

Today is Easter Sunday, the Queen of all the Religious Festivals of the Church. Today we Episcopalians, together with other Christians of America and from around the world, are celebrating Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The somber and sedate Lenten and Holy Week spiritual celebrations are concluding and now we begin a time of rejoicing, knowing that Jesus Christ is victorious over death and sin.

Today we began our service with the traditional Easter acclamation of those first Christian that had witnessed the resurrection:

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Those words have been said in many places and languages throughout time by Christians around the globe as they rejoice knowing that our Lord Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead.

And that, my dearly beloved, is also precisely my belief, a belief that I hold as a firm conviction in the knowledge that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead and is indeed alive. I don't think of the resurrection as something symbolic or imaginative that the disciples experienced in a moment of euphoria.

I believe in the resurrection, like those first followers of Christ starting with the women that went to anoint the dead body and instead encountered a Living and Resurrected Jesus, and also the Apostles that witnessed Christ's resurrection that first Easter morning and had their lives totally transformed by that experience.

There is no question that a radical change took place in their lives--a change of their behavior and their speech that gave them total confidence in their faith.

The fear and doubt that before had control over the disciples just evaporated, and an astonishing transformation moved them from doubt and defeat, giving way to a faith that could not be broken and to an unwavering commitment that was based on what they had experienced, a Living Christ.

I am aware that there are those who say that it was just a fable, a wishful thinking of religious people who had gone through a sad and painful experience of the tragic death of their leader.

I am also aware that the significance of Easter Sunday for a lot of people in our secularized and materialistic country is just a Bunny Rabbit that goes around hiding boiled colored eggs for children to find. Easter is for many one of those times when Macy's offers special discounts, a great opportunity to buy beautiful spring outfits.

But is this all that there is? Is that all?

Is there something else in Easter besides religious platitudes that affected the lives of people in the past and a lot of commercial hype affecting us in the present? I think there is more.

You see, Easter is not just a bygone day when we remember an extraordinary moment in the lives of those first disciples that encountered the Living Christ, but this Easter Sunday can be a day just as extraordinary for you and me, Christians of the 21st Century.

I say this because if we believe in Christ we are called to believe in his resurrection. And if so, then we must ask ourselves: What does it matter to me? What difference does Easter make in my life and the life of others? Does it matter at all?

I am aware that we are asked to believe in something that has been challenged as one of the greatest hoaxes of all times. Yes, we know that some question the fact that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead.

From the very beginning since it happened it has been denied and attacked. But we, like those first believers that were in Jerusalem, insist on declaring our belief in the resurrection.

We proclaim that belief every Sunday when we say either the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed. How does it go: "*he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures.*"

But if you happen to be one of those Christians unable to believe in the resurrection, I think that you should get some kind of discount, because you are not getting the whole package. You are missing an essential part of who we are and what we believe.

There are other religions and beliefs that don't preach to their followers that their leader was resurrected. Take for example the followers of Islam--they are able to go to the city of Medina in Saudi Arabia and there visit the Mosque of the Prophet.

It happens to be the second holiest mosque in Islam. Why? Because it is the final resting place of the dead body of the Prophet Muhammad.

Buddhists are able to visit Kunishagar in the State of Uttar Pradesh in India and there pray at the Maku-taban-dhana, which is the cremation place of the dead body of Sidarta Gautama the Buddha.

Confucians can go to the city of Qutu in the Shandong Province of China and visit the place where the dead body of Confucius is buried in his own hometown.

Even atheists Marxists can go to London and just get on the tube, taking the Northern Line on the route to High Barnett, and get off at the Highgate stop. It will be just a short walk from the underground station to Highgate Park and Cemetery. There they can say their prayers or do whatever Marxists do in front of the tomb of the dead body of Karl Marx.

But if you decide to go to Jerusalem with my wife Diana and me on our next pilgrimage this coming January 27, the best we can do for you is to show you an empty tomb--and there my beloved, there is no dead body.

You see, unlike other faiths and beliefs of this planet of ours, Christianity is daring enough to challenge you and me to believe in the resurrection of Christ; but furthermore, it also challenges us to make something out of it.

