

Easter Vigil B - 11 April 2009

Matthew 28:1-10

James V. Stockton

That it still matters that Christ is risen, that he is risen indeed, is happily demonstrated in the presence of millions of people gathering in Churches this night and tomorrow morning. "His resurrection is God's 'Amen!' upon the person of Jesus." So writes theologian Edward Schillebeeckx in his book, *Jesus: an Experiment in Christology*. He goes on: "Jesus, who had announced the imminent reign of God, ... despite the contradiction of his rejection and death, had not... been wrong. B]y raising him from the dead, God has now identified Himself... [w]ith him, who during his life had identified himself with... the coming rule of God [upon earth], ... Jesus Christ is himself the [reign] of God.'

People today still celebrate God's Amen upon the person of Jesus. Humanity still seeks the reign of God upon this earth and at this time. These truths are blessedly evident in the fact that people everywhere are gathering at the conclusion of the Way of the cross of Christ. And considering that, after all, what ends is the way of the cross, what a surprising conclusion it is! Through the introspective challenges of the season of Lent, through the poignancy of Holy Week, many have ventured into the experience of the first followers of Jesus.

With the disciples, they have accompanied Jesus in the warm welcome of his ministry among the common folk. They have stayed with him in the face of the fear and hatred of the religious authorities of his day; in his pain at being resented and rejected by those who should have been more prepared and eager than anyone to recognize him and receive him, the Son of God among them. Like the disciples long ago, they have vested and reinvested in Jesus every hope they've ever had that the ultimate rule in their world and in their lives would be one of goodness, of kindness, of justice, of mercy, of grace,

of hope itself, of all that lifts human beings from mere existence to true life itself.

And in the hearing of the Living Word, they've witnessed with the followers of Jesus as he is taken dead from the cross and laid in the tomb. And to the degree that they are able, they've experienced with the disciples not only the death of Jesus, but also the accompanying death of their hope that God really was making their world a better place, that God really was making them a better people.

And as much as they have tried to recall and recapture that sense of what surely must be the greatest surprise that has ever been, yet, their experience and our own of that surprise, can hardly approach what it must have been for these women in the reading from today's Gospel who come to Jesus' tomb. We today try to recall their experience as they return to the tomb to do nothing more than honor the memory of him whom died, as they now find that he is risen, that, for want of any better way to put it, he is risen indeed! They are prepared only to give a more proper and honorable burial to the one whom they have loved and lost.

And so they are not concerned with properly praising their risen Lord, but with how they might move away the heavy stone that blocks the entrance to the tomb. So it is surprise that meets them, surprise I think we cannot today imagine. The writer of the gospel does well, I think, to describe it the way he does. It's not that they rush back to the disciples to share the good news; it's more that they run away as fast they can from that empty grave. Here are the people who loved him most. Here are the most loyal of his followers, these women whose love for him is stronger than their grief. And yet, even these are put

to trembling with fear and astonishment at the fantastic evidence of the empty tomb, and the word of an ethereal stranger that Jesus is risen, and soon they will see him again.

And if you or I ever wonder, "Why doesn't Jesus simply prove that he is risen by simply showing up publicly in person?" here's a good example of the reason and the kindness not to do so. No amount of surprise will convince the determined skeptic; and, for the hopeful believer, well, I think there's only so much surprise that God seems willing to inflict. But here we are, seeking again the impact of the Easter surprise. And that you and I, and countless others around the world and across the ages are not only open to, but willingly seeking, God's holy surprise is perhaps the quieter surprise hidden within the grander one. It's true for us, nearly 2000 years after the event, that none of us can know by experience exactly what happened on that surprising Resurrection Day. Yet here we are, looking for that surprise to be reborn, to be raised up again, in us, and through us in the world around us.

Though the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is plainly beyond explanation, yet we also want it to remain so. For as soon as we explain it, then the surprise is undone, and any hope and courage that we might find rooted in God's ability to exceed our expectations, are undone along with the surprise. This is not to say that we should fear inquiry and analysis. Especially we as Episcopalians appreciate the gift of mind and the gift of curiosity with which to feed it. To the contrary, it is precisely this intellectual inquiry that gives us, and gives to the world around us, greater appreciation for the incomparable surprise that is the Resurrection of Jesus.

It is exactly because the surprise of his resurrection challenges us, that it enables us to find

that there have arisen also our hopes, our dreams, our conviction, our courage; that we need not surrender to even a *righteous* grief at the apparent victory of death and its disciples in the world today, no to fear; not to hatred, and not to the corruption of those who fuel and use them; for at the empty tomb of Jesus, their victory is rendered an illusion; God declares that we need not step aside for those who may exercise power in this world today, but who resent the Light of God and hide from it, who reject the Way of the Cross and run from it; for the Amen of God upon the person of Jesus renders them impotent cowards.

And so on this Easter evening, hear this Easter truth: Despite the contradiction of his death, Jesus has brought near the reign of God, the reign of good, of truth, of peace, of justice, of mercy. And so, on this Easter night, know this Easter truth: At the resurrection of Jesus there rises new strength, new vibrancy, new life in the hopes, the dreams, the conviction, the courage, of his people everywhere, you, me, and countless others around the world, those within Church this night, and those outside it, all of whom are seeking what God has given the world in the Easter surprise. And so, for want of a better way to put it, we can only say, and we can surely know, that we have been raised in Christ, we shall rise in Christ, and in Christ, we are risen, indeed.

And so may God, Eternal and Almighty, who by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, has given us the hope of everlasting life, by this victory banish our fears and make us bold to meet God, to praise Him, and to do His will; through the same Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now, always, and for ever. Amen.