

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Easter 1-A (12 April 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:1-6, Acts 10:34-43, John 20:1-18, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Beginning: Once upon a time...

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” It had been a rough weekend. Mary had watched someone she loved be tortured, violated, and lynched by a brutal state and a merciless mob. She was out early on Sunday morning. Mary wasn't able to eat; she was unable to sleep. Mary walked slowly, sadly, feeling alone in the world. Before the city awoke and swept her off into a new week, she wanted to spend some time acknowledging her grief. As we all long to do when we're missing someone, she went to visit the grave site. And in the early morning mists she found yet one more dagger to pierce her already-broken heart. Even the cemetery had been defiled. The grave had been robbed. Her beloved had not been left to rest in peace. The nightmare continued.

Our own global nightmare is taking place during this season. The current pandemic has killed more than 1700 people in the state of New Jersey alone – and its reach is global. Here in South Jersey, we have been among the last to experience the ill effects of this event: which makes the dissonance of dark news and sunny spring days all the more stressful and confusing as we wonder, how will this impact us? Which of my friends or loved ones will fall ill? Which will die? And when will this happen?

We have now lived through weeks of grim mortality predictions and profound uncertainty: great darkness that makes it difficult for us to see. We have been asked to stay at home and many millions of people have seen their businesses shut down and their livelihoods taken away. Important rhythms of life and patterns of social interaction have been stripped away from us unceremoniously. All the while, the death toll continues to climb.

Add to this the mixed, inconsistent, and often conflicting messages coming from our governments, those whose job it is to lead us in a coherent response to this global threat. If the darkness of disease and death weren't sufficient, add the fog of human prevarication and mixed motives to obscure our vision. It's no wonder we feel blind, helpless, discouraged, and alone.

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2 Middle: Tension: destabilizing

When Mary found that empty tomb, she immediately sought help from two other disciples of Jesus. Peter and John came and bore witness to what she had found, but they didn't have a single word of help to offer. They just walked away, silent witnesses to Mary's sadness and their own.

I feel some kinship with these three disciples: Mary in her tears, Peter and John in their silence. This early community of Christ-followers find themselves living in the dark and not understanding all the things that Jesus had told them. Think of it: Easter morning has come and the Lord has risen, but they are unable to recognize this fact. Resurrection is so unexpected, so outside the norm, so unthinkable that, in fact, they can't think that way. They are stuck, instead, in a sea of sadness, with the waters rising to their necks and the soft mud sucking their feet downward from below. This, *after* the Resurrection has taken place!

Although Peter and John walk away, Mary remains with the mystery, dwells in the darkness, is determined to follow it through. She doesn't shy away from the pain, but embraces the reality before her. That's how she encounters the two angels. Angels are messengers from God, signs that God is near and helpers along the way.

Two angels, like the Old Testament and the New Testament that together show us the patterns of God's activity in the world and the ways that God's people have experienced God: the ways we are likely to be encountered by God. Patterns of darkness followed by light, death followed by resurrection, alientation followed by reconciliation.

Two angels, like the Bible and the Church, those dynamic witnesses to God's love that have been handed down to us through the centuries, one faithful generation after another, with frequent rhythms of wandering and return, corruption and reformation, distraction with fads of interpretation or gimmicks of showiness followed by Gospel clarity and authentic piety.

Two angels, like Christmas and Easter, these two principal holy days around which the whole church year is arranged and through which the story of Resurrection life is told.

Two angels, like Communion and Baptism, those core sacraments of the church from which we are currently fasting in response to the trauma of the moment, practices we love because they sanctify our bodies and involve our whole persons in the story of the Kingdom of God.

Two angels, two messengers to lead us into Jesus' embrace, like Mary who embraced her pain and discovered Jesus on the other side of it!

3 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

Here's my message for you today:

Jesus is risen! The world threw at him the worst it could muster. Fear, loathing, and the heavy hand of a corrupt state with no actual ethical mores. Ridicule, torture, crucifixion. Burial with a heavy stone and an armed guard. None of this could hold back the power of a Resurrection life. Jesus rose from the dead, the firstborn into a new kind of life, the kind of life you stepped into at your baptism.

So you may be at home today, worried and frightened. You may be in the hospital today, sick and fighting for your life. You may be alone, separated from someone you love and chafing at your own inability to be with them. There's no denying these are dark times, smothering us with the stink of death and fear. But these times aren't the conclusion, or even the controlling narrative, of our lives. Because Jesus is risen, we too are living Resurrection lives and, in the end, none of those things are going to stop God's power of love and healing from doing its thing in our lives.

In the meantime, I urge you to look up, look around. Even in the darkness we are surrounded by angels, messengers from God, sent to encourage us and remind us and lead us home. Eucharist and baptism may be two of those angels, and we're missing them right now, but their absence is for us an invitation to notice other, neglected messengers.

God has filled the world with reminders. Resurrection is our story. Jesus has shown us the way. Even death on a cross is no obstacle. Instead, the dark places in life only serve to heighten our anticipation. If Christ has been raised, so will we be.

And that is our Easter cry:

Alleluia, the Lord is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Amen.