

Easter Sunday
April 8, 2007

Wandering in to New Life

The first thing I want to say is Welcome. Welcome to all of you who have come. Welcome to all of you who may have wandered here for the first time. Welcome to our day of celebration. I remember the first Sunday I wandered back into Church as an adult. I had been away from religion for over a decade but it felt much longer than that because it was the decade during which I had left my parents' house, gone to college, grown up, made mistakes and done all that. During that time, I had turned from early faith to atheism. And then, a visit to the atheistic Soviet Union and a near death experience with a rolling car rocked my world. Not knowing where to turn, I decided it could do no harm to try church. So one Sunday in late August, very early in the morning, while my husband slept, I crept back.

I was amazed at what I encountered there. The Church I chose to return to, the Episcopal Church, was very different than the puritan based church in which I had been raised. Indeed, it would not be an understatement to say that on that day it was the strangest place I had been in years and I had been some pretty strange places. It was dazzling in the early morning sunlight. It was filled with people in white, one of whom was carrying a brass cross in procession and as the sunlight bounced through the windows and off that cross, I was nearly blinded by it. (In my childhood church no one dressed in white robes and absolutely no one processed.) And as they came down the aisle they were all carrying on like idiots about someone rising from the dead and eternal life and they were singing "Alleluia!" Although the joy of all these people was infectious, I couldn't believe a word of what they said and sang. Like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James in Luke's Gospel, "these words seemed to me an idle tale. If, like Peter, I was amazed at what people could convince themselves to be true, I went home perplexed indeed. How could all these seemingly intelligent people believe in something as absurd as Jesus coming back from the dead? What was this place called Church anyway?

Resurrection was not something that had been particularly emphasized in the Church I grew up in. During the 1950's and '60's, the resurrection was kind of an embarrassment, an affront to the scientific truth in which dead people stayed dead and we learned to deal with our grief. New life was a pretty metaphor, flowers coming up in the spring, baby chicks, bunnies hopping, that sort of thing. Even more, resurrection was certainly not the most important thing about Jesus. Our Jesus was the thinking man's Jesus, (and we were all men in those days) important because he did good works and as church goers we were expected to do good works too. That was why we went to church, because we were the superior kind of people who helped others. I remember as a little girl being told it was my duty to give my stuffed animals to the poor. I remember as a teenager visiting old ladies and being bewildered by the difference in our ages and experience, not knowing quite what to say to these sweet, but slow, beings. My church gave me tasks, which I performed faithfully, but I never had any sense why these tasks are important, no sense that a gift from me might literally be a gift of New Life, indeed, no sense that New Life was even the point. During the 1960's as the world around me fell apart, I hungered for a miracle, but everyone in church during those days was embarrassed by signs, wonders and miracles. My Church practiced a lot of Lent and very little Easter.

Which was why I was amazed to return to Church and find all these people celebrating Easter in the middle of August. New Life was the whole point of everything, and for that reason alone, I decided that even though this place perplexed me, I would go back. I would hang around at least long enough to see if new life, even for me, might be possible. I suppose the result of that day 25 years ago now, is obvious today, but it sure wasn't then.

That being said, none of this, the joy of churchgoers, the return of spring, the death and resurrection of caterpillars into butterflies usually isn't enough to convince a hardened skeptic of the truth of Easter. We all know that the flowers will fade, the butterflies, too, will die, the grass will turn brown in the summer, the birds will silence their nesting songs. We all know that the usual things will continue to happen; Easter will not end my mother's illness or my best friend's alcoholism or the estrangement I feel from my first cousin. Easter will not change the headlines I see in the paper each day. It will not turn everything that was wrong into right. But it might, if I'm lucky, change me.

And that's only one of the reasons I so like Luke's account of the Resurrection. It's not full of unbelievable miracles when I'm just getting my toes wet at Church. The women don't see an empty tomb and jump to the conclusion that Jesus is alive and will meet them on the road to Galilee. Though they do as they are told and report the empty tomb to the other disciples, they don't especially believe the men in dazzling clothes. Indeed, they are terrified by them. And Peter, who goes to check things out, may be amazed at the empty tomb and the wrappings, but he doesn't see a body, or, for that matter, a resurrected Lord, and when he does, it happens offstage.

This Easter does not begin in triumph, it begins with Nothing at All. It encourages me to ask hard questions. It reminds me that a healthy life of faith has nothing at all to do with certainty. A healthy life of faith has everything to do with doubt. Many people think that to walk through the doors of the Church of the Redeemer amounts to a great affirmation of belief. It doesn't. If my own experience is at all typical it's much more like standing at the ticket counter at the airport and checking my baggage for a journey to a place I've never been before. I am interested enough to book a ticket, but beyond that, I'm not sure. Friends may have recommended the place, but for all I know, my experience of it will be totally different. We're all your fellow passengers on that mysterious journey. There's a great crew: Jesus, Moses, and because around here we're very interfaith, sometimes Buddha takes the controls and Mohammed has even been sighted on the navigation deck. But none of us know exactly where we'll be when we land; all that we have been given is the promise of a life that will be wonderful beyond our wildest dreams and a whole bunch of wonderful people with whom to share the trip and who, with time, will become best friends.

And that's the second thing I love about Luke's Easter story. The people. Jesus' story is all about friends, old and new. In Luke, Jesus doesn't appear first to his old friends, he makes new ones. In Luke's Gospel, the first people to encounter the risen Jesus are two obscure people who are taking a walk to Emmaus and pondering all the terrible things that had gone on in Jerusalem over the past three days. If we were staying here all day as we certainly would have in the ancient Church, we would turn to the second part of Luke's Easter story in the early evening, which is when the events on the Road to Emmaus occurred.

In Luke, Jesus first appears to someone named Cleopas and Cleopas' friend, who is never named. They are ordinary people and neither of them dreams for a moment that their new traveling companion might in fact be Jesus. That raises an extremely important thing about the resurrection. No one recognizes Jesus when he returns. It suggests that the Jesus who returned was a very different being than the one who left, that the true life after death is not a resuscitated body, but an entirely new one. It also suggests, since the second disciple is not named, that the second disciple to see this new being who has never yet been seen, might be one of us.

We are given this glimpse of things to come on Good Friday, for new life is not born with the old one ending. That's just the way of birth and transformation. At the moment Jesus dies, or so the story says, the veil of the Temple is torn. The veil was that part of the Temple that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest. Only the purest people could ever see what was in there. Only the pure could see God. But when the veil was torn, all of us were given a sudden and fleeting glance of the world beyond.

That is what Easter is. A glimpse. A glimpse past pain, doubt and death, to a moment when all is made right with the world, a beautiful destination where, all the stress and the strain finally makes sense, is gathered into meaning and peace, and in the words of the Prayer Book:

Give rest, O Christ, to your servants with your saints,
where sorrow and pain are no more,
neither sighing, but life everlasting.

You only are immortal, the creator and maker of mankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. For so did you ordain when you created me, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

It's alleluia time, friends. Thank you for joining us on the journey. AMEN.