

### **A most incredible story**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on Easter, the Day of Resurrection, March 27, 2016.

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen...Matthew 28:5

The women who arrive at the tomb are in deep sorrow. The shock of Jesus' death has not worn off. They have brought spices to anoint his body and it won't take long. Upon their arrival at the tomb, what they find is not what they expect to see. The sight of the empty tomb with two men sitting nearby leaves them puzzled and perplexed. The two men are messengers of God, people who appear in the right place at the right time to help us in times of crisis. The message to the women is, Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen.

The women are in shock when told that Jesus was not there because he has arisen from the dead. The startling news sets them in motion. The slow, sad steps that brought them to the tomb become a rush to tell the others what they have seen and heard. It is understandable that none of them take their word for it. They have to go and see for themselves that the tomb that held Jesus' body is now empty. In defiance of the basic laws of science and logic he is alive again. What defies the human mind is possible in the mind of God. No one saw the resurrection actually happen. We rely on what happened afterward in the witness to the appearances of the risen Christ. How do you explain that? You can't. You can only come to accept it in your own spiritual journey

If you go to the city of Jerusalem today, you will find not one, but two sites that claim to be the site of the burial and resurrection of Jesus. One is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher that many faithful Christians believe to be the authentic burial site of Jesus. Inside, it is dark and airless and for me not very convincing. The other site is just outside the walls of the city in a garden with a tomb hewn out of rock that is light and airy. For me, it is very convincing because resurrection is all about coming out of a dark place into the brightness of new life and growth. We look for life among the living, not among the dead. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ transcends time and space to become real in our own lives. The Jesus of history becomes the Jesus of the present. His sacrificial death means that fear, falsehood and death no longer have any power over us.

When you think about it much of our spiritual history takes place in gardens. They are places of life and beauty. To be in a garden affects our senses with the variety of fragrances and colors and sounds of nature. The story of good and evil takes place in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve live in a state of grace until their defiance of God compels them to leave the garden of innocence never to return there again.

Before his arrest and trial, Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane. Here we see his very human and plaintive cry to be delivered from the awful death that he is about to face. Yet, he knows he has to go through with it. He is compelled by his mission to leave the quiet beauty of that garden to be arrested and taken away.

Jesus hung on a cross between two thieves. He assures the penitent thief that he will be with him in paradise. In Persian mythology, paradise refers to the garden of the king. To be asked to walk with the king in his garden is the greatest privilege. The penitent thief was given the privilege of walking in the garden with the King of kings. After his death, the body of Jesus is buried in a borrowed tomb in a garden.

Easter is as good a time as any to look at the condition of our own spiritual garden. It is cared for and well kept, or has it been neglected and gone to seed? You decide. It is never too far gone that you can't weed out the bad growths, uproot what you have left undone. Now is the time to dig in and turn up the life giving soil, trim the shrubs of projects long neglected and add new plantings. You do the groundwork; God will do the rest. Take time each day to work in the garden of your life.

I will not try to convince you of the reality of the resurrection. Only you can come to that conviction; only you can draw your own conclusion. Resurrection is not a cold, meaningless doctrine found in some musty theological text. To begin to comprehend the meaning of such an incredible phenomenon requires setting our heart in the midst of all the evidence. It means setting our mind in the frame of believing in the possibility of what we think is not possible.

Resurrection is better experienced personally than any attempt to explain it. Those whose lives have recovered from a life in shambles know what resurrection means. For them, it is an experience of coming out of darkness into the light of the living. They had to turn their lives around to be freed from the bonds of their tomb-like existence to be raised to new life. Ask them if they believe in resurrection! Women who have been battered by their husbands and children who are bullied in school come to the realization that no one can make them feel inferior without their consent. Ask them if they believe in resurrection!

What does it take to leave doubt and uncertainty to find new life? It requires a transformation from the darkness of the sepulcher of unbelief to the light of the risen Christ. Once the spiritual stone is rolled away, the light of resurrection shines in a life of integrity and wholeness. Personal spiritual resurrection is possible. Proclaim that Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!