

**Only the beginning**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on Easter, the Day of Resurrection, April 5, 2015.

*Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"*      *John 20:15*

I      After it was all over, it seemed that all was lost. The man whom the disciples had come to know and love who changed their lives seemed destined for oblivion. For now, they were left with nothing but disillusionment as their hopes and dreams lay with his body in the tomb. The women who followed Jesus all the way to the cross had now but one final thing left to do. When the Sabbath was over, they went to prepare his body for burial.

It is early the next morning when Mary Magdalene approaches the garden tomb. She is perplexed to find that the stone at the door of the tomb has been rolled away. When she looks in, she is astonished: the tomb is empty. She hurries to tell the others who go to see for themselves. When they arrive, they are shocked and bewildered to find the body of Jesus is gone. What on earth could have happened? Had someone stolen the body? Was this some kind of sick joke?

In despair, the men return to their homes while Mary Magdalene remains behind at the tomb. It is then that the risen Christ then appears to her outside the tomb. She does not recognize him and thinks that he is the gardener and asks him what has become of body of Jesus. Not until he speaks and calls her by name does she realize that it is Jesus. We can only imagine her shock and surprise when she realizes that Jesus is alive and standing before her as big as life itself. Often we when we are focused on our own preconceived thoughts we don't recognize what is right in front of our eyes. The appearances of the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene and many others signaled that the forces of evil and hatred and death did not overcome him. He is alive in us who believe.

The Roman authorities wanted to do away with Jesus because they suspected that he was a seditious and dangerous person. They thought they had exposed him as a messianic pretender and expected to refute everything he claimed, but the plan to expose him as a fraud didn't work. Such evil schemes are thwarted by the fact that life isn't so easily predictable and orderly.

We miss the point if we think that the story ended on Good Friday. We are the people of Easter and the resurrection. For us the story has only just begun. Rather than dwelling on the suffering of Christ on the cross the great symbols of our Christian faith are the empty cross and the empty tomb. Both are sure signs of Christ's triumph over the forces of evil and death.

The resurrection tells us that Jesus is not found among the dead but among the living. Because he lives among us we have power over the forces of sin and guilt. We need never despair. We are freed from the ignorance that causes fear and lack of faith. Easter brings out the best in us because we are redeemed and given value. Our unworthy selves are made worthy in the risen Christ.

I can't tell you exactly how the resurrection happened. I wish I knew. What I do know is that resurrection happens when God raises us up from the depths to new life. It happens when a totally self-absorbed person realizes that he is not the center of the universe. It happens when someone with a poor self-image realizes that she is of infinite value in the sight of God. For those of us who have experienced the loss a loved one, resurrection happens when we realize that life after a loss can have meaning and fulfillment.

Quintus Tertullian was one of the early church fathers in the late second century A.D. Raised as a pagan in the city of Carthage he was educated in literature and rhetoric and eventually became a lawyer. He was converted to an ascetic form of Christianity and explained that he was drawn to it not because it is reasonable, but because it is unreasonable and outrageous in its claims.

The resurrection is something no ordinary human mind can invent. It defies all logic and reason. It defies every natural law, allowing the impossible to become possible. Our sense of orderliness, logic and reason is superseded by the wondrous mystery of an infinite God who can do what our finite minds cannot comprehend.

The great thing about the resurrection is that if you think you can explain it and make it rational, you've missed the point. If you think you can make it more acceptable, you've lost the essential meaning. Thomas Jefferson tried to do that by cutting out what he felt were offensive or irrelevant passages in the Bible, leaving only the parts that were acceptable and believable to him. Not so with those who experience a personal encounter with Christ. They know the power of resurrection because their lives are changed forever. They testify to the fact that the resurrection is not a creation of the church, but that the church was created and sustained by it.

We all have times when we become discouraged. We may feel that we aren't where we thought we should be at this point in our lives. We may feel that we have let certain opportunities pass us by and we haven't reached the goals we set for ourselves. We wake up one morning and wonder where the years have gone and that life isn't what we envisioned.

Easter enables us to climb out of the tomb of despair and self-doubt to stand with Christ in the brightness of the possibilities of life in him. The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote that life happens when we stop blaming things on our circumstances and start creating the circumstances we want. The resurrection brings new understanding of the possibilities for us as his light burns brightly in the shadows of discouragement and lack of faith in ourselves. His victory is our victory because we are inheritors of hope for the human race. When our old self is buried with Christ, we are raised with him in his resurrection.

Once we take that first step in our new life in Christ, we've only just begun.