

Risen Indeed!

A Sermon Preached by the
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Easter Sunday
March 23, 2008
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

If you imagine that pastors' knees get weak at the thought of preaching Easter, you'd be absolutely right! Any of us who has good sense will admit to some fear and trembling as this day approaches, not unlike those who arrived at the tomb to find the stone rolled away. But our weak-kneed approach probably has as much to do with the cultural and emotional baggage we carry around the resurrection story, and the expectations our congregation brings into the sanctuary, as it does with the difficulty of preaching resurrection. And either way, there's a lot riding on this one Sunday.

It's Easter, and in Christian churches everywhere, the sanctuary is usually full – and hallelujah for that – and whether you're here for the first time in a long time, the first time since Christmas, or the first time in your life, you've come to church at the right time. Whether you're a long-time faithful every-Sunday member or an occasional visitor, it's Easter, and you, too, have come to church at the right time. We are very glad to see all of you here this morning. This is the day that God has made, and we are rejoicing – welcome to worship!

Probably like some of you, I grew up in a family that celebrated Easter with new dresses and Mary Janes, Easter baskets, Easter bonnets, and Easter egg hunts in the backyard. We weren't church-goers, and I was in early elementary school before I heard the story of the resurrection, when a small, non-denominational church, Grace Memorial, was built on the corner of our block in east Denver. My sister and I took to Sunday School like ducks to water, memorizing Bible verses, winning awards for attendance, going to vacation Bible School. What I remember most were the pictures that accompanied the Bible stories, Jesus the Good Shepherd with the lamb on his shoulder, Jesus standing at the door knocking, Jesus at his baptism with the dove appearing over his head. But the one that comes to mind this morning is the resurrected Christ floating above the empty tomb, dressed in flowing white robes, clean, neat, healed and clearly on his way heavenward, his feet in the clouds.

Outwardly, that's how we come to Easter Sunday services, cleaned up in our Easter finery, our children scrubbed and ruffled, grandparents by our side, the ham in the oven at home, a Norman Rockwell Easter Sunday morning.

We have all probably tried to imagine what resurrection looks like. Describing one artist's rendering of the resurrection, someone wrote, "In it a gaunt, wounded man stumbled from the black mouth of his grave wearing nothing but a strip of linen around his loins. His bare feet were on the ground. His hurt places looked like they still hurt. He clearly needed something to eat, but there was such a look of stunned triumph on his face that I had no doubt he would live. I also had no doubt he had been dead. He had returned from some place so far and beyond this world that only God could have

brought him back. It was not a rescue; it was a resurrection, and he looked like it had cost him plenty.”

We don't know, of course, what it really looked like. No one does, because while the crucifixion was a public event, the resurrection was a rather more private affair, and the church has been trying to find persuasive arguments for or against the resurrection for a long time. Sometimes it's just best to report what we know, and trust the mystery of what happened between heaven and earth that morning. Like the first followers, we were not invited to the resurrection. All we've ever been given to consider are an open grave and some linen burial rags lying around, and reports of post-resurrection appearances that come later. So it's no wonder that preaching resurrection leaves us anxious and weak in the knees, no wonder that trying to explain what happened seems an impossible task.

What we do know is that *something* happened, and continues to happen, or we wouldn't still be talking about this man from Nazareth. It remains a mystery, but as Jim Gertmenian, the pastor at Plymouth Congregational Church, reminds us, “Not every mystery, after all, is meant to be solved. The best mysteries are simply meant to be loved.”¹ He goes on . . . “for the heart is able to love the mysteries that the mind can never solve.”²

All four Gospels report women at the tomb after the crucifixion. According to Matthew, there was another Mary with Mary Magdalene; in Mark there were two Marys and Salome; in Luke, several women, including two Marys and another named Joanna. But in the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene came alone, in the dark, and found the stone rolled away. There is no evidence, as there is in Matthew and Luke, that she brought spices to anoint the body, so perhaps she came only to convince herself that it was all true. She must have come expecting to see a sealed tomb, perhaps to find a place where she could grieve privately.

We can only imagine Mary's shock upon seeing the tomb opened, the stone rolled away. We can imagine her assumption that someone had robbed the grave, someone had taken the body, as she ran back to tell Simon Peter and the other disciples that “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him.” Following their own look into the tomb, where they apparently saw nothing more than the burial cloths neatly folded, the two disciples went home, leaving Mary Magdalene once again standing outside the tomb, alone and weeping.

Perhaps, like Mary Magdalene, we don't know what resurrection looks like and we're standing there desperate and weeping, wanting some sign of assurance that we have not been abandoned. Or perhaps we are simply afraid to believe or even imagine resurrection. Resurrection, after all, means radical change. It means transformation and we have to want it badly enough to set aside the truth of our past and live into the hope of a resurrected future, day after day. And it's hard work. I'm the first to admit that resurrection moments seem few and far between these days. You don't have to go very far or very deep to find evidence of a world desperately in need of resurrection, which often seems unbelievable and unattainable.

¹ James Gertmenian, “Progressive Christians Need: Mystery,” sermon preached at Plymouth Congregational Church, Minneapolis, MN, March 5, 2006.

² James Gertmenian, “Progressive Christians Need; Courage,” sermon preached at Plymouth Congregational Church, Minneapolis, MN, April 9, 2006.

