

## The Easter Difference

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The Sunday of the Resurrection  
Easter Day  
Holy Communion  
April 8, 2012

Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.” -- 1 Corinthians 15:10

Mysteries are tricky, and today we celebrate the mystery of the resurrection. So if you came here today looking for answers, I have good news and I have bad news. The good news is that, in whatever condition you came through those doors, you can leave a different and better person. That's the Easter difference.

The bad news is that none of us, including you, can make that change happen, none of us can control it, and none of us can predict its outcome. When God grabs a person's attention and life through the gracious power of the resurrected Jesus Christ, and when that person stops resisting that grace, anything can happen and everything is different. That is the promise of Easter, that is its difference, and that is my sermon.

But before you spring from your pews delighted with such a short service, let me wrap up this sermon with a few concluding remarks.

First, Easter is not about explanation, it is about participation. The people who bequeathed us our religion, Christianity, did not attempt to explain the resurrection, and they did not attempt to do so for a very good reason – they couldn't! They couldn't explain how their beloved master and teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, whom at least some of them had watched die a cruel and senseless death, was alive again to them in a way he had never been before. Raised by God to new life from death, Jesus had the power to do to and for those ordinary women and men what he had not been able to do during his lifetime with them, which was to overcome their fear of living his life as their own, and to make of them the new creations he had promised them they could be.

He had been telling them this all along. He had told fishermen that they could catch people and not simply fish. He had told a headstrong wanna-be named Peter that he would become the rock of the church. And he had urged all of his would-be followers to leave their spiritually dead lives behind them and follow him into a richer, fuller, more meaningful life than any of them could imagine.

And those promises were not hollow. They were full of power waiting to be realized by good but frightened, good but distracted, good but sometimes lazy people just like us, and the miracle of Easter is that those kindhearted but thick-headed people overcame their fear, overcame their distractions, overcame their own sloth and greed, and began, for the first time in their lives, to live as Jesus had told them they could live. They had, to use that much-maligned and overheated phrase of American evangelicalism, been born again. That's the Easter difference.

Now let's be clear and let's be honest. With the possible exception of St. Paul, whose words form the text for this morning's sermon, we don't have any evidence that Jesus's followers began to live their post-resurrection lives as though they had been fired out of a cannon. In fact, what meager evidence we have suggests that the overcoming of spiritual death took time and it took effort. After his resurrection, Jesus remained alive to his disciples, scripture tells us, for fifty days, until the feast of Pentecost, until the fuse of the confused was finally lit by the Holy Spirit and their lives really began to take off.

There's a message there for us. And that message is that without the Holy Spirit, Easter has not more significance than a Cadbury egg. Indeed, that's the kind of Easter you get when you try to manufacture one without the Spirit of the Living God giving it life. Easter bunnies, Easter baskets, Easter tooth-rotting candy, Easter eggs, Easter clothes – none of it means anything – except more cash in the merchants' pockets and less cash in ours – if the spiritual reality of the God of love, who brought again from the dead our Lord, Jesus Christ, does not animate our lives as it animated Christ's. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a spiritual reality that changes how we live in the physical world; it is not a conjuring trick with the body of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an article of faith – it is THE article of faith – and it is not magic. And no matter how hard you try, you cannot talk yourself into Easter. Easter, like everything else in our lives, is the gift of God through the Holy Spirit.

That's why it took everyone by surprise – no one was expecting it! We expect the inflated egos and the cowardice and the craven betrayal of Maundy Thursday. We expect the state-sanctioned cruelty and murder of Good Friday. We expect the grief and resignation and aimlessness of Holy Saturday. All of that we expect

But Easter? Nobody expects Easter. Not the real Easter. The Easter of new life and new expectations. They didn't then and we don't now. In spite of 2012 instant replays of it, in this church and in countless others, I would be willing to bet good, legal tender that every one of you came here this morning fully loaded with the world's expectations. You and all the other worshipers in Christian churches around the world came to this service expecting the world to continue on its blundering, misshapen way, broken and bleeding, with only our daffodils and tulips for momentary cheer.

And it's my job, my dear friends, to tell you this morning, yet again, how wrong you are and how much you're missing if those are the expectations you're bringing to the party. Easter is a celebration of new life – not Jesus's but yours! This is a party for YOU. This is the day that God has made, we said in the call to

worship, and we will be glad in it because it's our new day every bit as much as it is Jesus's. The Reformers got it spot on: salvation is *pro me* – for me, for us, for all of us. Salvation is not for Jesus – he doesn't need it. We do! The resurrection wasn't for Jesus – he didn't need that, either. We do! His resurrection, his life, his sacrifice, his teachings, his love – they're all for us.

And through us, they are for the world. The new life promised you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is to make your life – your ability to paint, your ability with words, your physical beauty, your ability to sing, your patience with children, your love of the outdoors, your confidence in front of crowds, your love of history, your calm in the presence of blood, your lack of fear of heights, your grace with the dying – to make all of that and so much more your gift to the world out of gratitude to the God who gave them first to you. The resurrection of Jesus Christ has the power to allow you to do that if you will simply get your old self out of the way of the new self you can, through God's grace, become.

“By God's grace I am what I am,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”

If the apostle Paul, the great persecutor of the first followers of Jesus, the super-Jew-turned-super-Christian, could make such a remarkable claim about himself – that his past mistakes, false starts, and blind alleys had not rendered vain God's grace toward him – if Paul could claim that, anyone can. Paul knew what Easter meant and means not because he thought about – which he clearly had – but because he lived it. He accepted God's grace for what it was, allowed it to make him into an entirely new creation, and changed the world as a result. If all of that sounds like theological mumbo-jumbo to you, then let me put it with bumper-sticker simplicity: be the change you want to see. And the only way you will be that change is through the grace of God.

The Guardian of London recently reported the findings of Bonnie Ware, an Australian palliative care nurse who spent years listening to dying people tell her what they regret most about their lives. She wrote down what she heard and has published her findings in a book, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. The number one regret that most people have as they near the end of their life is that they wish they'd lived a life more true to themselves and spent less time and energy trying to live the life others expected them to live. You and I are such dreadful conformists, and the spiritually deadening price we pay for our conformity only becomes clear to most of us when it's much too late.

So let me conclude this conclusion to these concluding remarks with the questions for you to take home to the waiting guests and the waiting roast. How much of God's grace to you – the grace that brought you into this world, the grace that made you smart, the grace that made you beautiful, the grace that made you loving, the grace that made you strong, the grace that made you patient or understanding or wise – how much of that has been in vain? How much of the new life in Christ offered to you every single day have you rejected in favor of the old life handed you by the world and that you brought in here this morning? That old life of marrying and burying, of buying and selling, of getting and losing, of trying and failing and worst of all, of failing even to try?

A few Wednesdays ago, in our Lenten study, we pondered the question raised by the recent tragedy at Chardon. If people can live for a time pouring out such compassion for their broken neighbors, why can they not live such lives every single day? The answer, of course, is that there's no reason at all. There are only excuses. Don't excuse yourself from living an Easter life, because it's the only true life there is.