

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
Easter Sunday- April 12, 2020
Given online at St. Mark's, Bridgewater

Jeremiah 31: 1-6; Psalm 118; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18
Christos Anesti! Alethos Anesti!

'For as yet they did not understand...' †

If you tried to tell me this time last year that I would be holding Easter services via the Internet, I'd have said you were crazy! I have a certain dislike for social media and always consider computer use to be work not fun. Even more, I love the beauty of the Triduum liturgies from Maundy Thursday through the Easter Vigil... why change that? I would have questioned how we could possibly celebrate Easter without being together. And yet, this year, we've found a different way of being together. Its almost surreal. And I think its safe to say this is an Easter we will never forget.

I've been spending an inordinate amount of time (at least for me) thinking about my family and looking at pictures this week. Some of those old photos are remarkable not just that my brothers and I have lost most of our hair, but that about 50% of the people in those early pictures are no longer walking this earth... both of my parents and my sister passed away long ago. And that's part of life.

Still, the crisis of the past few weeks has brought me to a dark place, one of loneliness and fear. I don't need to tell any of you that life is hard and even cruel. That fact seems to have really hit home during these past weeks of the COVID 19 pandemic (going through the statistics of people sick, on ventilators, and dead). There are days I feel like I am living in a dream! It's an almost incomprehensible time, one I would never have imagined just a year ago.

Sometimes real life is almost unbelievable... not unlike the fantastic stories of Jesus' resurrection. For these stories require great faith to understand, particularly during times of doubt. This week I found the words from John's Gospel helpful: "For as yet they did not understand."

Some stories are just too weird... Many years ago, just after I was ordained, I found myself leading Easter services alone for the first time at Trinity Church in Torrington. It happened to be for the Children's service (meant for infants-in-arms, toddlers, and preschoolers), and I asked them what Easter was all about: 'What do we celebrate at Easter?'

And one precocious boy jumped up and said: "Easter is when the rock over the tomb was rolled away and Jesus was freed!" ...☺

"You see," he continued, "the Easter Bunny rolled away the stone and let the resurrected Jesus out!" My response was cautious: 'Remember the Gospel stories, they say it might

have been an angel, or a man in dazzling white at the tomb...' "Nope," he insisted, "It was the Easter Bunny... you see they just didn't recognize him... they didn't know him, because they hadn't found the eggs yet!" As I stood there in front of him, with all the parents smirking at me, I must have looked helpless, because he quickly added, "Everyone knows that the Easter egg hunt comes *after* we see Jesus in Church! ... They had to see Jesus, *then* go find the eggs... Father, haven't you ever done this before?"

A fantastic story... and almost theologically sound... but still an incredible tale! Not unlike the one the first disciples heard. Depending upon which Gospel version you hear, there may have been a young man, or two dazzling men, or angels. Regardless, there was certainly something incredible about the discovery that first Easter morning. Sometimes stories are just too weird to take seriously, and it depends upon the witnesses, upon the credibility of the ones who are telling it. In Luke's version, we are told, "These words seemed to them an idle tale.' The Greek word here for 'idle,' is *le'ros* (nonsense), and it usually refers to a person who is suffering from delirium. The disciples thought the storytellers were crazy.

Grief and fear can do that... they can bring doubt to the forefront, even though faith once seemed so strong.

The story we heard today from John's Gospel is very different from that in the other Synoptic Gospels. Notice that Mary Magdalene is not with other women, but all alone in her grief; she is going to sit by Jesus' grave early before the sunrise, to weep and mourn. When she discovers what she assumes to be the work of grave robbers (very common in that day), she runs to seek consolation from the disciples... but when they return to discover the empty tomb, they are silent and we are told that the men "returned to their homes," leaving Mary alone once again.

As I read over this passage this week, I could not help but consider how these closest disciples of Jesus were scattered, isolated in their own homes. I could not help but feel the sadness and the loneliness Mary must have felt on that day, feelings vividly present among all of us today! Even though the disciples were warned earlier in this same Gospel, "you will have pain, but it will turn into joy," in their grief, "as yet they did not understand."

Then comes a fantastic twist... the angels and the Risen Jesus appear and Mary sees Jesus, though she does not recognize him! Perhaps her own fear and grief get in the way at first. Once she understands and reaches to "hold onto him," she is told that things are different. 'Do not hold onto me... Do not cling to what was, to what used to be..."

This remarkable story, the story of the resurrection, is about change and transformation. Out of human brokenness comes human fulfillment! He who was dead is alive again! And yet, Jesus is not the same as he was... and neither are we.

We know through faith that Jesus continues to reveal himself to us, in ways that are just as fantastic and crazy. Consider how Christ is revealing himself today...

Does he come in the form of those who are suffering from illness during this present pandemic? Is he there in the homeless, the outcast, those on the edge of our societies? Is he present in those that work on the medical front lines caring for those severely ill and dying? Is revealing himself in the first responders that continue to work in our communities despite their decreasing numbers?

Yes, he is... and he's present with those who feel lonely and forgotten. He is there with those who find themselves furloughed and unemployed. He is there in the many children and their parents who struggle to home school. He's present in those who work at grocery stores and those who deliver cooked food and supplies to so many who are stuck at home. He is present, now! ... in the helpers, in those who show his love.

Despite what seem to be some of the worst events in our life, notice how Christ has brought something good.

Yes, some stories are just too weird to take seriously... but not this story! And now we are the witnesses to Easter, called to share a beautiful, incredible, unbelievable story. We are witnesses to the truth that out of suffering, comes peace... out of crucifixion, comes glory... out of death, comes new life!

Allow this Easter to be one that is unforgettable. Recognize how very different it is, and recognize how different we are. Yes, eventually one day we will be able to meet together again side by side in worship, but until then, embrace this time as proof that our God is able to take something horrible and transform it into something good. Proclaim, in the words of the Psalmist, "I shall not die, but I shall live" (Psalm 118.17). I shall live in Christ and NOTHING—no power in heaven or on earth—can ever change that!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! †