

"The Light of Easter"

Rev. David Gregory

April 12, 2020

Easter Sunday



First reading

Matthew 28:1-10

New Revised Standard Version

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.

For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Second reading

From Walking in Wonder

by John O'Donohue

We don't realize all the good we can do. A kind, encouraging word or a helping hand can bring many a person through dark valleys in their lives. We weren't put here to make money or to acquire status or reputation. We were sent here to search for the light of Easter in our hearts, and when we find it we are meant to give it away generously.

I want to welcome you to this most amazing resurrection morning! This Easter finds us swimming in a sea of transformation, as the life that we have known is realigning in ways that are both radical and remarkable. Just when it seemed that the world could only grow meaner and more polarized, people are coming together in ways we could not have imagined just a couple of months ago. There is an explosion of love and light. Every day, complete strangers are showing compassion to one another in uncommon ways. This is a transformation that we celebrate this resurrection morning! Where a few short months ago there were wildfires raging, flowers now bloom on green hillsides. This is a transformation we celebrate this resurrection morning!

In a time of multiple losses—of loved ones, of employment, of mobility—we get to laugh at a video on Facebook, to smile at chalk drawings on the sidewalk, or to take the time to stand and read the happy signs that people are posting in their front windows. This is a transformation that we celebrate this resurrection morning! And just when we might feel trapped at home and separated from the rest of humanity, we let out our daily communal howl into the night, as if to say *we're still here, we're still together, and we still want to honor those who are on the front lines*. This is a transformation that we celebrate this resurrection morning!

And while the federal government is busy relaxing emission standards on automobiles, our major cities are breathing cleaner air than at any time since the Industrial Revolution. The time that I used to spend racing up and down the highway is now available for actual communication with actual people in numbers that are growing exponentially. This is a transformation that we celebrate this resurrection morning!

And just when it seemed that all of life revolved around material consumption, we have learned—as did our grandparents before us—that the joy of life is not to be found in the things that we accumulate, but in the love and light that exists in those we love. This is a transformation that we celebrate this resurrection morning!

Every single one of these transformations has involved the death of something meaningful or important to us, and then birth of something new in its place. This is the same pattern—death, burial, and resurrection—that is the core of our tradition, and forms the basis of our belief, that a seed must die before it can fall to the ground and germinate into something far greater. The lessons for us in the story of Holy Week could not be more clear to us than they are this year.

In Matthew's gospel, we read of the dawning of a brand new day, one that began with an earthquake, a flash of bright light, and a handful of terrified but courageous women. A crucified insurgent, instead of being left out in the open for the birds to feast on, was quickly and carefully placed in the tomb of a rich and powerful man, and the women came before dawn in order to do right by this one who had been their teacher. They brought spices for burial to fulfill their custom. When the others were socially distanced, these came out of their safe places to take their very first steps to the other side of their grief, and what they encountered was nothing that they could have expected or predicted.

The message from the angel was, "Don't be afraid!" The message from Jesus was, "Don't be afraid!" Don't be afraid of this new world that has suddenly been created for you. It is the world you have always dreamed of, but the old one had to die first. And like a phoenix rising from the ashes, you will be transformed into something newer, stronger, and better than you've ever been before.

When we emerge on the other side of the corona virus, when we find our way out of our cocoons and begin to flutter and fly once again—when that happens, and eventually it will—we will be faced with some big and important questions. Of all that has fallen away from us, which things will we choose to bring back, and which things might be better if they were cast aside for good? Of all the changes that have happened in our lives, which ones should be temporary and which ones should be permanent?

Some things must be temporary. The interruptions of education and child care need to become a thing of the past. We need to be able to get back into a crowded room and hear a symphony orchestra or a Broadway musical again. Art and co-creation need to flow freely again, and I need to be able to get on a plane and go see my grandchildren. But there are some other things that I might enjoy making more permanent, like connections with the people who have been a part of my life at one time or another, rekindled friendships, taking the time to catch up with them. I'd like to hang on to that. I'd also like to keep cooking healthy food in my own kitchen, and eat out a little less often. And I'd like to keep having these deep and dream-filled discussions with my spouse and enjoy his partnership in ways that I may have otherwise forgotten about.

I'd like to keep smiling and nodding at perfect strangers on the street, to use my car less, to make sure I take time every day to get outside and move my body. I'd like to hang on to that feeling of deference and care for others that permeates every trip to the grocery store, and I'd like to continue my quest to own fewer things. Which changes should be temporary, and which should be permanent?

We must ask this question individually and collectively, in families, in places of worship, in branches of government, and ultimately as an entire human race. Was this simply a time of trial meant to test us and to see what we are made of, or was it a time of transformation meant to change the trajectory of life itself? Resurrection does not involve the resuscitation of an old way of life. Resurrection is the trading of an old life for an entirely new form.

In some of the earliest writings of the New Testament, Paul the Apostle speaks of our own resurrection and that of the earth itself. Hear these words from the eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

What we need to remember is this, that the groaning does not go on forever. The earth has paused to take a breath, but that pause is pregnant with every co-creative idea, every God-given desire, every vision that we've ever had of the world we want to create and inhabit. It is all present in this moment. The body is in the tomb. We cannot change what happened, and it takes an earthquake to roll the stone away. But once it has happened, it paves the way for everything that wants to come forth, unencumbered and filled with new life and energy. We can rise *to* this moment, even as we rise *from* this moment, finding this Easter light that dwells in our hearts and generously giving it away.

