

Liturgy of the Word:

Genesis 1:1-2:4a [The Story of Creation];
Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18, 8:6-18, 9:8-13 [The Flood];
Genesis 22:1-18 [Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac];
Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21 [Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea];
Isaiah 55:1-11 [Salvation offered freely to all];
Baruch 3:9-15, 3:32-4:4 or Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6 [Learn wisdom and live];
Ezekiel 36:24-28 [A new heart and a new spirit];
Ezekiel 37:1-14 [The valley of dry bones];
Zephaniah 3:14-20 [The gathering of God's people]

Eucharist: Romans 6:3-11; Psalm 114; Luke 24:1-12

Sermon

Every few years or so, it seems, a high-ranking ecclesiastic or cleric somewhere in the Christian world gets into hot water for appearing to deny the reality of the Resurrection. The hapless theologian's name is in the papers and all over the blogosphere, and devout members of the church everywhere are scandalized. There is even talk of excommunication.

Usually the prelate's statement or assertion, when examined more closely, turns out to be nothing as definitive as an outright denial of Jesus' physical resurrection, but rather a vague – some might even say muddled – expression of uncertainty about its exact meaning and significance in the modern world.

Of course, if we review carefully the various scriptural texts dealing with the Resurrection of our Lord, we find plenty of precedent for ecclesial muddle and confusion surrounding its actual meaning. According to this evening's passage from the Gospel of Luke, for instance, the remaining eleven Apostles – the first bishops, as many believe – upon hearing the news of the empty tomb reject the women's testimony out of hand as "an idle tale" and pay no further attention to it. They simply cannot believe their ears.

Peter, of course, at least bestirs himself to visit the tomb and see for himself if the report is true – that the tomb is indeed empty – just as the women have reported. But beyond "stooping and looking in," he seems immobilized and unable to act. Rather than breaking out into Handel's "Alleluia Chorus" and proclaiming loudly and joyously the Good News of the Risen Lord, he instead heads straight "home, amazed at what had happened" – as Luke puts it – which seems to be a polite way of saying Peter went home not knowing quite what to make of it all.

Some apostle – or bishop – he turned out to be.

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The befuddlement does not end there, of course. If we look further into the various gospel accounts of the empty tomb, we find that Mary herself, according to the Gospel of John, at first does not recognize the Lord at all, even supposing him to be the local gardener. And in the account of the story from the Gospel of Mark, the band of women first head home themselves and sit on the news of the empty tomb, telling absolutely no one of their experience, “for they were afraid.”

So for something we now proudly proclaim as being at the very heart and hub of our faith, the Good News of the Resurrection does not get off to a very auspicious start. It is perhaps reassuring – or unsettling, depending on your point of view – to know that things have not changed that much among us Christians even some 2,000 years on. We still do not know quite what to make of the Resurrection. It is still a sign of contradiction, a mystery in the most genuine sense. Perhaps we should actually find it encouraging that Jesus’ resurrection can still be such a hot topic today.

Yet if the Resurrection itself remains a sign of contradiction and a mystery for Christians and seekers alike, it also happens to be the only hope there is for our fallen and sometimes all too callous world. The sad truth is that for far too many people today, believers and non-believers alike, it is still as if the rock had not yet been rolled aside from Christ’s tomb. They do not share in our Easter faith and joy this night. Their way is blocked still by sin, doubt and death; and their vigil goes on.

It is to such as these that we now proclaim our firm conviction that Christ has indeed been raised. It is perhaps not what we, left to our own wits and devices, might have expected or anticipated. It does not make sense, as the world understands sense and meaning. And it might, in fact, still seem “an idle tale” to some.

But it is so.

For us Christians, life and significance can paradoxically be found only in the chasm of an empty and abandoned tomb. The place of death has become for us and for our world the gateway of life itself. And just as our everyday living is in some deeper sense a mystery and sharing in all life, so is the Resurrection for us a sharing in the very life of God.

Perhaps better put, it is God sharing through his Son in our life, infusing our humble world with divinity, and transforming us as Christ was himself transformed.

In Christ’s death and resurrection, as Paul tells us in our second reading this day from his Letter to the Romans, “We are no longer ... enslaved to sin.” Perplexed or not, whether we realize it or not, the granite has been rolled aside for us just as surely as it was for the women at Jesus’ tomb. Unfettered by sin, we now are free,

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as Paul describes it, to “walk in newness of life,” perhaps with baby steps at first, but with an ever stronger stride.

We shall leave this church tonight, however tired or sleepy, nevertheless “alive to God in Christ Jesus,” knowing that, for us, the dawn has surely already come. For we “live with him” who has been raised immortal from the sleep of death. No boulder or stone can ever block our way again. But as we, like Peter perhaps, return home tonight from the empty tomb, amazed at what has happened, we shall arise soon enough to proclaim loudly and boldly – for the whole world to hear – an end to sin and death.

For Christ is risen. And we no longer look for “the living among the dead.”

Yes: The Lord is risen indeed.

Alleluia.