

Easter Sunday, A, 2008

John 20: 1-18

March 23, 2008

Title: Christ Closed The Yawning Gates of Hell

Grace and Peace to You from God our Father and Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the Bright Morning Star, The first born of the Dead.

On this day the church strains to speak of Easter. Here are some ways we have declared Jesus is Risen:

Christ Closed the Yawning Gates of Hell..... The Tomb is Empty

Death Could Not Hold Him..... God Has the Last Word

The Future is Open.... God Stalks this World With New Life

Christ is Loose and Alive.....The Eighth Day of Creation.....

ALLELUIA

The church gropes at Easter to speak the ineffable. We strain to put into words the baffling resurrection of Jesus which fits none of our settled categories. The New Life granted to Jesus is a newness beyond our achieving.

We can speak with ease about our Friday world. Easter is a foreign language. When Peter and the fast runner go to the tomb in response to Mary Magdalene's claim that Jesus' body is missing, they see the physical evidence ---CSI---the linen wrappings lying there. What do they do? Having rushed to the tomb, having looked in, one believing....they go home? A kind of Easter without the music, without the transformation, without new life. Just a trip back to the house. We know about the power of death.

Just ask UNC-CH senior Eric Johnson who in an editorial in our local paper refuses to accept the claim that college students think they are immortal.

‘What rubbish,’ he says. ‘Those of us graduating this year have witnessed a homicidal former student plow a car through our campus. We’ve absorbed the tragic deaths of a student who fell from a dorm window and a beloved mascot killed by a car. We’ve seen our dance clubs and our neighborhoods become scenes of senseless gang violence. We’ve grieved deeply for our peers at Virginia Tech. Eve Carson’s death is yet another lesson we didn’t need.’”

We know about death’s powers, lessons we do not need. As one poet declared:

We know ourselves to be held. Held by our fear and anxiety; held by grudge and resentment; held by doubt and fatigue; held by too much stuff....how are we no longer held?

I want to proclaim the power of the resurrection, a loosening of the hold. And to faithfully do so is not to make the resurrection of Jesus some happy ending. It’s to stand in the very places where we have faced the diminishing powers and say exactly there RESURRECTION. For if Jesus is raised from death what really is settled?

--Is there life beyond a broken relationship?

--Is there any real value in affirming those who are devalued?

--What place do immigrants have in this land?

--Must we see our Arab neighbors as enemies?

--Is there anything besides a shallow grave for those stricken with cancer?

--Must we be known only for what we consume?

--Will hard economic times diminish us?

If Jesus is raised from death, are these matters settled?

Frankly popular culture gives us many windows into Easter, veiled as they may be. Take the recent geezer movie *The Bucket List*, where two persons who know they are dying decide to live it up. They go on a pilgrimage without faith overtones....But in so doing they are surprised

by how new life comes to them and they are able to receive new life even before death.. They are able to move beyond grudges, beyond the yawning gates of their personal hells...They are given healing. As one character says at the funeral of the other ---He helped me find life. That's God's Bucket List ---pouring out new life where we least expect it.

Mary confuses Jesus to be a gardener. What an overlooked name for Christ. We call him the Good Shepherd, the Messiah and Lord, the Son of God. How about Gardener? As with the gift of Eden so with the gift of resurrection---a planting, a sowing, a tilling, a bud planted and grown. Gardeners give life.

How many times has the gardener Jesus come to us and we like Mary didn't know it?

--suggesting to us that we could build a Habitat House and host an intern in our 25th anniversary year? Placing before us a trip to the Mnene Parish in Zimbabwe? Sending children and youth to church camp for the first time? Being tapped on the shoulder to become a Stephen Minister or a Christ care group? Serving as a shepherd to a new member? Living with profound grief impelling you to reach others in grief. Jesus the gardener growing life in us.

In May young adult Brian Luke heads to Armenia to serve in the Peace Corps. Brian wrestled with this for a long time and found he could say I know God is calling me to the Peace Corps. Jesus is the gardener for new life!

Mary, he declares. The resurrected one knows her, know us by name. In so named, so is given resurrection identity.

A woman goes to a restaurant counter to pay her bill. Beneath the glass at the counter is a picture of two soldiers. "Where are they?" she asks. "Iraq," the woman behind the counter declares.

"What are their names?"

"I don't know their names. God knows their names!"

Listen for your name today. Listen in the gladness. Listen in the music. Listen in the water, in the torn bread, poured wine. Listen in the scent of the flowers. Listen in the Alleluias. Listen for the gardener Jesus saying your name. Mary named by Jesus went and did some naming....I have seen the Lord!

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