

Easter reflection; April, 2017

Good morning and Happy Easter! I hope you have all had a wonderful start to this magnificent day!

This morning, I'd like to begin my Easter reflection with a bit of teaching and a bit of history. I offer this teaching because I think it's important for us to better understand the meaning behind what we celebrate today; the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, a mystery that cannot be explained and yet, a mystery that is at the foundation of our faith. Through the centuries, even though thousands of pages have been written to try to explain and make sense out of the resurrection, there really is no way for human beings to fathom what the Resurrection of Jesus ultimately involved....and I think that needs to be said out loud and from a pulpit. Frankly, how the resurrection of Jesus occurred is known only to the mind of God. And to me, it is presumptuous for any human being to believe that he or she fully understands the mind of God. Yet, through hundreds of years, many theologians have offered their own take on why the resurrection of Christ came about. But as finite human beings, it is ultimately only by faith and through our imaginations that we can live into this divinely incredible mystery; a mystery about the resurrection of Jesus Christ which is at the heart of our faith and a mystery that has captivated people like you and me for over two thousand years. All four gospels point to the resurrection of Christ as proof of God's love for Jesus and for humanity, but it is ultimately left up to each of us individually to come to terms with this mysterious miracle that was captured first through storytelling and later captured on parchment over two thousand years ago.

Since that very first Easter morning when Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Jesus whom at first even she didn't recognize, countless numbers of people have wondered what Jesus' resurrected body must have looked like. If the truth be told, most of us have probably wondered ourselves: was the resurrected Jesus some kind of translucent, ethereal spirit or was he somehow fully alive, yet physically transformed?

Our only answers to these questions lay in our four gospel testimonies which all point to the truth that something incredible happened on that first Easter morning. In the 24th chapter of Luke's gospel, the author of this book tells two specific stories where the risen, physical Jesus appeared to be alive and in the

flesh. The first incident occurred just after Easter morning, when a risen Jesus accompanied two rather despondent friends as they walked a long journey to the town of Emmaus. At first, these two friends didn't recognize Jesus either, but soon enough they would when together they would share a meal. The next appearance of the living Jesus occurred just after the Emmaus road story, when He appeared to his cadre of friends who couldn't believe what they were seeing. To drive the point home that the risen Jesus was in fact alive and in-the-flesh, through this story we are told that Jesus asked for something to eat. In both of these stories, eating is important because a spirit wouldn't get hungry, but a living, breathing human being would. The point and the heart of these stories was meant to testify to and to teach the truth that somehow – by the grace and power of God – Jesus was again alive; living and breathing like you and me. This is the mystery that has baffled theologians and wobbly Christians like you and me since the beginning of the first century. The rational mind thinks, how could such a thing be possible? And yet, something miraculous must have happened that day, because the resurrection of Jesus Christ certainly turned the first century world upside-down. A new movement gained great momentum and unlikely evangelists like Peter and Paul became missionaries for Christ's sake in a world that was hardly welcoming to such a ridiculous message. Yet something big must have happened because even today, you and I are here in this church, worshipping God for God's mighty act of resurrecting Jesus. And also worshipping God for resurrecting the dead places in our lives, often when we least expect it. Personally, I believe resurrections still happen every day, we just need to be open to allowing God's Spirit to get to work in and through us, so that those dead zones in our lives can become alive once again.

And now I want to turn from teaching and instead tell you a story about resurrection that changed my life and the lives of a few other friends who walked with me on our own Emmaus Road experience. About fourteen years ago when I first began thinking about becoming a priest, I began a journey with a discernment committee that was formed in my home parish. This discernment committee was charged with learning why I felt called to the priesthood and if the truth be told, the discernment process was often cloudy and very confusing. I wasn't very good at articulating myself and frankly, I probably tried too hard to answer questions in a politically correct way, so the conversations shared among the members of my committee hadn't been very productive thus far. I will never forget the night that a woman on my committee floored me when she asked me a

very pointed question. But before I share that question with you, let me tell you a little about this incredible woman who even today at 93 is still a very dear friend.

