

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Easter Morning (A) - April 9, 2023
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda
Jeremiah 31:1-6
Psalm 118:14-15, 19-24
Colossians 3:1-4
Matthew 28:1-10

The story is told of a Russian railway worker who accidentally locked himself in a refrigerator car. After some time of not being able to escape or to attract attention, he resigned himself to his fate. Understanding all-too well what happens in such situations, he began to prepare himself, mentally, to freeze to death. As he felt his body growing increasingly numb, the man began to record the details of his impending death. He wanted others to know what became of him in his final hours, so he scribbled on the walls of the railway car:

“I am becoming colder...still colder...I am slowly freezing...half asleep – these may be my last words.”

And they were. When the car was opened sometime later, the man's body was found, just as he had predicted. His earthly life ended in the prison of that refrigerator car. And yet: An investigation into the cause of his death revealed that at no time was it colder than 56 degrees in that car. It never even approached the freezing mark. Contrary to the man's assumptions, the refrigeration unit was out of order and there was, in fact, plenty of fresh air available. There was no physical reason for the man's death whatsoever. It was determined that he had died simply because he had believed that he would die.¹

The man had died simply because he had believed that he would die. Freedom was at hand, but he could not grasp it. It was beyond his reach. It seems that a fundamental obstacle stood in his way: Namely, what he believed to be true. Or, perhaps better put, what he believed not to be true. Unable to imagine that hope was possible, he consigned himself to his own fate. He sealed the entrance to his own tomb, and therein he breathed his last.

¹ Denis Waitley, *Empires of the Mind* (New York: William Morrow, 1995), 126.

I begin with this story this morning, this Easter morning, because as Christians we find our very identity in what we believe to be true; it shapes us and makes us who we are.

And what do we believe to be true? Sunday after Sunday, we stand and recite the basic tenets of our faith, in the words of the Nicene Creed:

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,” we proclaim.

“For our sake, He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered death and was buried,” we continue.

And then, in the center of it all, we make this bold, audacious claim:

“On the third day He rose again...”

There it is, at the very heart of who we are: On the third day, He rose again. Defying the laws of nature and everything we “know,” rationally, to be possible, we assert the Easter miracle. Jesus, once dead, has been raised. He “has burst his three days' prison; let the whole wide earth rejoice.”

The Feast of the Resurrection – the glorious event we celebrate today – is the defining event for us as Christians. As the late priest and theologian Henri Nouwen wrote, “We are the people of the Resurrection, living our lives with a great vision that transforms us as we are living it.”²

“We are the people of the Resurrection, living our lives with a great vision that transforms us as we are living it.” That is the goal, at least. That is what we profess with our words to be true. But for how many of us gathered here this morning does some obstacle, some stumbling block, stand in the way? How many of us are dying ~ spiritually, if not physically – simply because we believe that we will?

Like that worker in the railway car, we, too, live and die by what we believe. I think it's safe to say that we humans tend to see what we expect to see – to experience

² Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Our Second Birth* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 150.

what we expect to experience. It's a phenomenon known as "motivated seeing," or "motivated perception."³ Our belief either opens us to the abundant, overflowing power of God, or it blinds us to what we could be and to the new life that even now God is preparing for us.

In today's version of the Easter story, from Matthew, we hear that Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" have come to see the tomb of Jesus. Unlike Mark and Luke, who both say that the women have brought spices to anoint Jesus' body, according to their custom, Matthew simply says that they have come to take a look. To investigate. To see with their own eyes.

We do not know what, exactly, the women expect to find. But it's likely that they do not expect to find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. No doubt they have heard – from Peter and the others, if not from Jesus Himself – the predictions of His death and Resurrection. They've heard, but they may not understand. Who could?

I imagine that they also do not expect to be given a job to do: "Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.'" Spread the Good News o'er all the earth: Jesus has died and is risen.

