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St. John's Episcopal Church  
Easter

## THE CROSS IN THE LILIES

*Dedicated to my father, Lewis, and my three sons, Caleb, Jacob and Jesse.*

This morning we complete the journey we began a week ago on Palm Sunday. We also continue the journey today ... because the drama and suffering of Holy Week and the sacred surprise of Easter are all part of one living circle. Last suppers, first betrayals, unspeakable losses, triumphal entries and tortuous trials, crosses and empty tombs, death and resurrection ... these are metaphors for the mysterious and miraculous stuff of our lives.

It is funny the ways things happen; accidents become coincidences, which become moments of grace. In previous years, the Easter flowers arrived on Holy Saturday. The large wooden cross of Good Friday, stark, stunning and solemn, had been removed, disassembled and stored in the crypt for the Passion of the next year. The powerful reminder of Jesus' suffering and crucifixion was always out of sight on Easter, perhaps we did not want to think about how Jesus and we arrived at this moment. "Let's just focus on the joy." There's nothing wrong with that.

This year, however, because she would be away Holy Saturday, it was necessary for Doris, who was in charge of the Easter flowers, to meet the flower vendor at 3:00 on Good Friday to bring the flowers into the church and arrange them. At first, I was somewhat uneasy with Easter flowers in the sanctuary only moments after, our story tells us, that Jesus had died and been taken away to the tomb. This jarring juxtaposition of sacred events seemed like we were rushing the resurrection. I could not be at church when the vendor arrived. But when I came back around 4:30, still Good Friday, I was stunned by the beauty of the flowers ... with the cross in their midst. They seemed to be almost pointing to it. The cross, a symbol of judgment, death and profound sorrow, had become the heart of resurrection joy and new life. So ... after a little fretting over the break with tradition, I decided to leave the cross right there in the middle. After all, are not death and resurrection, loss and the discovery of new life, intimately intertwined? Without the cross there is no resurrection. Conversely, without the resurrection there would be no cross.

The cross is the nexus where vertical and horizontal meet, where death and life convene, where sorrow and delight merge. Our natural inclination is to live in a dualistic and Manichean universe of opposites: night and day, good and evil, right and wrong, black and white, friend and enemy. The center of the cross, however, beckons us to leave the simplistic comfort of opposites and, moving towards wholeness, to hold the tension, awaiting and expecting that God, who loves to make all things new, will do exactly that. Holding the tension of opposites, or relaxing in the middle.

All this because Doris has grandchildren she loves and could not be here yesterday.

It was neither light nor dark, night or day, when Mary Magdalene set out for the tomb where she and the other women had last seen Jesus' lifeless body. It was before dawn, a time of day is between worlds, gray and mysterious. It may be hard to see what is really there or to not believe what we think we see. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene goes alone to the burial grounds. What impelled her do this? I might imagine that grief had robbed her of sleep or that she just wanted the consolation of being near Jesus' body, perhaps to touch it. Her love moved her feet on the path under a waning Passover moon.

Why do we go to the graves of loved ones? What do we hope to give? What do we expect to find? A connection between past and present, a bridge between this life and eternity?

In the half-light, Mary discovers that the stone has been rolled back from the tomb. She then runs to get Peter and the other disciple "whom Jesus loved". When they arrive at the tomb and go inside they see the linen wrappings where Jesus' head had lain. They see what they see, but they do not understand. Peter and the other disciple return home.

But Mary stands weeping outside of the tomb. What do we understand when we encounter death? What scares us? What quickens our spirits? Why are memorial services sometimes occasions for joyous Easter lilies that grow out of the soil of deep sadness, the cross amidst the flowers?

A funny thing (another) happened on Good Friday. From the Church office, we emailed a reminder of today's schedule of services. There was a beautiful picture at the top of the message, an abstract painting full of ecstatic Easter colors, energy and jubilation, like a new dawn breaking. When I got home later that day and checked my email, there was the announcement, but where the beautiful artwork was supposed to be, there was nothing but an empty square!

