

Easter I – Church of the Ascension – Year C – April 17, 2022

The Rev. Gary Lawler

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

In nomine+

We are gathered here this morning to celebrate the arrival of this new and glorious day, Easter Day, the anniversary of Day of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from death and the grave to a new life, eternal. Saint Peter, in the Acts of the Apostles, reminds us this morning, of the long and arduous journey of Our Lord from his baptism by John in the River Jordan, through his healing, teaching and preaching ministries in Galilee, Samaria and Judea and ultimately to Jerusalem where he was condemned to death by crucifixion and was hastily laid in a borrowed tomb, a journey which he assumed under the authority of Almighty God, whom he called his father, for the sake of a lost and sin bound people, desperately in need of redemption.

About the facts of Our Lord Jesus' life and the core and essence of his teachings, there is not a great deal of disagreement, even among the most contentious of Christian groups. We can all agree on the words and concepts. It is about what the meaning and interpretation of those words and concepts are, that great divergences of opinion arise. I won't even try to enumerate them. They are too many and too vast to catalogue! There will never be any winners in that contest! We all lose when we forget how much more we have in common than what separates us. But I digress...

The spiritual realities which have come to pass as a result of Jesus' resurrection and ascension are also largely agreed upon. When Jesus took on our human nature and fused it with his divine nature, he became not only God's Son on earth but also the perfect embodiment of humankind as God intended it from creation. It was as this human/divine being that he ministered on earth. It is as the very same being that he suffered, died and was buried. And it was as that very same being that he was raised from the dead, breaking forever the bondage of sin and death which for so many generations had separated us from God. With Christ as our mediator, there were no longer any divisions and barriers between God's creatures and most importantly between God and all of humankind. Now that's a mouthful and I'm sure I left some theological gaps, but that is the essence of how Christians of all stripes view the benefits of the Resurrection of Our Lord. Amen.

With so much unanimity around the reasons for our celebrations on this day, one of the great curiosities that continues to challenge my mind is: Why is there so much confusion around that actual event, itself? Reading the four gospel accounts of the resurrection event, one might think that they were recording different occurrences. Our gospel today from Saint Luke tells us that at early dawn, the women who had been with Jesus since his Galilean days, old friends, came to the tomb carrying the burial spices for his body. When they arrived, the stone to the door of the tomb was already rolled away but there was no body, inside. Overtaken by the perplexity of the situation, they paused long enough for two men in dazzling apparel to suddenly appear. The women responded in fear and awe, but were asked why they were seeking the living among the dead? The Jesus they are seeking has arisen. Then the two men remind them that this was all predicted by Jesus while they were in Galilee, and the women depart to tell the disciples the good news. We are given the names of only three of the women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Joanna. The rest of the women remain anonymous.

In Matthew's gospel, it seems to still be dark as Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" are making their way to the tomb. The temple police have placed an armed guard to ensure that Jesus stays buried. There is a great earthquake, an angel descends and rolls away the stone from the door of the tomb, and sits on the stone. The guards are terrified and fall into a faint. The angel says to the Marys: "Don't be afraid, I know you are looking for Jesus. He is not here. He has been raised as he had said. The angel invites them to look at the place where he was laid and then to go to the disciples and tell them that he has been raised and is going ahead of them to Galilee where they will see him. The Marys leave to tell the disciples and run into Jesus, himself, who greets them and tells them to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. Then there are some passages about the guards being given cover for their failure to secure the tomb. We are next told that the disciples went to Galilee.

In Saint Mark, we have three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James and Salome (no mention of any other women) who are going to the tomb with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. It is early, but after dawn, and they discuss how they will roll away the heavy stone sealing the tomb. When they arrive at the tomb, they find it already open and there is a single young man dressed in a white robe, inside, sitting on the right side where Jesus was laid. They are alarmed, but the young man tells them not to be alarmed. The Jesus they are looking for has been raised and is not there, but to go and tell the disciples, and Peter(!), that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee where they will see him as he promised. The women, terrified leave and tell no one.

In Saint John, we encounter a real head-turner. Is this still the same story? Here, early in the morning, before sunrise, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been removed. She runs to Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and tells them that "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter and John have a footrace to the tomb. John, being the younger, arrives first and looks in the tomb and sees the linen wrappings lying there, but does not go in. Peter then arrives, goes into the tomb and also sees the linen wrappings, and also the cloth that was on Jesus' head rolled up in a different place. Then John also enters the tomb. He sees and believes for up to that point they still did not understand the scriptures that he must rise from the dead. Then they returned to their homes. But Mary remains, weeping outside. When she bends over to look into the tomb, she sees two angels in white, sitting where Jesus had lain. They say "Woman, why are you weeping?" She answers that someone has taken Jesus' body away and she did not know where. As she is saying this, she turns and sees Jesus standing there. But, she does not recognize him! He asks her why she is weeping and she replies with the same words as before. He calls her by name and she recognizes him, but he will not let her touch him because he has not yet ascended to his father. He instructs her to go to the disciples and tell them that he is ascending to his God and Father and to the God and Father of all. Mary goes to the disciples to announce that she has seen the Lord and tells them all these things.

So, what is it? Were there one, two, three or a number of women who are eye witnesses to these events? Was there really an earthquake? Were there soldiers guarding the tomb or not? Was it still dark, early dawn or daylight? Were there angels or men in white, and how many were there? Were the disciples instructed to go to Galilee or not? Could Jesus be touched or not? Why didn't Mary Magdalene recognize him? These are a only few of the inconsistencies that continue to plague these recountings.

We have to conclude that we have no accurate record of the most important event in Christian history! We have stories of its aftermath. We have stories of its power to change and transform its own world which extend without interruption into our world, today. We have testimonies of miracles and movements that lack any explanation beyond Christ's invening grace. We have centuries of scholarship and libraries of books and papers seeking to understand and articulate what power this is that has been released on the creation. But the resurrection, itself, remains unknown and unknowable.

I recently heard a commentator, I wish I could remember who it was, state that the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ was the equivalent of a second big bang. I liked it so much that it has become the center of my Lent/Easter meditations. The resurrection of Our Lord was so unprecedented, so earth shattering that it terminated and obliterated the world and the beliefs that drove it, and so transformative that it ushered in a new and hitherto unknown world which is still unfolding before us. Like the big bang, it began in darkness and chaos and gradually began to take form and shape, and through its evolution began to reveal the order and unity for which it was intended and of which it was capable. That revelation is ongoing. Perhaps it will reveal more of itself to us, yet, today. That can be our prayer.

Our very best minds are still trying to understand the full implications of the big bang. As Christians and brothers and sisters of Our Lord Jesus Christ, dare we strive to do less. Our Christian big bang invites us to continue the quest. The mystery awaits!

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