Yet they do ~ clearly. We wouldn't be here today, two thousand years later, if not.

Matthew says that the women leave the tomb "quickly with fear and great joy" ~ notice it's not either/or – to share what they have seen and heard and now experienced for themselves. That seems about right, doesn't it? This moment is terrifying and elating, all at once.

And this is what we are invited to do today, too: To come and see for ourselves. And to tell – with fear, perhaps, and with great joy.

What if we were to approach this Easter – and more than that, to approach our faith – by taking the radical move of checking our expectations, checking our assumptions, at the door? Not easy, right? We are conditioned to see and hear what we believe to be true and what we believe not to be true. As rational, educated people, we think we know precisely what is and is not possible. We know ourselves

³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-019-0637-z>

and the world around us to be finite, to be limited. And so maybe we see God as finite and limited, too.

We know what happens when we expect the worst: So often we become prisoners of our own limitations, consigning ourselves to our own fate. So often we seal the entrance to our own tombs and therein breathe our last.

But in the Resurrection of Jesus God shows us an alternate world-view. God demonstrates, once and for all, that humankind does not, in fact, have all the answers. There is, indeed, a power and a force greater than us – thanks be to God! God is always working to break us out of the corners into which we've painted ourselves. God is always upsetting our surety and our complacency in new and surprising ways.

Now, I need to linger on that word, “surprising,” for just a moment, because you and I have the luxury of a post-Resurrection, post-Easter faith – which is to say that we knew in advance, before we even left the house this morning, how the story ends. Spoiler alert! The tomb is empty. So coming to Church on Easter is not particularly shocking or eye-opening. We know what to expect. It is joyful; it is beautiful; it is cause for celebration. It smells good. It looks good. It feels good. Easter is the ultimate “Happily-Ever-After” story.

And that, I would argue, is a problem.

It's a problem because if Easter is about anything, it is about the un-expected. It is about God disrupting the natural order and knocking the earth off its axis in the once-for-all, definitive act of Resurrection, of raising Jesus from the dead. We typically celebrate Easter as one joyous and glorious day, but then on Monday – or maybe Tuesday – we go back to life as usual, making sandwiches from the leftovers of Easter dinner. We tend to domesticate Easter as just another day – a special day, mind you, but really just another day on the calendar. And as a result, we miss the life-changing, forever world-altering enormity of what God has done. It is human nature to pause, mark this momentous occasion, and then carry on as before. But if Easter, is to have any significance at all, Resurrection cannot be a given. It cannot be assumed. We always have to dance the dynamic, terrifying line of not really being certain how things will turn out.

That may not be what you wanted to hear this morning, but I owe it to you to tell the truth.

Have there ever been points in your life when Resurrection was not a given? Times of fear or grief, desolation or despair, when you simply were not been able to see the road ahead, or the possibility of a way out? This is a rhetorical question, really, because odds are very good that the answer is yes. At one point or another we have all stood on the precipice of the unknown and unexpected, peering into a dark, empty cave.

Here's the thing: In order to experience Resurrection, we first have to experience death. Real, staring into the grave death. There is no getting around it. It may not be a literal, physical death. 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 certainty. It may not look at all as we expect, and it probably will not be what we want or when we want it. God cannot be predicted, controlled, or manufactured. 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. Otherwise, our faith is nothing more than empty platitudes.

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So what does all of this mean for us? It means that, if any of us is sitting here this morning unsure about this Resurrection business, perhaps not even clear why we're here today, then we are blessed, indeed. Because then we might just be ready to see for ourselves. To look. To investigate. And then maybe – just maybe – to be surprised by God.

And what about those of us whose faith has never wavered, who have always been certain of the Resurrection? May God be gentle with us. May God break through that fortress of surety and bless us all with the tiniest dose of skepticism...so that we might not take this miracle, the resounding echo of an empty tomb, for granted.

I wish you a blessed – and an un-expected – Easter.

Amen.