

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,  
 St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,  
 on Easter Day (8 April 2007):  
 Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; Luke 24:1-10

## **It's About God, Stupid!**

Every once in a while, you will still hear someone remember a sign that hung within the Clinton White House planning room. It proclaimed boldly for all to see: "It's the economy, stupid!" As that administration carried out its day-to-day business, that sign served as a visible reminder to them of what their core focus needed to be. It was a public reminder to them to keep the main business the main business.

I was wondering if you and I needed a similar sign to keep us focused today, as we encounter the resurrection story and celebrate Easter. I was wondering: Since the vast majority of us already knows what to expect when it comes to this Easter worship and that, unlike the women at the empty tomb, we do not anticipate being surprised by this day – I was wondering if, perhaps, what we truly need is a way to remember what all of this is about.

Maybe amidst the festivity, the music, the words of celebration, the special story of the empty tomb – maybe a visible sign would be a helpful way for us to keep our focus on what this Easter Day is all about. Maybe we could use a sign hanging in some conspicuous place so that we would keep the main thing about Easter the main thing. Maybe we should hang it right over the choir. That would be a good public place for

us; don't you think? And what would the sign say? Taking a cue from the former president's administration, my suggestion is this: "It's about God, stupid!"

Of all the things that deserve to be noted, preached about, sung about, and prayed about on this Easter Day, every single one of them speaks about God -- our God: what our God is like and what life with our God is like. And of all the things to remember about this Easter celebration, of all the things to recall when we experience the joy and the hope and the power of Jesus' resurrection, we must remember that it's all about God and it's all about the life God has given us in Christ Jesus, our Lord, who was crucified and lives now.

"It's all about God..."

Once we remember that this day is all about God, please notice what emerges, what crystallizes in our sight, what echoes in our ears. In the words of the psalm: "On this day, the Lord has *acted* [my emphasis]; we will rejoice and be glad in it."

From the mouth of Peter: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation *any one* [my emphasis] who fear him and does what is right is acceptable to [God]."

From Paul's epistle to the Colossians: "Since you have been *raised with Christ* [my emphasis], seek the things that are above...for you have died, and your life is hid with Christ."

Something important, something earth-shaking has occurred on this occasion. Like an eggshell that has been cracked open, we see that Christ has risen from the dead. "The Lord has, indeed, acted." Things have changed.

"The powers of death have done their worst, but Christ their legions hath dispersed: let shout of holy joy outburst. Alleluia!" [Hymn 208]

This day, this event, this reality is about God. And on this day, God has had enough! The Holy One has put his foot down and proclaimed – once and for all – that fear and death do not rule! They are not the definers of life. God -- the Creator-- is. And to make the point – once and for all -- the Creator raises his incarnate word, Jesus, from the tomb to reveal a larger life, a redeemed life, a glorious life – to show us what life with God is like.

Death is real – to be sure. Christ Jesus, the Son of God, died, and it was a fearful thing, a wild thing to behold. . For when death is allowed to masquerade as the final word, then fear looms among us like a sickening fog, choking our breathing, obscuring our sight, and we miss – we miss what God has for us to see and to take in.

What that is speaks of God's will. It is God's living promise. It is God's action on this Easter Day that we see

and hear and taste and touch and smell the liberating truth that death has been passed-over and.

"Alleluia. Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast. Alleluia."

In Christ's rising, fear and death are unmasked. They are unmasked as the impostors they truly are. They are no longer seen as the end, in Christ we are "awakened to" what life with our God is truly like.

That is what the word "resurrection" actually means. It means, "awaken to." We are called to "awaken to" what we see about God. We are called to awaken to our life with God in the wake of Jesus' rising from the dead. Resurrection unveils what life with our God is like; and this life, seen in the risen Christ, is now – even though the powers of evil and death resist the news that the "strife is o'er, the battle won."

Easter is not about what happens when we die! Easter is about now. It is about God, our God, who is not the God of the dead but the living and the eternal.

Resurrection is no metaphor. It is not a matter of wishful thinking. It is not about hallucinations that weakly compensate for grieving hearts. No, "on this day the Lord has acted." Fear and death are unmasked, stripped of their pretentious power in the face of God's love and God's life.

Christ is risen. There's no turning back now. There's no need to turn back. The way ahead is open. It is

clear. We are free. We belong to God and to the life in Jesus Christ – and that can never be taken away.

“On this day, the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it.”

We have gotten so used to life on our own terms, to the extent that when we are confronted with this God-life, this resurrection-life – well, it is hard to adjust our eyes – the ones in our heads as well as the ones in our hearts. Sometimes, in spite of what God has done in Christ, we remain asleep, and our vision is heavy, clouded with this protective sleep.

I recently read a story, one that was told by a cleric on himself. Like Easter, it is a story about seeing. It turns out that the cleric was shopping in a green grocery store, on the prowl for some cantaloupe. Finding a neatly piled stash on a table display, the man went about the irresistible urge of picking the fruit up in his hands in an attempt to discern which was the best one. Consequently, he thumped the melons. He smelled the melons. He scrutinized their rinds and came to the conclusion that there had to be better options.

