

He Is Risen!

Sermon for Easter, April 12 2009

Rev. Franklin E. Vilas, D.Min.

In this ninth year of the new millennium, we are in quite a different world than that of my grandparents, who saw the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. For them, the world turned according to Newtonian physics. Objects were solid mass, and gravitation alone explained the movement of the stars. Nuclear physics, quasars, quantum mechanics and DNA were not even in their lexicon.

We left the twentieth century and entered the twenty-first with a wholly different consciousness. We know now of energies, particles, biological and psychological realities that they never even dreamed of. It is essential for us to approach everything—including our faith—in full acceptance of what has been revealed to us about God’s creation in the last hundred years.

It is therefore as modern people—more aware of the mystery at the core of the universe than were our ancestors—that I would ask you to approach the subject of the resurrection on this Easter morning. Please allow your reason and your imagination to take you into the two scenes which I will describe—scenes as old as the scriptures, and as new as this twenty-first century after Christ,

“Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but lying rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, went in, and he saw and believed.”

It is the dark, yet wakeful moment that hovers between night and day. A man in a bed in Jerusalem yawns, stretches, and turns over for yet another half-hour of sleep. Outside the city, in a gentle wooded area, a bird begins to sing. It is a quiet time, a hushed time—a time of drowsiness at the end of a long sleep.

In a nook by a sealed cave, two soldiers are asleep on the grass, the sound of their snoring blending with the gurgle of a brook which flows among the trees. The darkness still hangs heavily—but, as a second bird begins to sing, the sky imperceptibly turns to grey.

In the East, a faint red glow appears. And then, as time passes and other sounds may be heard, a ray of light, gentle and persistent as time itself, steals across the sky and touches the edge of a cloud, retreating overhead. Then, just as gently and persistently, the bred and glowing edge of the sun appears over the horizon.

We who are modern, and understand the nature of the universe better than those in former times did, are aware that the peace and tranquility of this gentle dawn are illusions of the senses. We know that what we are perceiving is really something much more dramatic, much more furious than our senses

tell us. For we are actually experiencing the rotation of the planet Earth as it hurtles through space around its parent star at incredible speed.

And that red, peaceful sphere emerging just now from behind a low hill is actually a raging furnace of hydrogen and other gases, so awesome in its power that its sudden explosion would disintegrate the solar system it controls.

Yet from where we are we perceive only its tranquility. A ray of light from the rising sun now reflects on the cast-off helmet of one of the guards at the tomb. It seems as a dawn like any other dawn—and yet it is utterly different. For from somewhere beyond the Sun, from beyond the galaxy itself another ray of energy steals softly across the landscape.

What sort of energy is it? Who can tell? In this vast universe of which we know so little even today, there are many forms of energy beyond the experience or understanding of the human race. This ray enters the atmosphere of the Earth from the edges of eternity, and quietly penetrates the small glade outside of Jerusalem.

One soldier jumps in his sleep, and the breathing of the other becomes irregular. The birds are suddenly silent, and an eerie stillness hangs about the glade. It is almost as if some great concentration of energy is building, focused on this small piece of land like sunlight through a gigantic magnifying glass. The sun continues to rise, and when it is fully above the horizon, the stillness breaks. From somewhere deep within the bowels of the Earth there comes a growing thunder. The ground heaves perceptibly, and the guards leap awake.

Then, with a steady motion, like some great door sliding open, the large boulder rolls away from the mouth of the cave. The guards glance at one another and propelled by a natural human fear of the unknown, they stumble off through the trees, until the clattering of their armor is no longer heard.

The vital hush returns—a hush as before the dawn of life on the planet Earth, a hush filled with the pregnant potential of creation itself.

Then, a silent figure appears at the mouth of the cave. It hesitates, as if waking from some deep sleep. Immediately the sounds of morning begin again, but with anew vigor. It seems as if every bird in Jerusalem is now in this small glade. The figure walks, tentatively at first, but then with more assurance, across the clearing and into the trees.

“Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white.. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she Turned around and saw Jesus standing there....”

It is difficult to imagine the devastation felt by Mary, such a close friend of Jesus, as she stands weeping by the tomb. She had found the stone rolled away and reported it to the disciples. Several have run to see for themselves, and have now departed, leaving her alone. Deprived of the one who

was the light of her life, she had lost even the consolation of grieving as she prepares his body for burial. All of the horror of the previous day's experiences rushes in upon her.

And then, according to the Gospel of John, the transformation begins. As she weeps, Mary bends to look into the tomb, which she had not done before. Through her tears, she sees a strange sight—two men in white robes sitting where Jesus' head and feet had been laid. The scripture says that they were angels—messengers from another realm of being.

The appearances of beings of light are not unknown in the Bible. Again and again when God wishes to convey some deep message to human beings, the veil of matter parts and the mystery of creative love breaks through.

Nor is this unknown in our own day. In moments of great trial—or events such as near-death experiences—normal senses give way to a deeper perception and divine truth may be conveyed. It is so with Mary at this moment of deepest grief and loss. In her confusion she sees them as ordinary human beings and responds to their question out of her desolation: “They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

Mary has no sense of resurrection—only of an empty tomb, from which the body of her teacher has been stolen. She turns, then, and sees another figure standing in the garden. We are told that it was Jesus, but in her grief she thinks that it is the grave-tender—the gardener. Mary pleads for his help. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Then Jesus speaks one word—“Mary!”—and in that word is contained all the love in the universe. How often in our own times of doubt or grief would we give anything to hear our name spoken gently by the living God? We are here in church, many of us, because we seek assurance that our lives mean more than just the span of a few brief years on the planet Earth. We come to places of worship because we long to be touched by a sense of the presence of God. Does God *really* know my name? In the Divine plan, am I more than just a collection of atoms and DNA?

In this wonderful scene outside the tomb we find the answer to that question. Faith can send echoes of that experience into our hearts as well. “Mary!”

Suddenly through the tears of grief, through the anguish of loss, through the confusion of shock—the light breaks. And Mary responds, “Rabbouni!” Master! In this moment of surprise and joy it is a woman, according to John, who becomes the first witness to the risen Christ. In the sound of that familiar voice calling her name, the resurrection occurs for Mary.

And this, after all, is what resurrection is really about. When all is said and done, when all the arguments about what actually happened at that first Easter have ceased, the truth is that I want to hear my God, through the spirit of the Risen Christ, call my name! I want to experience that moment of recognition when I know that creative love conquers everything—even the bitterness of personal loss and human death.

This is the breakthrough that Mary experienced—and that soon afterwards, according to John, became the joyful experience of the other apostles as well. And it has continued to be the

experience of Christians ever since—of ordinary believers and of great mystics—who over the centuries have known the joy of the resurrection, and have heard their names called gently by the risen Christ.

I pray for this knowledge for each and every one of us this Easter, in the year of our Lord 2009. There may be some of you who have come to this Easter service out of habit, or because it is a “family thing” to do. Perhaps you don’t know why you are here. I invite you to draw near to celebrate the mystery of the Eucharist, and to think of Mary at the tomb on that morning so long ago.

Share with her the joy of recognition—listen to the words, the music and in the silence hear the Risen Christ speak your name. For we proclaim with Mary—and with all those who have heard his voice over the years—

‘THE LORD IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!’