

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
The Feast of the Resurrection (C) ~ April 20, 2025
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 118:1, 14-15, 19-24
1 Corinthians 5:1-11
John 20:1-18

What If?

In November 1982, Leonid Brezhnev, the leader of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union for nearly two decades, died. According to tradition, the country observed five days of national mourning, culminating with a grand state funeral and burial in the wall of the Kremlin. Then-Vice President George H.W. Bush represented the United States at the funeral, and by virtue of his seat of honor, he was able to witness a small moment that may well have gone unnoticed by most of the assembled masses.

Mr. Bush observed that, all the while her husband's body lay in state, Brezhnev's widow, Viktoria, stood motionless by the coffin, dutifully honoring the ideology he represented. That is, until seconds before the coffin was closed. At that moment, just as the soldiers drew near to bring down the lid, Viktoria Brezhneva made a bold and surprising move: She leaned in over her husband's body and made the sign of the cross on his chest. There, before the powers and principalities in a country in which religious believers of any stripe were persecuted, she acted in the hope that her husband had gotten it wrong. She stretched out her hand and asserted, however tentatively, that this life might not be all there is.¹

Now, maybe this story is just one more example of the old adage that there are no atheists in foxholes. Perhaps Viktoria was hedging her bets, "just in case." But there's no denying that the stakes were high, living as she did in a culture and

¹ Gary Thomas, *Christian Times*, October 3, 1994, p. 26.

political climate in which faith was not merely frowned upon but was in danger of elimination altogether. Whatever her motivation – whether it was closeted belief or covering her bases – Viktoria Brezhneva took a chance. What a brave and defiant woman.

What strikes me most about this story is that, when staring death face-to-face, when no doubt all the voices around her were telling her otherwise, Viktoria Brezhneva asked “What if...?”

“What if it is true?”

“What if this is *not* the end?”

“What if death does not get the final word?”

What if?

That is the question I want on all our lips this morning. Will you say it with me?

What if?

There are many things that have brought us to church today. Some of us are here out of habit, or family tradition, or societal expectation. Some of us have come because it's the most natural thing in the world to us, like breathing in and breathing out. It's what we *do*; it's who we *are*. Some of us have come for reasons which – quite frankly – we don't fully understand, ourselves. Curiosity, maybe. We are seeking something – or someone. We have questions. We wonder.

Regardless of why we are here this morning, I think that it is safe to make a couple of generalizations about most (if not all) of us. First: We have the luxury of a post-Resurrection...which is to say that we knew in advance, before we even left the house this morning, that the tomb would be empty. We expect that. Even if we haven't read the last chapter of the story – or even if we haven't read *any* of the story, for that matter – odds are we know the surprise ending already. Spoiler alert: Jesus lives! So coming to Church on Easter is not

particularly stressful. The stakes are relatively low. It is joyful; it is beautiful; it is cause for celebration. It smells good. It looks good. Easter is the ultimate “Happily-Ever-After” story, after all. It feels *good*.

The second generalization I think we are safe in making is this: Most (if not all) of us, if we are really being honest, can’t help but ask...even if only quietly, even if only privately...

“Did it really happen?”

“Should I believe?”

I invite you to pause and reflect for a moment on these questions. Have you ever found yourself pondering the incredible (and I mean that word literally) impossibility of it all? Resurrection defies nature, it disregards the laws of science, it flies in the face of reason. It makes absolutely no sense. So if you have ever wondered, if only fleetingly, whether there was any truth to this improbable story, you are not alone. You’ve got a lot of company. Including me. Including, most likely, the person seated to your right or your left. In short, I suspect that most people, at one time or another, are brought up short by the Resurrection.

We know the story so well, *and* we ask: How can this be? Is it true? And that wondering, that questioning, is a Very Good Thing. Because engaging these questions is where new life begins.

Pause

Sunday after Sunday, Christians around the world stand and make a bold, audacious claim:

“On the third day He rose again ...”

There it is, the very cornerstone of the Christian promise: On the third day – on this day – Jesus rose again, defying the laws of nature and everything we “know,” rationally, to be possible.

This is the miracle we celebrate this morning.

But what does this mean to us? Do we have any clue about what we are professing when we say these words?

I surely hope not.

This may sound strange (and maybe even a bit unsettling) coming from the person in the pulpit, especially on Easter Sunday, the day – of all days – when we are supposed to be pretty certain about the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

But hear me out, please: You see, in order for the miracle of Easter to have any real meaning, any significance whatsoever for our everyday, down-in-the-trenches lives, then we can't ever be 100% "sure."

Fr. Martin Smith, an Episcopal priest and insightful spiritual guide, writes that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certitude.² Certitude – knowing something so securely, so confidently, in the marrow our bones – actually may be detrimental to our faith.

If we are *too* certain, if Resurrection is a given, something we expect to roll around every March or April, then we risk reducing the central miracle of our faith to nothing more than a happily-ever-after fairy tale – a nice story, but ultimately meaningless.

If we are *too* certain, we might just domesticate the miracle and lose sight of the fact that there ever was a time when Resurrection was *not* a given.

Have there ever been moments in *your* life when Resurrection was not a given? Times of fear or grief, desolation or despair, when you simply were not able to see the road ahead, or the possibility of a way out? This is a rhetorical question, because odds are very good that the answer is yes. At one point or another we

² Martin L. Smith, SSJE, *Nativities and Passions: Words for Transformation* (Cambridge + Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994)

have all been there – or will be. I know for a fact that many of you are in that place right now.

And it is in those moments that we are invited to stand in the garden, right alongside Mary Magdalene, and ask, tremulously, achingly, authentically,

“Where is Jesus?”

“Why is He not here?”

Mary is not certain about Resurrection at all – on the contrary, the only thing she is sure about is death. She stood there at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. She watched Jesus’ body lowered from the Cross. She saw death win.

So convinced is Mary of the “truth” of death that she cannot recognize the Risen Christ when He is standing right in front of her. She startles when He calls her name.

I think this is the most beautiful moment in all the Gospels: Mary gasping in shock and fear and joy, allowing herself to ask, “What if?”

Thanks be to God. What a gift. Mary is taken utterly by surprise. Imagine what it would have been like had she *not* been startled, had she expected the Risen Christ all along. I can tell you one thing: We probably would not be here today – or any Sunday, for that matter. Our faith would be meaningless if we knew 100% for sure. It would be nothing more than a performative exercise.

Here’s the thing: In order to experience the joy of Resurrection, we first have to experience death. There is no getting around it. It may not be a literal, physical loss. It may be the loss of a relationship or freedom or employment or health or identity. It may be the death of assumptions we make about ourselves and our place in the world. It may be the death of certitude. It may not look at all as we expect, and it probably will not be what we want or when we want it. Whatever the “death,” the truth is that it doesn’t matter if the tomb is empty if it was never occupied in the first place.

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So what does all of this mean for us? It means that, if any of us sitting here this morning is at all skeptical about this Resurrection business, not feeling it right now, perhaps not even sure why we've come to church today, then we are blessed, indeed. Because that means that we do not take any of this for granted. It means it's possible to be startled by the Risen Christ. That's where new life begins.

And what about those of us whose faith has never wavered, who have always been 100% certain of the Resurrection? May God be gentle with us. May God break through that surety and bless us with the tiniest dose of doubt...so that we might be startled by the Risen Christ. So that we might just be brave enough to ask, "*What if?*"

"What if it is true?"

"What if this is *not* the end?"

"What if death does not get the final word?"

And that's where new life begins.

Will you say it with me?

What if?

I wish you all a joyful – and startling – Easter.

Amen.