

Easter Truths

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"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." -- John 10:10

Those of you who are liturgically astute – and I know we have at least a few of those types in this congregation – you may be wondering why two of this morning's three lessons are from the Gospel according to John.

Ordinarily, in this church, as in many churches who follow the Revised Common Lectionary, we have three lessons on Sunday morning, and those three lessons consist of an Old Testament reading, an Epistle reading, and a Gospel reading, in that order.

But today is Easter, and things shaken and not stirred on Easter. The first verse of the sermon hymn, for example, was sung in Tanzanian, and although that may not be a first for this church, it has to be an extremely rare occurrence, for which we can thank our young and courageous Coordinator of Music, Jordan Mathews. I'm fairly confident that singing in Tanzanian was outside the comfort zone of our choir, as it would be for all of the rest of us here this morning, but that's okay – in fact, it's fine – because Easter itself is outside the comfort zone of all of us here this morning, and that's the first of the three Easter truths I want to talk to you about this morning: Easter is about your conversion, it's not about your comfort. That's the first Easter truth I would like for you to take home to Easter lunch: Easter is about conversion, it's not about comfort.

Now I know, as well as any of you, that I am flying into the wind this morning – of all mornings – by suggesting that Easter is not about your comfort. Many of you have come here this morning precisely for that reason – to make yourselves feel comfortable. We go to church on Easter day because that's what we do, and doing what we do on Easter Day – or Christmas Eve or the Fourth of July – makes us feel good. We're in the right place at the right time with the right people doing the right thing. And that puts us squarely in our comfort zone.

You may have grumbled a bit this morning as you interrupted your preparations for Easter lunch by getting dressed and making your way to Easter breakfast, but that's a very minor inconvenience compared to the deep sense of satisfaction you're experiencing right now, because you're where you know you're supposed to be and you're doing what you know you're supposed to be doing. You're in church on Easter morning listening to a brilliant sermon, and life just doesn't get much better than that, at least for an hour. You're welcome.

But here's the thing. Easter isn't about your feeling great that the sun is shining, the birds are singing, the daffodils are blooming, God's in heaven, and all's right with the world. That's not Easter, at least not Christian Easter. That's Disney Easter. That's Easter-bunny Easter. That's feel-good, user-friendly Easter. That's you in your Easter bonnet in the Easter parade Easter.

And it's lovely and it's charming and it's fun for the kids and grandkids – and it's for the birds. Because that's not what happened on Easter morning two thousand and sixteen years ago. Neither Easter bonnets nor Easter lilies nor Easter bunnies nor Easter eggs stood reality on its head and changed the course of human history. That's what

happened on Easter morning. The followers of Jesus who experienced the risen Jesus Christ were not wearing their Easter outfits, and the garden tomb was not The Happiest Place on Earth. The Easter of those first Easter Christians was anything but the blasting trumpets, thundering organs, and screaming choirs that we've turned Easter into, let alone the chocolate eggs, marshmallow peeps, and spiral-cut hams that our retailers are urging us to consume.

No, the first Easter turned the lives of those first Easter Christians upside down, inside out, and made them into people so different from the people they'd been before that they felt they had been born again, just as Jesus had told them they must be if they were to experience the power of resurrection. To be raised to new life in Christ from the living death of business-as-usual lives in a business-as-usual world is to experience Easter – the real Easter, the first Easter, the mother of all Easters, and the only Easter that matters.

Easter was never intended to comfort you, friends; it's always been meant to convert you – from the life you've been living to the life that's been waiting. From the life you know to the life you want. From the life you have had to the life you yet can have – that's the Easter message, and that's the first of this morning's Easter truths – it's not about comfort, it's about change. It's about conversion. And it's about you.

And that's the second truth about Easter that I want to lay on you this morning. Easter is not primarily about Jesus; Easter is primarily about you. Jesus doesn't need Easter, but you do. Each and every one of you out there in Pewville – you need Easter. You and I and all our brethren and sistren in the Christian family and all our more distant relatives in the human family – we all need Easter.

We all need to hear again, and believe again, if only for an hour or so, the good news of Easter. We all need to hear again and believe again that there is a different and better way to be in this world than the way we know and have come to dread.

Most of us don't live our lives in overt, wide-eyed, mind-numbing fear. Most of us live our lives in dread. Despite the best diabolical efforts of so-called terrorists, most of us have not yet succumbed to fear. What we live with, however, and have indeed succumbed to, is dread – dread of the next bombing, dread of the next shooting, dread of the next war, dread of the next phone call, dread of the next domestic drama.

We have come to dread the future because we have identified it with the past, and Easter breaks that connection. That's what Easter did to and for those first Easter Christians – it disrupted their past from their future – and it freed them to live the lives that God had created them to live.

When you're dead, you're dead – that's the past. You've passed. You're now part of the past. That's what we know. That's what we've experienced, and that, we believe, is the way the world works – the way it always has been and always will be. We believe that, and that's what those first followers of Jesus believed, too.

And that's the world they were expecting to find as they went to the tomb early on that first day of the week after Jesus's crucifixion. They came with their expectations, shaped by their pasts, and they expected to have their low expectations met.

And that's when everything changed. Instead of finding a dead body, they found a living truth. Instead of doing for Jesus, Jesus did for them. Instead of bringing his life to its earthly close, they were given new life through the power of his resurrection.

That's what happened on Easter morning, and that's why we had two lessons from the Gospel of John. You needed to hear both the truth of abundant life that Jesus came to bring – that's my text – and you also needed to hear the account of the first followers of Jesus who received that abundant life and began living it abundantly and immediately – that's the Easter story. That's why Easter, this year in this church, is a twofer: the

message of abundant life, and the story of those who first began to live it. You're welcome.