The empty tomb right on my monitor! Another Easter surprise. Isn't that what Easter is about? Surprise, astonishment, even humor? Like Mary Magdalene, we are so preoccupied that we miss the new thing that is happening right in front of our eyes. Mary wept outside and then went back into the cave, the place of burial and birth. She saw Jesus, though she did not recognize him at first, thinking him to be the gardener. Perhaps her tears and the faint light made it hard to see. Or perhaps the possibility of seeing him again was so remote that her mind could not grasp what her eyes beheld.

Then Jesus calls her name, "Mary", and she immediately knows and understands. We sometimes remember the distinctive voice of a loved one even though long departed. Mary is the first witness. She hears Jesus' voice and responds with unbridled surprise, tenderness and joy, "Rabbouni", an affectionate name for Rabbi or "Teacher". Because of its compelling clarity and utter certainty, Mary's moment of revelation here is one we might envy. John closes his gospel by reminding his readers that he has written all this down for those who did *not* see these things in order that they might believe. That is, he wrote it for us, that Mary's greeting, "Rabbouni", might spill from our lips too.

When I set out to Seminary with Deborah and two young boys (3 and a half years and 3 months), I was an unlikely prospect for ordained ministry. Though encouraged by my home parish, my Diocese had not yet approved me as a Postulant. I had many questions and doubts but the desire to explore tugged. Daily recitation of the creeds caused me to bump into my questions.

My father died on Holy Saturday at the end of my first year at Seminary. Though I saw no empty tomb, witnessed no startling appearances of my father or of Jesus; nevertheless, sitting in Church with my family Easter morning, I felt with power the presence of my father's spirit. I cannot describe what it was like. But it was real, new and transformative. It was also enough. Over the years, I have learned, as Rainer Rilke advised, "to live the questions".

When they hear sacred stories about the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus after his death, biblical literalists, or fundamentalists, believe that these accounts are factually and historically accurate in every detail. No questions asked or encouraged. At the other end of the spectrum are the skeptics and agnostics, true heirs of the Age of Enlightenment, Cartesian disciples, who know from science that dead people cannot be reborn and then appear to others. Church feels quite uncomfortable to this group. How could anyone believe all this irrational folderol and then even fess up to it in public?

But there is another way, a third way, for honest seekers like us, one that is open and generous. What if today's gospel story of Mary Magdalene's astonishing experience is understood as metaphor; taking nothing away from those who believe the stories to be factually correct. After his death, the followers of Jesus had a profound experience of his presence, spirit and power. When the Temple curtain tore as Jesus breathed his last, his spirit was released and multiplied in a way that was miraculous.

We have witnessed a similar phenomenon following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. who was assassinated on this day 42 years ago. We have seen it also following the deaths of Mahatma Gandhi, Archbishop Oscar Romero as he celebrated Mass in El Salvador 30 years ago, and in the anonymous Chinese student who confronted a tank in Tiananmen Square. The spirits of Gandhi, King, and Romero are still with us and offering spiritual power. To me that is miraculous. Deceased loved ones also may have this power in our lives. Whatever happened in Golgotha and the days following was a proliferation of spiritual power unequalled, I believe, in human experience.

How do the male and female disciples describe the indescribable, their experiences of Jesus' powerful presence in their lives after his death? The language best suited for this is that of story and metaphor. Metaphor teases our imaginations and invites us to ascend to the high peaks of truth and beauty. This language does not seek to challenge or repudiate historical accuracy, but *does* point to what is most important, that is the meaning of holy events.

That meaning is found in the marriage of opposites, in the beauty of the lilies and the suffering of the cross. Jesus' spirit of transformation and love lives powerfully, then and right now.

Happy Easter!

*I am deeply indebted to the pioneering scholarship of Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg who have influenced much of what I have to say in this sermon.*