this matter?

Why does it matter if Mary can hold on to Jesus or not?

Because Resurrection is not Resuscitation –

it is not going back to the way things were, or simply putting broken things back:

Resurrection is new life,

which requires a new way of living –

because once we have experienced the Truth and the power of the Resurrection,

we cannot simply be content to be the same:

we will be empowered and called upon to live differently, to love boldly,

and it will ask us to share this message of Risen Life with others.

If you were here on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday,

Fr. Bill Locke, our preacher at those services,

framed our Holy Week liturgies with the theme of God’s invitation.

On Maundy Thursday, there is an invitation to intimacy with God.

To be known and loved, rough spots and all, by a God who thinks nothing

of stripping down and washing feet.

On Good Friday, there was the invitation to let our sins be nailed to the Cross

with Christ –

to let God take our pain and brokenness into his own pain and suffering,

and to let them go – to let those places of death do just that: die.

Today, I would say to you

that there is an invitation that comes with the Resurrection –

or more specifically, an invitation that resides within the moment

when we are claimed by the truth of the Resurrection.

Having been known by God, and having let God see our ugliest parts,

and letting them be nailed to the Cross,

today, the invitation is this: Can we step out of the tomb with Christ?

Can we step into the brightness of the Resurrection light?

The shrouds which wrapped us in death –

can we likewise leave them in the tomb?

You may say this is a question with an obvious answer: Yes.

Of course we would choose life and light – who wouldn’t?

Well, as I said a moment ago,

things can’t go back to the way they were before – and that can be scary.

But Resurrection is not resuscitation.

Mary wants to hold on to the Jesus that she knew –

but having beheld the truth of his Resurrection,

she must now prepare for a new way of relating to Jesus,

and of being in the world.

The Jesus of Nazareth she knew as the man from Galilee

who cured her of her demons

will no longer be with her to talk, eat, and laugh with.

He will be absent, even as he remains present with her in a new way.

She will be called upon to proclaim this truth to the other disciples,

and they in turn will all be compelled to tell all who will have ears to listen.

It will come with risk and danger,

even as it brings great joy and peace.

As we have spent the better part of a year in fear and uncertainty,

with a promise of “normalcy” somewhere on the horizon,

at some point we will likewise be confronted with the choice to leave the comfort

and odd security of what he have known in the past year.

All the things which seemed odd or frustrating at the beginning of this pandemic

now feel routine and oddly comforting.

As strange as it felt the first time going into the grocery store wearing a mask,

now it would seem terrifying to do so without one.

The pandemic has changed the way we interact, and the way we live our lives,

and – especially for us gathered here, the way we do church.

Even though part of what feeds me as a priest is, paradoxically, feeding you –

in Word and Sacrament –

the shutting of our doors

and the routine of Sunday and weekday worship being simply me,

one or two others, and an iPhone

became normal.

Preaching to an imagined audience on the other side of an iPad

was at one time awkward and difficult –

no reactions, no laughter, no emotional energy in the room.

And then it felt normal.

In some ways, it became easier.

Less to do, less to worry about.

But it is not the way things are supposed to be,

and it’s not the way they will stay for ever.

When the time comes,

and when it becomes safe to do so,

we will be called to leave the odd security of this past year.

But Resurrection is not resuscitation.

When we start to return to “normalcy,”

or are told it is safe to resume certain activities and practices,

it will not be – it cannot be – just a return to things as they were before.

As a church, and as faithful followers of Christ,

we will be asked to live anew in the light of Resurrection,

to look for areas of new growth, and for new ways of ministering,

new plots of fertile ground for sharing the Good News that we celebrate today.

In our own lives, the invitation also stands:

having laid our sins at the foot of the Cross,

and having died with Christ only to be raised to new life,

can we take that step into the fullness of Resurrection light?

Can we leave the death shrouds behind in the tomb?

Can we live lives that are more than just emptied or devoid of sin

and whatever brokenness we left behind,

but lives that are transformed and imbued with the truth of the Resurrection?

Do not hold on to me, Jesus tells Mary.

He is risen, but he is also no longer the earthly Jesus she knew.

Perhaps her joy was tinged with sadness for a moment there.

But what he was saying and offering in that moment

was full of even more joy and hope than she could imagine.

Everything he had taught and foretold had been ratified by his death

and his rising.

Her eyes, along with the other disciples,

would now be opened to understand the Scriptures,

and they would have a mission which would take them far beyond Jerusalem

and Galilee.

They didn’t just return to the normalcy of before.

Having been claimed by the truth of the Resurrection,

they were compelled to share this truth with others,

and it was a message which would lead them to the ends of the known world;

and it would get them killed.

But there is no going back once we have beheld the Risen Jesus –

he who is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and none other.

Like Mary Magdalene, may we today also proclaim, “I have seen the Lord.”

To him be honor, power, glory, and praise, now and for evermore.

Alleluia. Christ is risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!* Amen.