A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
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Experiencing the Resurrection

It was dark. The dawning sun was barely a sliver of russet on the distant horizon, but even that was enough to soften the night's cold grip and allow Mary Magdalene to tread the path to the tomb. She hurried, quietly padding her footsteps on the hard trail, while her arms cradled several clay jars of spices and ointment that jingled slightly against one another, as she pressed on.

The horror of Jesus' death had created a panic among his followers, and the approaching Passover Sabbath made burial arrangements for Jesus' broken body temporary, at best. Understandably, the practical logistics of burial had been overlooked. The shocking sight of their master, stripped naked, beaten, and nailed to the cross was more than their minds could absorb. When finally Jesus died and that part of the suffering ended, only then did the reality of what to do with his body
come home to them.

Surprisingly – (and most helpfully) -- two prominent men from the Jewish leadership, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, emerged from the fringes and took responsibility for removing the body from its tormented perch. At least the humiliation of exposure to gawking eyes and pecking birds could be avoided. The men wrapped Jesus' lifeless torso in a shroud, and they carried the corpse to Joseph's own tomb, a brand new one that his men had recently cut out for him in anticipation of his own needs. It was the only semblance of dignity shown to Jesus since his arrest.

Having observed a restless Sabbath and squeezing in some fitful sleep, the Magdalene was off to finish the burial rites. Aside from the fact that it was, by custom, women's work, Mary Magdalene needed to tend to Jesus' dead body for her own sake and sanity. Even if it involved dubious judgment for a woman to be out alone in the wee hours of the morning, she would do it. She had to do it.

So, as Mary continued her walk-trot pace to the tomb and her mind desperately raced through what needed to be done, she nearly lost her breath when she wondered how she would get into the tomb to perform her rites. Joseph and Nicodemus and their men had rolled a great stone to seal off the entrance from the outside. These men had struggled with the weight of the stone in order to put it in place. How was she, one woman, ever going to deal with it in order to perform her ministrations?

No sooner had this practicality struck her somber heart than another blow replaced it. Moving along the path, footing her way down a slight incline and around a bend, the Magdalene looked up toward Jesus' tomb to see that it was inexplicably open! She stopped dead in her tracks at this appalling sight. Uncontrollably, both hands came to her mouth, as she gasped in alarm, the clay jars crashing to the ground from her involuntary release. Instinctively, she concluded: "Grave

robbers!" And turning on her heels, she sprinted back to where the men had holed up for the night.
They simply had to know! They simply had to do something!
Mary Magdalene's alarm shot through the disciples' frayed nerves. They had been hiding out for fear that their enemies would soon be marking them for the same treatment that Jesus received. But the report that the tomb had been opened filled them with such a sense of outrage that they were propelled beyond their fear into action. Yet, the moment before they rushed out together, prudence prevailed. Peter and the Beloved Disciple volunteered to step forward to check Mary's story out. Two representatives would go, just in case this was a trap to ensnare all eleven in one fell swoop.

With that, Peter and the young disciple raced to the sight of the tomb, with the Magdalene trailing well-behind. The Beloved Disciple's lithe legs brought him to the open tomb first, whereupon he bent his young frame over to peer into the vault. It was, indeed, empty. He could plainly see that, but at the sound of Peter's heavy footsteps and labored breathing, he bent back upright to wait for his senior companion.

Once Peter arrived and caught his breath, both men entered the tomb. To their mutual amazement, the tomb was unmolested, save for the linen cloths, which were lying strangely in place, untouched, as if they had gently fallen like leaves from a tree. Looking over Peter's shoulder, the Beloved Disciple took note of the burial cloths, now limp and deflated, and a smile gently creased his lips.

Intuitively, it struck him. This was no robbery. This was not a matter of anything nefarious. No, incomprehensibly, Jesus' body was free. It reminded him of Lazarus: Death had been deprived. But unlike Lazarus, no one had needed to untie Jesus nor free him from his burial cloths. How all this happened, the Beloved Disciple could not fathom, but that it happened, he did not doubt.

Experiencing the Resurrection: In John's gospel, the empty tomb and the burial linens are experienced differently by the various characters involved. The Beloved Disciple evidently perceives that death has not been victorious over Jesus, perhaps linking his experience of what occurred to Lazarus with his insight into the state of Jesus' burial cloths. Peter, who saw what the Beloved Disciple saw, when he saw it, had a different experience of the empty tomb. Less quick to move to insight perhaps than his younger counterpart, Peter, nonetheless, recognizes that yet again expectations have been turned upside-down when it comes to over Jesus. One can almost see Peter scratching his bearded chin, wondering: "Now what?"

Grief-stricken weeping and confusion characterized Mary Magdalene's experience of the empty tomb. With Peter and the Beloved Disciple having returned to their homes, Mary found herself alone at the site for a second time. When it was her turn to look into the grave, she beheld what the author tells us were two angels, to whom she once again expressed her anguish that someone had stolen Jesus' body. Saying this, she spun away from the tomb only to confront another figure. Supposing him to be the caretaker, she again pleaded her case for the return of Jesus' body.

"Mary" was all that the figure said; and hearing her name spoken by him, the Magdalene recognized that she had found the one she had presumed was lost. Understandably, having found what was feared stolen, Mary's first inclination was to hold onto Jesus, never to let him go. Yet,

tellingly Jesus warned her that this could not be. She had to let go of what she knew in order that she might receive what she could not imagine.

