

## **It has only just begun**

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Easter, the Day of Resurrection, April 12, 2009.

*Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"* John 20:15

It was sixty-four years ago today that President Franklin Roosevelt died in Warm Springs, Georgia. Following his funeral and burial rites a few days later, the news reporters gathered around his widow Eleanor Roosevelt for a story they were covering. "Gentlemen," she said, "the story is over." For her husband, who served longer than any other in the presidency, there would be no more stories to write. But for her, the story had only just begun as she came into her own with a life dedicated to giving hope and opportunity to those who live on the margins of our society.

For the disciples, it seemed that the story of Jesus and his mission was over, that he would go into oblivion and be lost to history. They had spent a hopeful three years with the man they had come to know and love and there was no question of his love for them. But for now, there was nothing left but disillusionment as their hopes and dreams were buried with him in the tomb. It seemed to them that the story was over.

The women who followed him all the way to the cross had but one final thing left to do. They would go and prepare his body for a proper burial. He told them that his suffering would set them free, but they felt bound up in their grief and loss.

Early the next morning, Mary Magdalene approaches the garden tomb and is astonished to discover that the stone at the door of the tomb has been rolled away and the tomb is mysteriously empty. She hurries to tell the others who run to see for themselves. When they arrive, they are shocked and bewildered to see that the body of Jesus is gone. What on earth could have happened? Had someone stolen the body? Was this a cruel trick?

As the risen Christ appears outside the tomb, she does not recognize him and assumes that he is the gardener. She asks what has become of his body. Not until he speaks to her and calls her by name does she realize that it is Jesus. Often when we are distracted with our own expectations we don't see what is right in front of us. Imagine her shock and surprise in realizing that Jesus has arisen and is standing before her. His appearance to her and many others is evidence that he has overcome the forces of evil and hatred and death, the greatest barrier of all.

The Roman authorities tried to silence Jesus by condemning him to death as a convicted felon. They considered him a seditious and dangerous person who threatened their way of life. They thought they had exposed him as a messianic pretender and expected to refute everything he claimed. But the plan to expose him as a fraud didn't work. The resurrection refutes the claim that life is orderly and predictable.

We miss the point if we think that the story ends on Good Friday with the hero dying in the end. We are people of Easter and for us the story has only just begun. The great symbol of our Christian faith is both the empty cross and the empty tomb. Both are sure signs of Christ's triumph over the forces of evil and death. He is not found among the dead, but among the living. Because he lives among us we are no longer bound by our sin and guilt. We have no need to give in to the forces of defeat and despair. We are freed from darkness and fear. Easter brings out the best in us by redeeming us, giving us value and worth. By accepting Christ, our unworthy selves are made worthy.

I don't know how the resurrection happened and I wish I could explain it. What I do know is that resurrection happens when God takes a self-absorbed person and makes him realize that he is not the center of the universe. Resurrection happens when a person with poor self image realizes that she is of infinite value in the eyes of God. Resurrection happens whenever and wherever the forces of dread and despair are overcome by the forces of hope and possibility. I have seen it happen many times and each time it defies explanation.

One of the great theologians in the early Church was Tertullian. Raised as a pagan in Carthage, he was educated in literature and rhetoric and eventually became a lawyer. He was converted to an ascetic form of Christianity late in the second century A.D. Tertullian wrote that he came to Christianity not because it is reasonable, but because it is outrageous in its claims. The resurrection is something no ordinary human mind can invent. It is an outrageously wonderful story because it defies all logic and all possibility. It defies every natural law and allows the impossible to become possible. Our sense of orderliness, logic and reason is replaced by the wondrous mystery of God doing unexplainable things. The great thing about Christianity is that if you think you can explain it and make it rational, you've missed the point. If you think you can make more acceptable, you've lost the essential meaning. Those who experience a personal encounter with Christ know the power of resurrection when their lives are changed forever. They testify to the fact that the resurrection is not a creation of the church, but that the church was created and is sustained by it.

We all have times when we become discouraged with where we are in life. We experience lost opportunities and unfulfilled goals. Easter means that we can climb out of the tomb of despair and self-doubt to stand with Christ in the brightness of the light of the resurrection. His light burns brightly in the face of evil, falsehood and death. His victory is our victory because we are inheritors of the salvation and restoration of the human race. God enables us to emerge out of our bondage into the light of Christ. As our old self is buried with Christ, we are raised in his resurrection. Once we take that first step, we've only just begun.

Rejoice now in proclaiming that Christ is risen; the Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!