

Good News Indeed

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

Joanna M. Adams
Atlanta, Georgia

But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.”
Mark 16:6 (NRSV)

I do not know what prompted T. S. Eliot to begin one of his poems “April is the cruellest month.” I wonder if it could have been springtime in Chicago. I watched a hearty band of Chicago Cubs fans on television one April night. There they were sitting in the stands of Wrigley Field wearing great puffy coats and woolly caps with flaps over their ears. When I mentioned it to a die-hard Cubs fan, he assured me they were having the time of their life. I suspect the desire for a good time was less of a motivating factor than the fact that “hope springs eternal in the human breast,” especially at the beginning of baseball season.

One should never underestimate the power of hope. Why, after all, are Christian churches bursting at the seams this Easter Sunday? Everyone loves the stirring music, the pretty clothes, and the extra excitement, but I believe that we have come for nothing less than the hopeful Easter message. Through sermon and song, through prayer and praise, the glad news rings forth: there is no force of death or darkness that has the power to destroy the light and life that is the risen Lord. It is the power of hope that brought us here, drawing us like filings to a magnet.

On that first Easter morning, the three grieving women had no reason for hope. They had been in Jerusalem, having come up from Galilee, and had witnessed all the events of the week before. They had seen the betrayal. They had watched as Jesus appeared before the chief priests, had watched while he was sentenced before Pilate; they had watched him take the long walk to Golgotha. They had seen the mocking and the cursing, the sword piercing his side. They had seen the crucifying.

In this sanctuary on Thursday evening, a hauntingly beautiful Tenebrae service took place. It ended in complete darkness, as the Christ candle was removed from the communion table and taken down the center aisle. We sat in utter darkness and silence. After a moment, a single voice was heard asking the question, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” The women at the tomb on Easter morning could have only answered yes. That was why their hearts were broken, why they had no hope.

But something astonishing happened as they arrived at the tomb to anoint the body. They discovered that the massive stone placed in the mouth of the tomb had been rolled away. In one of the greatest understatements ever recorded in scripture, Mark says, “They were alarmed.”¹

Some years ago, Easter fell on a particularly brutal April day. There was wind and freezing rain. Michigan Avenue had been blocked off because ice was falling from the Hancock building. Worshipers had to enter Fourth Church by the side door entrances on Delaware or Chestnut Streets. Everyone’s nerves were frazzled. The preacher of the morning was the distinguished senior pastor at the time, a Welshman named Elam

Davies, known for his strong preaching of the gospel and his dramatic flair. Just at the moment that Dr. Davies was making this point, “The women arrived at the tomb, and they learned that the stone had been rolled away,” a sheet of ice fell from the roof of the sanctuary and crashed on the sidewalks outside. It sounded for the entire world as if the world itself had come to an end, but that is the essence of the good news of Easter. The world as we know it—a world in which death and sin and betrayal appear to have carried the day, a world in which wounds grow so deep and threaten never to heal—that world has been overturned by the power and grace of God.

This is the most stunning claim the Christian faith has to make, that God reigns. The kingdom of God is real and will prevail. Nothing in life or in death can ever separate us from that promise, from the love of God made known to us through Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39).

Does this mean there is no more death? Obviously not. Death is undeniable and inevitable. What the resurrection means is that the ultimate power of death has been altered.² The Apostle Paul got it so right with his eloquent rhetorical question, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting,” now that Christ has been raised from the dead? (1 Corinthians 15:55). The resurrection did not alter the reality of death. What the resurrection did was to defeat the power of death to rob life of its meaning or hope.

Emily Dickinson begins one of her poems with this pithy line: “I will die, but that is all I will do for death.” Does death have power? Of course it does, but Easter, the good, glad news of Easter is this: Death no longer has ultimate power.

I have been thinking this week about a good friend who was a member of the first church I served in Atlanta. She was an award-winning writer of children’s books, who wore beautiful colored scarves and was a particularly bright human spirit. Ann was ridiculously young when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, which took her life eventually. We buried her on a spring day, as the rain came down in great, ragged sheets. At the cemetery, we stood at the graveside holding on to our umbrellas, and I kept trying to clear my throat so I could read the words from the *Book of Common Worship*. I began with words that acknowledge the reality of death: “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” But I did not stop there; I went on to name the even deeper reality: “I am the resurrection and the life,” says the Lord. “If this earthly tent that we live in is destroyed, then we have a building from God, a tent not made from hands, eternal in the heavens” (John 11:25-26; 2 Corinthians 5:1).