If you believe in the resurrection, then I invite you this morning to ask yourself what difference it makes in your life and in the life others.

Each one of us has to answer that question individually. What difference does it make? Does it matter at all if Christ is resurrected or not?

Allow me to tell you what it means to me. Let me share with you the difference that it makes in my life and ministry and also the difference that it could make in your life.

First I have to say that I agree with Saint Paul when he says that vain is our faith if there was no resurrection.

He challenges the desperation of our finitude, and he can do it because he believes that Christ is resurrected and if Christ is resurrected, we can believe in our own resurrection and proclaim like St. Paul:

"Where, O death is your sting?"

"Where, O sepulcher, is your victory?"

The reality is that Easter gives us back everything that Good Friday has grabbed from us. Easter is able to turn your despair into hope, and all tears are turned into laughter.

Christ gives himself back to us by conquering sin and death and by doing so, he gives us the assurance of life eternal.

What does it mean to my ministry?

Well, it is the reassurance that I can give in all sincerity every time I preach a funeral sermon and reassure the loved ones that are left behind that death is not the end of existence.

I know the pain and desperation of those relatives and friends for their loved ones that have passed away. Probably most of us have experienced that pain of losing a loved one at one time or another.

Maybe some of you here are now going through sad times of mourning for the ones you love but see no more.

Their pain and desperation is similar to that of Christ's followers on that Good Friday.

Jesus had promised his disciples, "I will not leave you comfortless," but right after he had given them that promise it seemed that he had broken the promise as they witnessed the crucifixion. Just like that, the one that had been able to give their lives any meaning and hope was now gone.

Of a sudden they were disciples without a teacher, servants without a master, and evangelists with no Gospel to preach. The only things they had left were just broken promises and the pain of death.

When I preach at a funeral, I want those who grieve to be able to experience that first Easter Sunday morning when Christ was able to fulfill his promise of not leaving his disciples orphaned.

I remind them that through Christ's resurrection he was able to give himself back to all of his disciples and in doing so he gave them back their hope in life.

We too can trust in Christ's victory over death and sin. I want those who are grieving to rediscover their hope of eternal life and to be able to see much beyond a lifeless body of a loved one that has died in Christ.

I want them to be transformed from being like a desperate Mary Magdalene bringing ointments to anoint a dead body to a rejoicing Mary Magdalene, whose eyes were opened so that she was able to see the living Christ.

I want them to know that when Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene he was able to give himself back to her. It is in that wonderful gift of believing in the resurrection that He is also able to give back to *every one of us* our dear ones who have fallen asleep in Him.

What does the resurrection mean to me? It means hope and a firm belief that begins to see the chains of our captivity by sin loosen and a bright light of hope, that begins to shine on the horizon where darkness used to reign but now begins to decrease.

My belief in the resurrection is not only for a future time, but also it is for right here and right now.

Remember that Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life" and not "I *will be* the resurrection and the life."

In a world that has gone crazy with greed and self-centeredness; a world where emptiness is common, even for those who have everything; a world that lacks purpose except to try to have more than anyone else at all costs; in that world we believe that there is something more, something that is much deeper and of more value.

Don't look for Jesus among the dead, he is alive and on the move, like Aslan the Lion from the *Chronicles of Narnia*. The victorious resurrected Christ is on the move, calling each one of us this morning to make a new creation that can take place today as we establish the kingdom of heaven on earth.

That is the world that Archbishop Tutu and Mother Teresa have believed possible, where we can aim to change poverty, death, sickness, injustice and oppression. The fact that Christ is alive is what moved them to respond to work with him for a renewed world.

I believe that God's new creation has commenced and that his future is able to shatter sin and pain and take us to a place where we can have not only eternal life after death, but life in its fullness right here and right now and to be able to have it abundantly.

The Good News of the Gospel this morning is *not only* that death has been vanished and sin has been conquered, but also that the old creation that pulled us into sin, into lying, greed and selfishness, is now defeated.

Yes, there can be a better world, and the living Christ is calling you to make it possible the same way that he called those first disciples, starting with Mary Magdalene. He is inviting you to dare to believe in his resurrection.

This Easter Sunday I invite you to believe and to proclaim with me:

Alleluia, Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Amen.