

EASTER 2003

April 20, 2003 – Grace Church in Haddonfield

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Is there anyone who is a devout lover of God?

Let them enjoy this beautiful festival!

Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!

Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!

Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!

Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!

Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead;

For Christ having risen from dead,

Is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To Him be Glory and Power forever and even. Amen!

(St. John of Chrysostom, 400 AD, Constantiople)

What a joyful day! This is the greatest day of the Church year! This is what it's all about as a Christian. Easter is the principal feast of the Church. Its name comes from the word, "Eostre." Eostre was the Teutonic goddess associated with spring and fertility. Easter talks about more than just spring. Easter is about Christ's overcoming death! The door is now open for us to everlasting life! Easter speaks about NEW LIFE ... new life that is made available to us in the life, death and RESURRECTION of Jesus Christ!

We have a new order, a new world. We are each called to become bearers of this new world. The extraordinary, the Resurrection, has been brought into our ordinary days. It is vital for us to remember how important witnesses are to us this day. The women were the first to witness what had happened. They came to the tomb ... and found it empty! The Church is founded on a VISION. This vision has been brought down to us over the ages by the witness of others. Our faith depends upon witness. The future depends upon our witness to what has happened!

My New Testament Professor, Reggie Fuller, would remind us of the three aspects in the account of Mark's Gospel this morning. There is a historical, traditional and editorial message in the Holy Scripture. The historical reality is the women and the empty tomb. They help to formulate the historical message of the Church ... the declaration is that death is overcome. Now our destiny is opened beyond the grave and death!

The traditional message is that which the Church hands down age after age. We find it in the angel's message. "Jesus is not here, he's risen!" What we discover is that Jesus can't be found in the past. Jesus' saving power is present here and now to the faith community. Jesus also brings us the future. The Church has embraced and announced this message for nearly 2,000 years!

The editorial part of the text is what we call the evangelist Mark's commentary. Mark tells us that Easter restores us to a relationship with God. The disciples who ran away at the crucifixion are invited back. Now they are commissioned to become witnesses ... apostles! The disciples now become bearers of the word. A significant transformation has occurred. They change from being FOLLOWERS TO PROCLAIMERS. God has

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acted ... again! Jesus' Resurrection is now ours. The mission that Mark proclaims is ours is that of the angel's command, "God and tell!"

This is no ordinary Sunday. This is not a typical day. It's EASTER! The Church is not always like this ... this day is extra special. Jesus has been crucified, he has died ... and now he has been raised from the dead. Now we have the empty tomb! This is extraordinary. What is ordinary? Death is ordinary. Our world is ordinary. The reality is that everything that lives ultimately dies. Life is finite, temporary and has limits. But Easter is not ordinary.

What an extraordinary story we have today. The women, the strange man, the unbelievable scene are part of this wonderful story. There is amazement, startled people and great news! Jesus Christ is risen today ... Alleluia! No where else do we hear such a story. Easter transforms our ordinary lives and world into something special. Death once seemed so powerful ... but now Christ has overcome it. Easter brings us joy, hope, meaning and redemption. Death is no longer the last word. There is something else God announces!

Tom Long, in his book, "Whispering the Lyrics" talks about how death can be transformed in our lives today. He shares with us what a moment of Resurrection might look and feel like now. A woman from Tom's parish told him a story. Her father died over the summer. The last week of his life was so difficult. He had suffered a stroke and lost the power to speak. Her father was a vital person to the family.

She shared what it was like for her dad ... he loved to talk. But those last few days he couldn't speak. The woman talked about her brothers and sisters being gathered with her in the hospital room. The last day of his life was so difficult. The man's children were feeling the pain of his struggle since he couldn't speak.

The father motioned to her brother to get a glass of water. The brother filled a glass and gave it to his dad. But he wouldn't drink from it. He motioned to his son to drink. Her brother took a sip. The father motioned to the woman's sisters as if to day ... give it to her. He handed the glass and she took a sip. The father motioned that the glass should be passed around. Each of the children took the glass and a sip.

Suddenly, one of the brothers proclaimed, "Oh my God! He's serving communion!" It was at this moment that they all knew ... nothing, not death, nor life, no nothing ... could separate them from the love of God in Jesus Christ. The Resurrection became real for them in that hospital room. The woman, her siblings and the father were transformed in the face of death. It was a most wonderful extraordinary event. They were filled with the extraordinary love of God that breaks into the ordinary moments of our lives.

That is what Easter is all about. It comes into our ordinary lives and makes them extraordinary. It changes the way we look at life, ourselves and others. Easter helps us to focus on a new world. I am indebted to an example that Professor Diogenes Allen

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shared a few weeks ago at our lecture series. He said that the Resurrection is life eyeglasses. They help us see more clearly.

I'm nearsighted and have a stigmatism. If I take off my glasses ... all of you are very fuzzy! I can make out shapes, but nothing is distinct. However, I put my glasses on and I can see! The eyeglasses take the images and light coming at me in the world. They reshape them and focus them properly on the back of my eye. As a result ... I can see!

The Resurrection puts everything back into focus for us. To believe in Easter is to see the world and life differently. It's to see everything through God's lens! Easter brings us a new focus and new priorities. We become part of a new world ... where we are no longer overcome by fear and anxiety. We share in a new life, like that of a baby ... where life is full of possibilities! Easter is the new beginning, the new order for us. IT is the first day of the week that marks a new relationship with our Lord! Easter is a joyous surprise that helps us to see the heavenly things in the midst of the earthly.

No we have a mission. It is not just to enjoy this day. Just like the women, we are commanded to GO & TELL! How did we get here today? It is thanks to the countless number of witnesses who have gone before us. They shared the Good News of Easter. Remember the witness of the women? They were the first ones to see. They started it all! Then came the witness of the apostles. People throughout the generations have been renewed, reformed and given the mission. Each of us is called to move from follower to proclaimer!

Easter demands that change from ordinary people to extraordinary messengers. We are to build a new community. It will possess a new vision of life fro God. Countless others have been witnesses. Among a few were Mary, Peter, Paul, Hildegard, Francis, Julian, Augustine, Benedict, Augustine, Patrick, Columba ... and hundreds of thousands of others.

Now it's our turn. It is time to celebrate. It's time to go and tell. It's time to share the good news! Jesus is not dead! He's alive! Easter is the extraordinary ... Jesus is come into our lives. Let's go and tell it to the whole world! Christ is Risen! Alleluia! The Lord is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!