Later we gathered in the kitchen at Ann’s house. People had brought a lot of food—congealed salads, casseroles, and chicken. Stewed chicken, fried chicken, chicken made into a pie—I don’t know what it is about chicken, but it seems to work at a time like that. I remember our standing in a circle. I was eating a brownie, and someone told a funny story about our now deceased friend. We all laughed. I remember folding my arms and my shoulders shaking and I thought, is this respectful that we should be laughing so soon from the cemetery? Of course we should have laughed. We were laughing at death. It was an Easter laugh that bore witness to the rolled-away stone, the empty tomb, and the power of God to snatch life from the very jaws of death.

As the women entered the tomb, they saw a man in white sitting, and he said to them, “The one you are looking for, the one who was crucified, he is not here. He has been raised and he has gone ahead of you to Galilee. There you will find him.” If you are wondering where Galilee is, I wouldn’t get out my map.³ I can tell you

geographically it is a place in the northeast region of Israel. On that spring afternoon some years ago, Galilee turned out to be a kitchen in Atlanta. Galilee is everywhere the spirit of the risen Christ can be found.

Sometimes I wonder if it would not make sense to put signs by the church entrances that say, "Welcome to Galilee." Why? Because the spirit of Christ is here every day, as the hungry are fed and the grieving are comforted. People who come into this place believing they are at the end of their rope more often than not are able to leave with their hope and confidence restored. The stone of despair is rolled away daily here. The spirit of the living Christ lives here. Not only here, but out there in the world, because the world itself is Galilee. He cannot be held or contained. You will find him wherever people suffer and have their suffering relieved. You will find him wherever wounds are being bound and wherever seeds of hope are being planted. I would suggest today that you would also find him, his living spirit, within your heart and soul. The power of God is at work to make you whole and new.

There is a sense in which the resurrection is entirely God's business. There is a wonderful story that was told by a professor at McCormick Seminary. The distinguished teacher, Joseph Haroutunian, used to ask his students if the town's reprobate were buried in a cemetery and the town's most upright citizen were buried right next to him and God came along and said, "Get up!" which one would get up first. The professor would pause and say, "Neither, of course, for only God raises the dead."⁴

It was entirely God's doing. No cooperation from anyone was needed. And yet, I would suggest to you this Easter Sunday that the resurrection invites your cooperation. If you can but receive the hope, the good news that the past does not necessarily determine the future, if you can receive that, then you will have enough to live for and to die for. The good news of Easter is not only that there is life after death; it is the promise of new life before death. You cannot prove a thing I have said to you this morning, but if you live these promises, you will discover they will turn out to be true, every single one of them.⁵

I close with my favorite Easter story. It seems that a visiting schoolteacher who worked in a hospital was asked by the classroom teacher of a little boy to go and visit him in the hospital and help him with his homework. The classroom teacher said to the visiting teacher, "We are studying nouns and adverbs in this young man's class, and I hope you will help him."

When the visiting teacher arrived at the hospital, she was dismayed to discover that the child was in the hospital's burn unit in very serious condition and experiencing great pain. She was embarrassed when she walked in the room and saw him in his state of misery, but she decided to press on and stumbled through the lesson, ashamed of herself for putting him through such a senseless exercise. The next morning, the nurse on the burn unit said to the teacher, "What did you do to that boy yesterday?" Before the teacher could get out her apology, the nurse said, "We had given up on him, but ever since you visited him, he seems to be fighting back, responding to treatment."

The boy himself later explained that he had given up hope, but it all changed when he had come to the simple realization that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?⁶

O, the power of hope! Tell the others. He is risen! On the other side of pain and death is always resurrection. Across even the darkest shadows of life, there shines a light that will never fail. Thanks be to God.

Notes

¹ P.C. Enniss, "Too Preposterous to Believe," *Journal for Preachers* 27 (Easter 2003): 18.

² William J. Carl III, "Something Happened," *Journal for Preachers* 9 (Easter 1986): 13.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁵ Thomas Long, in a sermon preached long ago.

⁶ Joyce Hollyday, "Wayfare," *Sojourners* 15, no. 3 (1986): 19.