

Those Who Hope

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, April 8, 2012.
Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day.
Based on Mark 16:1-8.*

One of the truly great joys of being a priest is that we are the repositories of people's stories. Often these stories are breathtakingly sad, tales of tragedies and dilemmas that render us mostly quiet, certainly if we have much sense. In the end most people don't come to priests looking for answers but to be heard and, yes, to be loved—safely but unreservedly.

Happily, though, we also hear stories of joyous moments, often little accounts of God's breaking through our consciousnesses, transforming a mood or an event. Of such moments someone very dear to me often exclaims, "Ah, it is a God thing." Frankly at times I find the remark a bit tedious and maybe self-centered to think that God is interested in such minutia about our lives. Shouldn't God be too busy, I ponder aloud, with drought and famine, wars and pestilence, sick children and the homeless, to be giving us goose bumps about one thing or another? Can you imagine what a buzz-kill I can be at such times? This fact has been brought to my attention.

But on Easter, I reconsider. You see, Easter reminds me that what I think I know about God is just that: what I *think* I know about God. Even as one devoted to theology and theologians, I have to admit that thinking and knowing about God may on occasion be the wrong kind of process. Beyond doubt it is wrong if it leads to precision and the certainty that almost always follows such exactitude. Therefore, my Easter approach to God this morning includes hoping, rejoicing, thanking, and feeling. I shall attempt to leave thinking and knowing for another day.

Yesterday I heard from, I suppose, my oldest friend in the world. From birth we lived next door to one another until we left our hometown for the same undergraduate college. Though we don't keep up with one another much, the love is so deep and real that when out of the blue one of us makes contact, we pick up just where we were. Yesterday all in text, we recalled past Easters, remembering my troubling affinity for white sport coats and her smart style for matching and very cute, she reminded me, shoes, purses and hats! The exchange lasted just a few moments, but it was a joyous in-breaking at the end of a really busy week, giving me the occasion to recall her with such uncomplicated but genuine love. She has known intense heartbreak in her life as a parent, suffering what no parent ever should, and, yet, for her, Easter still rises. That fact moves me to tears every time I think of it, helping me to see Easter when it has no right to be, when darkness appears for all the world to be impenetrable. And, yet, Easter comes.

A contact with a newer friend this weekend also reminded me that while not all things end perfectly, sometimes they do. A relative from whom much of the family has been estranged recently became very ill, so ill in fact that end of life decisions were required of those closest, even though the estrangement had been deep and longstanding. Unable as they were to know his wishes, these siblings struggled with the doctor's advice to stop the measures keeping their brother alive. Just after they reluctantly agreed to cease intervention, their brother's lawyer called to say that he had found the original statement indicating that this brother had clearly stated he wanted no extreme measures, believing as he did that life was eternal and that as he left this one, he would join a new form of life. Just a few moments after they learned this, their brother died peacefully. It was noon on Good Friday, but it was Easter somewhere.

In her poem, *Halleluia*, Mary Oliver admits that for most of her life she has clambered toward being happy and trying to love everything and then asks:

And have you too been trudging like that, sometimes
almost forgetting how wondrous the world is
and how miraculously kind some people can be?
And have you too decided that probably nothing important
is ever easy?
Not, say, for the first sixty years.
Halleluiah, I'm sixty now, and even a little more,
and some days I feel I have wings.

Unlike Mary Oliver I am not sixty yet, and anyone who says I am is looking for a fight—even if it is indeed so close that I can feel its creepy breath on my neck, I am not there yet. But thanks be to God, I know what Mary Oliver is talking about even now as a youngster.

Easter reminds me of how wondrous the world is, particularly on mornings like this when everything seems not only possible but completely likely. It is no surprise that the literary giants of the Christian scripture chose to have the women show up at the tomb early in the morning. I do love mornings, the earlier the better, and can't understand why everyone doesn't. *Weeping may linger for the night*, claims the Psalmist, *but joy comes with the morning*. The tears in these faithful women's eyes, the catch in their throats which could not be swallowed, were replaced with gasps and fearful joy when it began to dawn on them that no death, no matter how deafening and final, could silence the joy in their hearts. They didn't get it, but they felt it from head to toe.

In my world, the world of the church, people spend years discussing the resurrection, what it was, how it was, what it means. Often the greatest joy in these discussions comes from the satisfaction of knowing that one side is right and the other side is wrong. We do so love being right, don't we? I'd like to make a bold proclamation on this Easter Day 2012 in the most respectful way possible: I don't care what you think about the resurrection. I want to care on some level, but I don't. But I do passionately care about this—for you and for me: have you experienced the risen Christ in your life, have I experienced Christ in mine? Do we experience Christ today, perhaps of all days? Can we release into the mystery, which is God, our compulsions to know and to control? Can we simply say, even if just for today, "Thank you, God, for continuing to come to us through Christ, who somehow still lives and moves among us, transforming us slowly into the people we are being created to be"?

Ours is a world and a church desperately more in need of people being transformed than people who are emphatically doctrinaire. Ours is a faith that flourishes less as we "get it," "grab it" and "control it" than when we are surprised by the joy of Easter, the presence of God in a world we sometimes suspect in our despair to be without God.

There is so much wrong in the world, my brothers and sisters, really, really wrong. But this is right, this moment of people gathering in search of God, not making—not most of us anyway—extraordinary claims about what we know or what precisely is going to happen, but making a loud statement about hope, hope that all that is to be in our lives and in the world has not yet come, hope that each one of us can be a moment of light to another and that another's light will shine on us at least part of the time.

Look around, my friends. We have surrounded ourselves with those who give their hearts to hope, and Easter has come again.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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