

# **Easter Sunday**

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In the Niklos Kazantsakis story, Tale of St. Francis, there is a moment when Francis shares an Easter memory. He says, "Listen, my child, each year at Easter I used to watch Christ's resurrection. All the faithful would gather around his tomb and weep, weep inconsolably, beating on the ground to make it open. And behold...in the midst of our lamentations the tombstone crumbled to pieces and Christ sprang from the earth and ascended to heaven, smiling at us and waving a white banner. There was only one year I did not see Him resurrected. That year a well-known theologian, a graduate of the university, came to us. He mounted the pulpit in church and began to elucidate the resurrection. He explained and explained and explained until our heads began to swim. And that year the tombstone did not crumble, and, I swear to you, no one saw the resurrection."

That story sounds a warning for Easter preachers, and I'm not sure I like it. Isn't a preacher supposed to interpret and explain...to tell you what it all means? Well, maybe not today...not this day. The great theologian and preacher, Reinhold Neibuhr, once confessed that on the great festivals of Christmas and Easter, he would attend a "high" church, where there would be great music, moving liturgy and very little, if any, preaching. In his words, "No preacher is up to the task on Easter and Christmas." Perhaps that is why my children, as they grew older, used to ask, "Well Dad, found anything new to say about Easter this year?" (nasty children!) But again, perhaps they had a point; perhaps this is not a day for explanations.

As one of my colleagues has said, "The earliest followers of Jesus made no real attempt to explain Easter. Easter explained them. It was not what happened to a rock or in a tomb that held the focus of their attention. It was what happened in their hearts..." So it just may be that you come here today, not to listen to me explain Easter, but to allow Easter to explain you; Easter not as a form of knowledge, but as a fact of experience – something that happens to you and within you.

I find it interesting that the Gospel accounts of that first Easter all begin at dawn, indeed John specifically says it was still dark. Easter breaks unexpectedly into the darkness. Perhaps this is how our discovery of the risen Christ always begins...in darkness, before the dawn. This is when Mary Magdalene and the others came to the tomb. They came to this place of death because earlier in the week, Jesus had been killed. Earlier in the week, with him, their hope had died as well.

Earlier this week, an elderly couple received a phone call from their son who lives far away. The son said he was sorry, but he and his family would not be able to visit during spring break after all. "The grandkids say hello." They assured him that they understood, but when they hung up the phone, they didn't dare look at each other.

Earlier this week a woman was called into her supervisor's office and told that although she was a wonderful and loyal employee, hard times for the company meant that she was going to be let go. She cleaned out her desk, packed away her hopes for getting ahead, and wondered what she would tell her children.

Earlier this week, someone received dreaded news from a physician. Someone else heard the words, "I don't love you anymore." Someone else slipped into depression and despair. The darkness can at times be overwhelming. But you already know this. And Easter always begins in the dark. Says Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, "No one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen. Easter is the last thing we are expecting. This day is not about bunnies, springtime and girls in new spring dresses. It is about more hope that we can handle."

Easter, not a flight from fear, but rather living through our fears and finding hope. It is finding God, not on the mountain top, but in the deepest valley. That's the unexpected surprise. Mary and the disciples, expecting to find only darkness and death, were never the same after Easter. Are you ready for that? For as Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, "Every time the risen one came to his friends they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him...That's where the miracle happened and keeps happening – not in the tomb, but in the encounter with the living Lord." Again are we ready for that, for a world that bright, that filled with possibility? Mary knew how to deal with death and disappointment. But what was she going to do with this totally unexpected and unprecedented explosion of new life into her old life?

Toni Morrison's classic novel, *Beloved*, pointedly explores this timeless human theme of the struggle to find and sustain hope in the midst of suffering and despair. In the novel, Paul D and Sethe, both former slaves living in the 1870's in Ohio, try to share some of their painful experiences with each other. But they don't get very far: "Paul D had only begun, what he was telling her was only the beginning, when her fingers on his knee, soft and reassuring, stopped him. Just as well. Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin in his chest where a red heart used to be, it's lid rusted shut."

Similarly, says Morrison, “Sethe’s brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past...it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for the next day.” Indeed, it was never too early for Sethe to start the day’s serious work of, “beating back the past.” Both Paul D and Sethe are looking for a safe space, a sanctuary where they can cope with horrifying memories and still find hope. The novel asks if hope is even possible for those who have known so much darkness, who have been pushed beyond their breaking point. And yet, at the end of the novel, after all their struggle, Paul D tells Sethe, “Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”

And that, I submit to you, is the bold, death-defying proclamation of this day...no matter what our yesterdays might look like, no matter how deeply they might haunt us, because of this day, this hope, this Lord, this Easter, we all have some kind of tomorrow. Will we believe it? Will we claim it as our own?

A Fred Craddock story: “I remember one night, sitting in a little rural church on a Sunday night, listening to the minister drone on about something. It was a hot summer evening and the window was open beside my pew. I was sitting there and listening when a man came by the church building and stopped by my window, and said, ‘Psst, psst.’

“I said, ‘What is it? I’m listening to the sermon.’

“He said, ‘Come with me.’

“I asked, ‘Where are you going?’

“He said, ‘I know where there’s a pearl of great price that’s more valuable than all the other pearls in the world.’

“I said, ‘There’s no such thing.’

“He said, ‘In fact, I know where there is a treasure buried in a field.’

“I said, ‘You’re kidding!’

“He said, ‘Where I’m going, bums are invited to sit down at the king’s table...all are welcome there.’

“I said, ‘That’s ridiculous!’

“He said, ‘In fact, where I’m going they give big parties for irresponsible prodigals who come home.’

“I said, ‘That’s just plain stupid!’

He left, and I listened to the rest of the sermon. When it over I told the preacher about how the man had disturbed me and that I hoped it didn’t upset him during the sermon. He asked, ‘Who was that?’

“I said, ‘I don’t know who he was, telling me all that fancy stuff.’

“The preacher asked, ‘Well, did he get anybody?’

And I said, ‘Well, none of our crowd went, but I did notice he had about twelve with him.’”

Can we claim the promise and dare to go with him? Because Easter comes as a threat of newness and deep change and massive transformation. It is not about a dead person being resuscitated. It is about God’s power for life that moves into all our comfortable arrangements, shatters all the usual categories by which we manage, control and administer life. It speaks about God’s will for new life working where we thought our tired deathliness would always prevail...Again, do we open our hearts to this bright new promise, or do we step back and hope that such dangerous and risky life will not come among us?

Yes, probably a waste of time to try to explain Easter. For what we confront on this day is the power of life in the midst of a world bent on death, a life that wills life for us, a life that refuses to be carried off into future speculation but which concerns and confronts us here and now, a life affirming that any of us can be raised from death to life...this very day – yes, a terrifying and hopeful promise.

John Buchanan, a United Presbyterian pastor, recalls, a few years ago, when his wife’s father died right at the beginning of Lent. She sat by his bedside on the last night, holding his hand. “What did you do all night long?” I asked her. “What did you say?”

“I ran out of things to say,” she said, “so I sang all the Easter songs I could remember, and said, “Easter’s coming, Daddy, Easter’s coming.”

Words from John Updike’s poem, *Seven Stanzas at Easter*, come to mind:

Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
analogy, sidestepping transcendence...  
let us walk through the door.

That’s Easter...not explanation, but proclamation; an invitation to walk through the door into a bright new world, where God’s power for life and the gift of life overwhelm our fear and despair, and where the ultimate reality is not the death of all things, but is instead God and goodness and truth and love everlasting.