At the time, this particular woman, Helen Ross, was the wife of a retired Episcopal priest and she had been (married to Vic) for more than fifty years. Throughout their marriage, Helen and Vic moved to various parts of the country and in the 1950's and 60's, they lived in northern Virginia during the difficult years of our country's struggle with racism and segregation. Through her own life experiences, Helen had "been around the block a few times" and I came to find out that she did not mince words! The question that she asked me that night is still seared into my memory even today, because it changed the course of our discernment committee in a very profound way. She said to me quite pointedly, "Paul, what if I told you that I don't believe in the Virgin Birth and I'm not so sure about the Resurrection. How would you respond to a parishioner who might say the same to you on any given Sunday morning??"

I have to admit, I was floored. The room was quiet for a moment, but then, the strangest thing happened. Everyone began to talk in turn about their own faith questions, their own misgivings, their doubts, their journeys. By bluntly stating her own somewhat "heretical" doubts, that gutsy woman, my friend Helen Ross, gave permission to everyone else in the room to share what was really on their hearts and afterward our discussions were never the same. They were more real. They were more honest. And as a group we were more connected. After that, I was finally able to articulate why I felt called to become a priest. That call being so that perhaps I could share with others how God's continual presence and grace had supported me throughout the firestorms of my life. A grace, a presence, and a supporting love that has transformed me in ways I really can't describe. My own call to priesthood was grounded in the hope that perhaps through my own story and life examples, that I might help others to find a faith in God; a faith that has truly sustained me all of my life. Through good times and in bad, God has always seen me through and never have I felt as though I was really going it alone. That feeling and that reassurance of God's presence in my life is resurrection in the plainest and most practical ways, for God has never given up on me, even when I was ready to give up on myself.

The question that Helen asked was not was not really heretical, after all. In fact, it was a real question asked by a real person who just couldn't fathom what the

resurrection of Christ was all about. And again, if truth be told, not one of us here today can do the same either. So, I think that question gives us an opportunity to ask ourselves and to ask one another, what does resurrection really mean to you and me in our daily lives? I've thought about that recently and I'd like to share a few glimpses of my own understanding of resurrection's reality in this 21st century world:

- I've seen resurrection in the lives of widows and widowers who have continued moving forward with purpose in their own lives, even in the midst of their own profound sorrow and grief. That is resurrection.
- I've seen resurrection in the eyes of an expectant grandparent who has been transformed by an unanticipated joy that makes them gleeful about possibilities for the future.
- I've seen resurrection in the lives of those whose relationships have changed or ended, only to be surprised by some new aspect of their lives they couldn't have seen coming.
- I've seen resurrection in my own life, when I slowly began the process of letting go of old hurts and grudges, replaced instead by a slowly softening heart when I didn't think that would ever be possible.
- And I've also seen resurrection in a faith community who has moved into a new era of shared ministry, where individuals are stepping out in faith by taking risks and by continuing to do God's work right here in our own neighborhood.

These are just a few examples of where I've noticed that resurrection has sprung up around me recently. I wonder if you have your own experiences of resurrection or if you've noticed some unanticipated new beginnings that you couldn't quite have imagined? And I wonder if perhaps you might be willing to share those new beginnings with the loved ones whom you may gather with today? I hope you'll take that risk by sharing your observations with others. To be sure, the Christian celebration of Easter is a day and a concept that we will never fully wrap our heads around. But in conclusion, please allow me to end this reflection with one final perspective: If Jesus is the Incarnate Son of God who

came into the world to understand our human condition, then by his death and through his resurrection we can be assured of three things:

1. That Jesus understands what it's like to live, to love, to suffer, and to die as a human being. Jesus gets who we are. Each of us, every day.
2. That God our Creator loved not only Jesus, but that God's love for humanity extends to every human being. And by extension of Jesus' resurrection, we too will share in our own resurrections both in this life and in the next.
3. That the power of God's loving, and life-giving Spirit always brings forth new life to the whole of this creation, even in the midst of what we may think is certain death. God is life and because we are made in the image of God, God's Spirit continually breathes new life throughout this creation each and every day.

This is the power of Easter and this is our Easter message: that death is never the end, for God's love and power is absolutely without measure and we can take that to the bank. For in his letter to the Romans, St. Paul reminds us: (We are) convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." –*Romans 8:38-39*.

Happy Easter everyone! Amen!