So raising a melon in his hand, he asked a nearby clerk, “Do you have any more?” Without hesitation, the clerk retorted: “What you see is all there is. Take it or leave it!”

You and I are quite often like the clerk, when it comes to our understanding of Easter life and even of our understanding of God. We have learned, usually with a great deal of pain, to accept as true that

“what you see is all there is.” Honed on this fearful and painful vision of life, we can and do easily begin to define life, our life, in similar terms. “What you see is all there is. Take it or leave it.”

In order to survive, we take our vision, our awareness, and like a camera’s lens we narrow down the aperture, the opening through which we see beyond ourselves – we narrow our vision down, until what we see is something we can manage. No matter how pinched the vision becomes, in order to survive, in order to get by, we settle for what we can manage to see. Take it or leave it.

Yes, we yearn for more than this manageable life. We feel that deep hunger in our guts for a richer, more expansive life, but we can’t quite get to it; can we? Sadly, many of us have ceased trying.

For instance, we would all like to be loved more but also know that if we don’t watch out we could be loved less. So, again we settle for what there is. Be practical, we say. “Take it or leave it,” they say.

Our vision of life is shaped and largely configured by this experience of scarcity and by the expectations that what we see is all there is. Take it or leave it.

Along these lines, I recently read a reference to an observation that a distinguished historian of the modern world made. The comment was: “Once the modern world convinced itself that nothing is real except what you can see, taste, and

touch, the modern world has gone down hill ever since.”<sup>1</sup>

Scientists tell us that seeing is a very complex process, with the brain as the interpreter of the images and impulses that the optic nerve and the other mechanisms of the human eye register. What science has discovered about this process, however, is quite revealing. Specifically, the brain interprets what the optic nerve conveys and makes sense of that information by matching this data with patterns from previous experiences. This is to say that the brain interprets -- it “sees” – not necessarily what there is to see but what the brain has already known and recognized.

In this vein, the old saw that says “if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all” has more credibility than we might be comfortable with. Quite literally, if the brain has seen one tree, for instance, it has seen them all because the pattern of what is “tree” has been recognized, stored and put in position to “see” the next time.

A study at Harvard recalls this scientific insight. Participants in the study were shown decks of cards, whose denominations were all printed in red. In addition to the expected red suits of diamonds and hearts, the traditional black spades and clubs were also printed in red. Over and over, the participants were exposed to the all-red decks of cards, until a pattern of expectation was established that recognized all the cards in red.

Consequently, to a person, not one participant ever identified the solitary black card that was introduced into the decks as a black card in the otherwise totally red decks. We simply don’t see things that go beyond our expectations and our experience. We rarely adjust the focus of our vision to see unexpected sights – even when they are right in front of us.

“What you see is all there is. Take it or leave it.”

On the morning of the first day of the week, at the crack of dawn, the women who had seen Jesus’ crucifixion and burial made their way to his tomb. They had witnessed very clearly, how their Lord had been betrayed, arrested, brutalized, humiliated, and killed. Powerless, they simply watched and waited, until they could come to the place of his burial and provide a proper burial for Jesus.

Bringing the traditional spices for their interment work, they were shocked to see that the tomb was open. The rock that had sealed the entryway had been rolled away. Concern outweighing prudence, the women went into the tomb. Their sense of urgency driving them to expect ... what?

What they saw was that the body of Jesus was gone. The tomb was empty, and the women were, understandably, puzzled. Before they had a chance to consider their perplexity, out of nowhere it seemed, two men, with light cascading over them, stood with them. Instinctively, the women dropped to the ground,

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<sup>1</sup> taken from a reference in William Willimon’s “Pulpit Resources,” Vol. 35/No. 2; page 14

awestruck and worshipful. And then earth-shattering question: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”

Quite obviously, it was a rhetorical question, designed to awaken the women to see what they did not expect or imagine to see. Like a hidden black card in an all-red deck, the men’s surprising words slid by the women unnoticed. They had come to finish the burial. They had expected to wash Jesus’ body with the spices and to wrap his cold corpse in a shroud, until nature would take its course. Then, in a year or so, they would return to gather his bones from the tomb’s shelf and seal them in a stone box. End of story.

“Why do you seek the living among the dead?” followed by this eye-opening statement: “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise” caused them to remember. Combined with the fact that the tomb was empty, they caused a rearrangement in their heads. It was as if the eyes of their hearts had first seen the truth. Then, that image, placed in the context of what the transfigured men had said, caused a new recognition. They did remember Jesus’ words, and in light of this new experience, they dropped their spices, turned on their heels and raced to tell the apostles the Good (albeit, unexpected) News.

“It’s about God...”

Today, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of

James, we remember that the Lord has acted. We remember on another Easter Day what our God is like and what life with our God is like. We remember that fear and death are real, but in Christ, our Passover, they no longer are the end. They have been overcome – by God, our God.

It’s about God...

Christ is risen, and so are we. What has been hidden from our eyes is now made clear. We no longer need look for the living among the dead. There is more, more to life, more to our life – than what fear and death have taught us to see. God has acted. Christ is risen from the dead. We can now dare to awaken from our sleep and celebrate what this God-life, this resurrection-life is like.

It is Easter. Thank God.  
Alleluia. Amen.