But let's consider this bit of wisdom, again from Jim Gertmenian: "It isn't about *believing* the resurrection. It's about *living* the resurrection."³ I would second that, and add that before we can live the resurrection, we have to know what it looks like, we have to be able to recognize it.

So let me tell you what I think resurrection looks like. Several years ago, I had the great good fortune to travel to Russia as part of a study group on Russian Orthodoxy, and we traveled by boat from St. Petersburg to Moscow, stopping every day to visit another monastery, another church, another seminary, another museum. For a child of the 1950's growing up in America, it was an eye-opening journey for me. That little girl at Grace Memorial Church grew up being told that the Russians were a godless people, that they had no faith, no religion, certainly no church. We arrived in St. Petersburg on a Saturday evening, and on Sunday morning, we went to church. The church was full, and since there are no pews or places to sit, you could say it was standing room only – and there wasn't much of that. Everybody - from the youngest children to the most elderly worshipers – everybody stands for the whole service, which can often go for three hours.

It was the third Sunday in Eastertide for the Eastern Orthodox churches, and part of their Eastertide celebration included a procession around the church. Because we were guests of the bishop, our group of twelve was invited to be at the front of the procession, along with the children, who were dressed in red and gold brocade capes and carrying candles. We, too, were given candles to carry, and as we fell in line behind the children, the entire congregation followed. The priests led the way and were carrying the icons, the cross, and the Bible, all of which we could identify. But we were most intrigued by the one who was carrying a large bowl of water and something that looked like a giant wooden whisk, with curls of wood like curled ribbon at the end of the handle.

Russian churches are built in the shape of a cross. So the procession marched out the front door of the church and around to the side of the church to what would be one arm of the cross. The priests sang for a while, and then one of them said, "*Christos voskrese!* Christ is risen!" And the congregation responded, "*Voistinu voskrese!* Risen indeed." Three times. And each time, he dipped the wooden whisk in the water and showered all of us in what was clearly meant to be a remembrance of our baptism.

The procession began again and we moved to the head of the cross, where the same ritual was repeated, again three times, "*Christos voskrese!*" "*Voistinu voskrese!*" And more water. We walked once more to the other arm of the cross, and this time, the priest who had the honor of proclaiming resurrection picked up the wooden whisk, and looking at us said, in English, "Christ is risen!" And we responded, "Christ is risen indeed!" Three times, and three more times we were reminded of our baptisms.

During the Bolshevik Revolution hundreds, perhaps thousands of priests were killed or exiled, thousands of churches were closed or turned into museums or government buildings, and only three seminaries survived, mostly as empty buildings or residences for the handful of priests who were left. In 1943 the Soviets allowed the election of a new *patriarche* and re-opened some of the churches, but only to those who were loyal to the Communist party. Today there are fifty-seven seminaries, and all of them have waiting lists of students. Fifteen thousand churches have been rebuilt or restored. You know that iconography is central to the Russian Orthodox faith. The

³ James Gertmenian, "The Dawning Promise," sermon preached at Plymouth Congregational Church, Minneapolis, MN, March 27, 2005.

Russians will tell you that icons are windows into heaven. That Sunday morning in Eastertide, the faces of those standing with us proclaiming resurrection were the icons, the windows into heaven for me.

That's what resurrection looks like. Those people are living the resurrection.

A little closer to home. Most of you are probably familiar with the Kwanzaa Community Church in northeast Minneapolis. It is the first African-American Presbyterian church in the presbytery. Several weeks ago, we heard the Rev. Paula Sanders preach and talk about the Lydia Project, an outreach ministry of the Kwanzaa church. What some of you may not know is that for the Kwanzaa Community Church to be born, the Highland Park Presbyterian Church had to die. About ten years ago now, the members of the Highland Park church found themselves in a changing neighborhood, largely African-American, and a declining church membership. So they made an intentional decision to work towards developing an African-American Presbyterian church, a new church development of the presbytery, that would be a vital presence in that neighborhood, and when all was said and done, they turned over the building and everything in it to the Kwanzaa Community Church.

The morning that Kwanzaa was chartered as a congregation, the sanctuary was packed. Every available seat was taken and people were standing in the aisles. Pastor Alika Galloway stood up to preach and said, "You thought you were coming to a funeral, and here you are at a wedding!"

That's what resurrection looks like. And the members of both of those congregations are living the resurrection.

If you're still having trouble imagining resurrection, let's get even a little closer to home. Think about this. If you've ever come through a dark night of the soul and gotten to the light at the other end, you know what resurrection looks like.

If you've ever fallen into the despair of addiction and are still in recovery, you know what resurrection looks like.

If you've ever stepped away from an abusive relationship and recovered yourself as a beloved child of God, you know what resurrection looks like.

If you've ever faced acute or chronic illness, and decided not to let it get the better of you, you know what resurrection looks like. And you're living the resurrection.

It's Easter. And it's still Easter bonnets and Easter baskets, Easter bunnies and Easter brunch. But it's also resurrection. And, once again, the question on Easter Sunday is not whether you believe the resurrection, but whether you are living the resurrection. Let me close by reading a part of Jim Gertmenian's Easter sermon last year: "If belief is given to you, that's wonderful. But to live the resurrection is the higher calling and – I can assure you – much more costly than simply believing it. The commitment demanded is deeper, the risk greater, the price more dear. This is not easy good news. But it is, if we dare it, news that will change our lives."⁴ Thanks be to God. Alleluia!

⁴ Ibid.