The first followers of Jesus on Easter morning found before themselves not the old reality of death, but rather the new reality of undying love in the person of their crucified and risen savior. The pasts they all knew and had brought with them to that tomb were dramatically and irrevocably disrupted. God shattered the expectations of those kind and generous people not by letting them continue to live the lives they brought with them to the tomb, but by giving them new and different lives, just as God had graciously and miraculously given to Jesus.

To be raised to new life in Christ is to be set free from our low expectations, our preconceived notions, and our old and cynical selves. We who are raised with Christ have been set free from fear, from sin, and even from death itself. Not because we won't be afraid, misstep, or die, but because those realities will no longer define us. Their power over us – to control us, to embarrass us, and to deceive us – has been broken by a greater power, the power of a love that will never let us go.

And that power is available to each and every one of us, right here, right now, and that's the good news of Easter. Heaven someday is not the Easter message; heaven is not waiting for you to die. Heaven is waiting for you to accept. That's all you have to do to get there – accept it. Accept the gift of Easter – the gift of resurrection life – that is being offered to you every single day. It has your name on it; it is addressed to you, and no one needs your new life in Christ except you. For once, it IS all about you!

And that's why I've lifted up for you this morning the second great truth about Easter – it's all about you. Your hopes, your dreams, your longings, your aspirations – Easter is about all of that. And it's also about your fears, your hates, your failures, your shames, and your frustrations – Easter is about all of that, as well. Because all of that is part of our old life, and the new life promised to us in Easter wouldn't be true unless it can take up all of us – the good, the bad, the sad, and the mad – and make all of that new.

I know that most of you – perhaps all of you – don't believe what I'm saying. Congregations have never believed preachers on Easter morning, but that hasn't stopped us from telling that old, old story that we, at least, up here in Pulpitland, have loved so well. You do not have to walk out of this sanctuary the same person as you walked in. That's the Easter good news. You can have this life – the life you brought through those doors with you – or you can have something better. That's your Easter option and that's your Easter choice. Easter really is about you – what God has done for you in raising Jesus Christ from death to life, and what you will do for God in response to that great gift. It's all about you.

So having laid this second Easter truth on you thick and wide, let me turn here at the end to the third and final Easter truth that you deserve to hear this morning. And that is that Easter is about life, it's not about death. Easter is about new life, different, abundant life. The kind of life that Jesus said he came to bring: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

That's my text and it's the tenth verse of the tenth chapter of John's Gospel that we heard Donna read for us a little while ago. I've taken it as my text because it says, with brevity and clarity, what the life, teachings, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus are all about – they're about life. Life for us, life for everyone. Life for the people we like, and life for the people we hate, including those who call themselves Isis. Life for the haves and especially life for the have-nots. Life for those who came before us and life for those who will come after us. And life that is more than worth living, no matter what the myth of scarcity says. The myth of scarcity says that there isn't enough to go around,

but the truth of abundant life in Christ says that we all do better when we all do better. The abundant life in Christ is spiritual not because it floats around three feet off the ground, but rather because it refuses to believe the lie that the way things are is the way things have to be.

Material truth says that what you see is what you get; spiritual truth – Easter truth – says that there is less here than meets the eye. There is a reality that is more than the material reality determined by the golden rule – you know, the one who has the gold makes the rules.

That's life, as Old Blue Eyes sang, but that's not the abundant life Jesus promised us and came to bring. The life in which gold rules is a life of death – death for those who worked themselves to death to mine that gold, death for those without the gold, and death for those desperately afraid of losing their gold. To live in such a golden age is to live in the valley of the shadow of death, and death, my friends, is not what Easter is about. Easter is about life.

Now I know that some of you came here this morning expecting – or at least hoping – that I would be the preacher who would finally explain how it happened – it being Jesus's resurrection. You and I, living as we must, in our spiritually impoverished age, want to know if it happened and, if it did, how it happened. You want, in short, for me to explain the resurrection.

I can't, and no one can, because the resurrection is an encounter between the human and the divine, and it is miraculous, as all such encounters are. There are no explanations for those, although skeptics insist that they all come down to one variety or another of delusion, fantasy, psychosis, or hysteria.

If you believe in God – and would you be here this morning if you didn't? -- then believing in the resurrection should present few difficulties for you, since God and the resurrection belong to the same realm, which is faith. Christians believe in the resurrection of Jesus for the same reason that we believe in God – the evidence will not allow us to believe otherwise. We believe, as the old gospel hymn puts it, that he lives because we are here this morning, brought here, like the swallows to Capistrano, by an invisible and inexplicable reality, but one which is undeniably real. That is the living presence of the risen Jesus Christ.

If you want to see the evidence of the resurrection, look around you. Look at the people who could be elsewhere, but they chose to be here. Look at the people who could be allowing themselves to be defined by Starbucks and the New York Times, but instead they are defining themselves with and by the body of Christ. Look at the people who could be defining themselves by hate and radicalized religion and toxic politics, but instead are defining themselves by life and death-defying love.

Those are the people, friends, who embody the proof of the resurrection – the proof of resurrection life – and I put it to you this morning: What better proof could you ask for?

So those are the three Easter truths I want to leave you with on this Easter day. The first is that Easter is about your conversion, not about your comfort. The second is that Easter is much more about you than it is about Jesus. And the third is that Easter is not about death, it's about life – the new and abundant life that is yours for the living in Jesus the Christ, our crucified and risen savior.

“You ask me how I know he lives,” we sometimes sing in this church on Easter day, “he lives within my heart.”

My hope and prayer for all of you is that you can sing that hymn for yourself – and mean it – as you go about the rest of this day, and tomorrow, and all the days of your life. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Have a blessed Easter.