What did those apostolic followers of Jesus experience? What would you say? But this form of the question only veils the real question that is in our hearts. We want to know, we need to know what is there of resurrection for us to experience?

What are we doing here? Are we simply celebrating Easter as if it were just another Memorial Day commemoration? Is this just about the past? Is this just about what some people said happened to them a long time ago? Is this just wishful thinking on our parts? Is there anyone here for whom this occasion feels just a bit too good to be true?

Personally, I am getting clearer and clearer that life is complex. Yet, complexities are the products of intricately intertwined simplicities. I think, therefore, that it is important to realize that in the face of life's complexity, one needs both to bow in awe, humility, and wonder, but also to do this without being overwhelmed and without losing track of the basic simplicities involved.

I say this because I believe that this is an important way to approach Jesus' resurrection, to its truth. Our experiences of it will differ because we are different people with different expectations, different backgrounds. Some will respond as the Beloved Disciple responded. Some will respond as Peter did; and some will respond in the manner of Mary Magdalene. And let us also be honest and say that some respond as Judas Iscariot did. But beneath both our ability and our willingness to respond to the empty tomb, to the burial linens, and to the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus – beyond it all stands a very simple point. What do we know about God; and what is life with God like?

In its simplest form, there are only two possible responses.

One response says that life with God is stronger than fear and death, that with God there is more to life than what you and I can make of it. The other response says that this is all a lie, that we're on our own: 'You only go 'round once in life; so grab for all the gusto you can.'

Part of the revealed simplicity involved here is that there is nothing in between these two responses, and ironically both responses require the same leap of faith.

Personally, I know that with God there is more to life than I can see or that I can fathom or that I can control. This is my experience. This is my belief, my faith – even though (like Peter) I am still prone to deny my Lord and his truth when fear clutches and claws at my heart. Yet, resurrection is the antidote for such fear, not because it is some magical thing the wizard-god does to make his chosen few all better. No, resurrection (for all its unique mystery in human experience) is rather simple, and its tone can always be heard reverberating around the God we know and love.

Specifically, the word "resurrection" means "awaken to;" and I think that this is really the key to experiencing its power and its truth. Jesus' resurrection calls us to "awaken to" what life with God is like, and specifically today to "awaken to" what God has done in his Christ. If we can begin to view life from the resurrection prism, we will start to glean that God has been asking people to

"awaken to" the divine will from the very beginning. And in this regard, resurrection's intent and meaning are not new, although its particular expression in Christ clearly is.

To this simple, key point, a helpful yet (to some) surprising echoing of this resurrection insight comes from a contemporary Jewish theologian and teacher. Michael Wyschogrod has written about resurrection from a Jewish perspective, and this is what he has to say. Listen carefully.

"Now, for the Jew, death is a catastrophe and because God is a redeeming God, it follows that death cannot be the last word. If death is not the last word…then what else is there except resurrection? It is almost a necessary doctrine: either death wins or God saves."[1]

Last week, I received an email from a dear friend that also testifies to the experience of resurrection's reality. It comes from her own hard-won experience of death not having the last word. Listen once again.

"I am so grateful that God gives us a lifetime to understand Christ's passion and the meaning of Easter. My divorce has helped me understand the events of Holy Week in new ways; more mature ways, I think. I would never has chosen to be divorced, but I meant it when I said I was called out of my marriage and in responding to the call, I chose the death of divorce. [I was helped] to understand, however, that my marriage was 'spiritually dead.' Of all the things that people said to me as I have experienced the pain of divorce, that message…was more helpful than anything. I know that [none] of us [is] meant to be in anything spiritually dead. So when I was in the depths of despair, I fed on that truth and I was sustained [by it]. I think Jesus must have found a similar comfort when in the anguish of the cross, he remembered that God was calling him to fulfill His purpose on earth and that nothing God calls us to ends in spiritual death; physical death, yes; spiritual death, no."

"[Bill] and I signed our separation agreement last month. As I drove back from [that meeting], I decided I needed to go to church. St. Thomas' has a beautiful chapel; [and] because it [was] Lent, the cross [had] a pewter crown of thorns hanging from it – it was fitting [my] experience. I was alone in the chapel; I took our signed separation agreement and laid it at the foot of the altar. I offered it up to God. And then I said my prayers and asked God to bless our divorce as he had blessed our marriage. I asked him always to bless [Bill] and me and our children and to help us remain friends until the end. …what would I ever do without the church? How could I ever have gotten through this without God's model in Christ? I would have been lost. Truly lost. But I am not. On the contrary, my new life …is rich and full and hopeful. Most importantly, it is full of the very best of spiritual life. Imagine that…The pain of divorce still brings tears to my eyes; the death is quite real but so too is my new life, which gives me indescribable joy. My story is the Easter story. I get it in a way I never did before."

"Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death…" This is the ancient refrain Christians sang as a worshipping reminder of resurrection. We are called by God in Christ to "awaken to" our Maker and to what life is like, when we are not held hostage by fear. Easter is not something you figure out ahead of time; it's something you live with and increasingly experience. It's not about magic, that Jesus has taken all the bad stuff away left us with the jelly beans. No. "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death." This means, of course, that fear

and death are real, but they are not the defining elements of human life. God's presence and love are. And today, we are invited to "awaken to" this great and glorious gift.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia. Amen.

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[1] Michael Wyschodrod, "Resurrection," from a lecture at St. Olaf Summer Theology Conference, Northfield, Mn., 7/91.