

C Easter 1
 2013 March 31
 Isaiah 65.17-25
 1 Corinthians 15.19-26
 Luke 24.1-12
 "This is the Day. Let Us Rejoice!"

A great cartoon. Easter Sunday in a Minnesota church. A preacher intones from the pulpit : "Christ is risen!" The congregation replies, "Christ is risen, you betcha!"

Easter Sunday, 2013. Here we are again. Tomorrow will be April the first, April Fool's Day. The days will roll on after today as they have always done. However, it is worth reminding ourselves when we become too complacent or sure that nothing will ever change, that our sacred texts affirm that the Jesus whose resurrection we celebrate today will return some day. Some biblical texts say, ".in the clouds with glory." We will affirm with thanksgiving that someday, history will change dramatically once again, as it did on that day when the tomb was found empty.

But for now, even in the excitement of this day, we can already begin to anticipate the resumption of our normal lives. Tomorrow will be Monday, followed by Tuesday, and so on. "Christ is risen, indeed!" we affirm. So what?

For the past 40 days we have been observing the Season of Lent, a time in which, anticipating the suffering of Christ, we examine ourselves, repent, sometimes adopt a new practice or give up an old one. A time for us, in some way, to empathize with the journey that Jesus made from his home in Galilee to his place of execution in Jerusalem, knowing what was waiting for him there every step along the journey. In the preceding chapter of Luke's gospel, chapter 23, we find the story of the suffering and death of Jesus on that dreaded Roman cross. Things were most certainly dark and hopeless for the little band of disciples, including but not limited to the eleven who were closest to Jesus after Judas Iscariot betrayed him and deserted.

That group of disciples, including the women who went to the tomb and others, was not anticipating just another Monday, followed by just another Tuesday, and so on. They were wondering how they were going to put their lives back together without their teacher and master. They were wondering if the Jerusalem religious authorities might be coming after them next. They were wondering if there was anything left of their former livelihoods in Galilee. They were wondering how they were going to rebuild their families, if indeed they left wives and children behind in order to follow their now-dead master.

All four of the gospel accounts of the "third day" after Jesus died have one or more women going to the tomb in order to wash his body and anoint it with oils and spices, which was common Jewish practice in those days. When they arrive at the tomb the stone is rolled away from the entrance, and the body is not there. Immediately two men in dazzling clothes appear, and they are terrified. The men say to the women, "Why do

you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.'

Remember, the two men say. Luke, like Mark and Matthew, includes three explicit times when Jesus tells his followers that he will be arrested, killed, and raised. Two of those are in chapter 9 and one in chapter 18. Here is how one of the predictions from chapter 9 reads. Jesus says to his disciples, 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.' The other two predictions are very similar, and indeed Luke has others beyond just these three, perhaps six of them in all.

"Remember," the two dazzling men say. How could the women forget? They could forget because death is so final, so powerful, so overwhelming, so numbing. And furthermore, we don't see people alive after they are dead, do we? Actually, the disciples had seen the power of God demonstrated by resurrection before. The women, and the other disciples, too, had apparently also forgotten that, as recorded by Luke in chapter 7, Jesus raises a widow's son who has died, and in chapter 8, a girl who is twelve years old.

If the women, and the other disciples did remember those resurrections, they probably thought that only Jesus could pull those off, and he certainly couldn't raise himself. Nope. It was over. It had been a great time, a time of excitement and enthusiasm, and they had been sure that he was the promised and long-expected Messiah. But apparently not. The Messiah can't be killed on a Roman cross, an instrument of torture and humiliation. In fact, he can't be killed at all. So apparently in spite of all the charisma and amazing miracles, and healings, and the two resurrections, he wasn't the Messiah after all. Time to go back home to Galilee, assuming the religious authorities and their allies the Romans don't get them first.

But the women encounter the two dazzling men at the tomb, and they are reminded to remember, to remember how Jesus had predicted all of these things, but always followed by his resurrection. Arrest, yes. Suffering, yes. Death, yes. But then, resurrection.

One can imagine, with great enthusiasm they return to the other disciples and tell them what they have seen and heard. The others are not impressed. "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." Just some kind of fantasy, they must have thought. After all these women were exhausted and ridden with grief. Must have been an illusion. Luke tells us that Peter, however, runs to the tomb and finds it just as the women have said, and he is amazed. Some translations say perplexed.

The four gospel accounts of the resurrection differ in some important ways, but all of them have an empty tomb. Very shortly in chapter 24 of Luke's gospel, Jesus himself will encounter groups of his followers. But at the end of today's reading all we have is

the empty tomb, some dazzling men, their encouragement to remember, and some puzzled disciples.

We are not so different from that frightened band of disciples, of course. We will be seeing how much we are like them over the next few weeks, as we progress through the Season of Easter 2013. We will always harbor some doubt, sometimes not so bad, sometimes terrifyingly strong, about the reality of the resurrection. So if today you are wrestling with that question, hang on, and keep coming to worship. You can be sure you are not alone.

In 1st Corinthians the 15th chapter, Paul puts forth an eloquent and impassioned defense of the reality of the resurrection, because at least some of those Corinthians were doubting, too. We heard the tail end of that defense read a little while ago. “But in fact,” he writes, “Christ has been raised from the dead.” It was that conviction that propelled Paul across the Mediterranean world three times, spreading the good news that he had experienced, and especially when the risen Christ appeared to him on the road to the town of Damascus.

The women and the other disciples are amazed and perplexed. What has happened? Can it really be true? Has he been raised, as he said he would be? And if so, where is he?

I have shared with you before a ritual that one of my former seminary professors and his friend from seminary re-enact every Easter. You can be sure that they will be doing it today. My professor’s friend calls him up every Easter afternoon. He doesn't say hello, or identify himself. He says only five words: “Jesus is on the loose!” And he hangs up the phone.

“Jesus is on the loose!” Still carrying out that mission that he proclaimed for himself in Luke, chapter 4:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to bring good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

The psalmist proclaims, “This is the day the LORD has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!” Of all the days that the LORD has made, and will make, this day, this Resurrection Day, that we remember and celebrate every spring, is the most precious of them all. For that Sunday morning, the day the women went to the tomb and found it empty, is the hinge of human history, the fulfillment of so many ancient prophecies, the perfect demonstration of our Father's love and compassion, the final defeat of darkness, sin and death. That is, of course, the answer to the question, “So what?”

This day, this Resurrection Day, is the day the LORD has made. Let us rejoice, and be glad in it, for Jesus is on the loose.