

Christ is risen: God's new world begins

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Easter Day, April 12, 2009.

Alleluia! Christ is risen, and in our own peculiar American way, we celebrate the joy of Easter. Some of us have already eaten the ears off the chocolate bunnies. We are looking forward to eating a lot of pink-tinted hard-boiled eggs, egg salad sandwiches, and deviled eggs. But my favorite Easter tradition is Cincinnati Zoo's gorilla Easter egg hunt. What a sight to see a 700-pound silverback gorilla daintily holding an Easter basket by the handle in one hand, and munching on a blue Easter egg in the other! And so it is, that after a long season of Lenten fasting and penitence, and a long Holy Week following in the passion and death of Christ, we come to the simple, happy joy of the resurrection.

But the Gospel of Mark goes a different way. There is none of that lilted happiness that we usually associate with Easter. Instead, the women go to the tomb, and they meet somebody who tells them that Jesus is not there but is risen. "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid." What kind of happy ending is that?

The empty tomb is not the point. Of course, they may have gone to the wrong tomb, or somebody may have stolen the body. There is a certainty in the resurrection story that cannot be denied, or debated by an empty tomb. The certainty is that three days after he is dead and buried, Jesus begins appearing to people. He appears to Peter and to Paul and many others. Their encounters with Jesus form the basis of their belief in salvation through him. And so they proclaim their believing, in words that they have themselves heard and are passing on—and these words form the early creeds upon which our Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are built.

But the first time Jesus appears—to the women—they don't understand, and so they are afraid. When death itself—the most final act in a human life—is cancelled, or reversed, or killed, or however the women might have imaged the event of Jesus' rising, they could not imagine the world where that would happen. In other words, they could not yet see what God had done, and how God had "made all things new."

Walter Brueggemann talks about "imagination" as "the capacity to see images of reality that are different from the images that are in front of you." The women came to anoint a dead body. But death wasn't there anymore. The body that was dead was part of the old order of things. They could not yet imagine a different reality. It takes a while for Jesus' followers to see that a new order of God's making was embodied in Jesus. The first sign was his being raised from the dead by God. In this greatest of signs, God tells us that "death no longer has dominion over us." Death could not hold Jesus. What clearer message can there be, that God holds out a new world for us—a world so different from the world that we are so used to seeing and believing in?

Then Jesus began to appear to people here and there, and the people began to put it all together. They began to be able to imagine a different ending, and then to see the reality that God held out in front of them. That reality shows them that “the way things are” is not the way things have to be.

In today’s readings, we can see how the disciples began to put it together. Jesus appeared to Peter and to Paul. During the next fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection, Peter remembers how Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism. He remembers all those stories about lost sheep and prodigal children, wedding banquets for the masses, and kindly Samaritans. He remembers the healings, the calls for peace and justice, the tender compassion. All these begin to make sense to Peter. Jesus, who was dead, is now alive. Everything that he embodied has been upheld by God. Bless those who curse you—THIS is real! Blessed are the poor—THIS is real! As you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me—THIS is real! This is the new reality that he is able to see, and that he proclaims.

Imagination does not mean “idle daydreaming.” When put in the service of God, imagination can be a prophetic act, as with Isaiah or Martin Luther King, Jr. When informed by Jesus’ resurrection, imagination can transform us, because it means that we can see another way of life, a way informed by Jesus’ resurrection. It means that we can see past a society governed by self-interest, a society consumed by fear of not having enough, a society of “every man for himself” when we feel compelled to climb over others in order to get what we think we need. We can see past *that* world and look to the world that God wants for us, we can see ourselves and each other as God created us to be. When we can imagine this world as a reality and not just a daydream—and Christ’s resurrection opens this world up to us—then we can believe in that world. And what we believe, we can proclaim as Peter did and as Paul did, and as we say in our baptismal vows, to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.”

We have fifty days—the Great Fifty Days of Easter—to unpack what Christ’s being raised means for us. During that time, we will learn for ourselves how we can best proclaim his resurrection, as Peter and Paul did after Jesus appeared to them. We can learn for ourselves how we can live in the REAL world of Christ’s resurrection. But for today, Easter Day, I invite you to imagine—to imagine God’s reality and to celebrate God’s new world. *Alleluia! Christ is risen!*