

Easter Day 2022  
April 17th  
Christ Church, Millwood

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It is Easter and a Sunday school teacher is in her classroom with her kindergarten class.

“Children”, she asks, “What has long droopy ears and a wiggly nose?”

The children look at each other, but no one makes a response.

And so she asks, “What has long droopy ears, a wiggly nose, and hops?” Now, the children begin to squirm a bit and look at their hands, but again, no one answers.

The teacher tries again. “What has long droopy ears, a wiggly nose, hops, and carries a big basket full of beautifully colored eggs?”

At this point, one little boy leans over to his neighbor and whispers, “I know that the answer is Jesus...but it sure sounds like the Easter bunny to me.”

My friends, I say this only somewhat in jest: In our present era, I think that there may more people who take the Easter bunny seriously than they do the possibility of an empty tomb and a risen Son outside Jerusalem on that first Easter morning.

“Now it begins. It all begins.”

One of the films I always watch at this time of year is “Jesus of Nazareth” directed by Franco Zeffirelli. Some of you will remember that it first appeared as a television mini-series shown during Holy Week in 1977. I will readily admit that the film made a profound impact on my life, and while it does seem quite “seventy-ish” now, I still think it is one of best film adaptations of the Gospel stories available.

The film does include some extra-biblical characters, that is, individuals who don’t actually appear in the written accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Chief among them is Zerah, a politically astute lawyer representing the leaders of the Temple in Jerusalem. He recognizes the great danger Jesus poses to the status quo, to the power and prestige held by that leadership, and he works ruthlessly with Pontius Pilate and others to bring Jesus to trial, and ultimately, to his crucifixion.

Zerah has heard the rumors about Jesus declaring to his followers that, after his death, he would, after three days, rise from the dead. Zerah understands what would happen if the body were to suddenly go missing. And so he convinces Pilate to place guards around the tomb in order to ensure that Jesus’ followers do not remove it.

We know the rest of the story. On that fateful morning, in the film, Zerah and other representatives from the Temple go to the now empty tomb. Zerah alone enters the tomb. Upon seeing the burial clothes neatly placed to one side, he looks around and whispers, "Now it begins. It all begins."

The question before us this morning is, "What begins? What commencement did that empty tomb represent?" I will offer you a one-word response this morning:  
SALVATION.

SALVATION: The dictionary defines salvation as "a saving or being saved from danger, evil, fear, difficulty, destruction, death."

Now, even the skeptic (and if you are a skeptic, I am glad you're here this morning) even the skeptic who has at least taken the time to consider the stories of the Bible will admit that the message at the heart of these stories is one of salvation. Over and over again, we read of a God whose very nature is to save, reaching into human history in order to restore the world. While the messengers may change...Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the apostles, Paul, the message remains the same: the God of the Bible is a God whose very nature is to save. Please don't misunderstand. This does NOT mean that faith in God now guarantees a world in which danger, evil, fear, difficulty, destruction, and death are entirely absent! If that's what you think salvation ought to be, if you think that's what Jesus promised, then you are misunderstanding the nature of this salvation and frankly will be greatly disappointed. God is not some talisman, some lucky charm making all our wishes come true. That certainly has nothing to do with the Good News Jesus proclaimed. Jesus has been raised from the dead and yet the marks of the nails still remain in his hands and feet. No, the salvation proclaimed in the Gospels is about a salvation far greater than our desire for a pain free existence with all the benefits we desire! And in order to experience this salvation, there is a kicker. We must be ready to believe, like those first disciples, that God is always with us, even in our broken and pain-filled moments, and that when the time comes, when it matters most, God will be there for us and God will save us from our sins and even death itself.

You see, that Friday had been the end of everything for Jesus' followers. Their Rabbi had been silenced for good. He had been publicly humiliated and painfully executed, without the slightest indication that the God he had proclaimed with uttermost certainty and familiarity had been anywhere around. Jesus had died utterly forsaken, both by his followers and seemingly by his God. The powers of this world had won. The world had sought his death and crucified him, on the hard wood of a cross, between two criminals.

And now the world was laughing at him. After all, all that nonsense about the "lilies of the field" and "the prodigal son"? Please. Nothing more than pious sentimentalism at its worst. His works of healing, particularly as they defiled the Sabbath, were the works of a sinner in league with the devil. Casting the moneychangers out of the temple was the work of a madman. His disdain for the traditions of the elders (saying that nothing

outside people can defile them but only the things that come from the heart) was the work of a dangerous heretic. Forgiving the sins of the sick and possessed was blasphemy. And the very idea of that story about Lazarus, that sore covered, worthless beggar, coming off better in the afterlife than the upstanding and wealthy citizen was delusional and insane.

This Jesus of Nazareth was dangerous, a threat to society. He had been brought to justice, put to death, completely unmasked and ultimately censored. Yes, the world had won.

But then, as the theologian Hans Kung has asked: “How did a community emerge in the name of a crucified man? How did a new beginning come out of such a disastrous end? Where did his followers gain their strength? How did this unmasked seducer of the people become ”Savior”, this rejected blasphemer “the Son of God”? How did they come to proclaim not only the Gospel of Jesus, but Jesus himself as the Gospel, turning the proclaimer himself into the proclamation, the message of the kingdom of God into the message of Jesus as the Christ?”

In other words, how did belief in Jesus continue and grow after such a complete and utterly dismal conclusion?

That’s what today is about. Easter is the celebration of an end that becomes the beginning. Easter is the celebration of an empty tomb. Easter is about resurrection to eternal life. And the Resurrection is the ultimate expression of God’s promised salvation.

But do we really believe in this promise? I think that requires a personal relationship.

In John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene had been at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. She was devoted to him, a devotion rooted in her profound experience of his saving grace. According to Luke, Jesus had healed her, set her free from seven demons, and in response, she had become a disciple. There had been no question in her heart and mind as to the source of her deliverance, the power of the exodus of her soul and body from all that had oppressed her. She knew the truth and that truth had set her free. She had experienced salvation first hand and she was not about to abandon that amazing grace.

And yet, when she goes to the tomb that first Easter morning, and finds the stone rolled away from the entrance, it is not enough. She does not believe.

She tells Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, and then watches them engage in the most imponderable foot race ever, but that is not enough.

Weeping, she sees two angels in white, who attempt to console her, but that is not enough.

She is met by a stranger who asks her, “Who are you looking for?” But that is not enough.

It is only when Jesus speaks her name, and is recognized for who he is and what he is, Jesus Christ, dead and buried and then raised from the dead, that it becomes enough. According to John’s Gospel, Mary is the first to meet the risen Christ, is called by her very name, and in that moment, her encounter becomes the watershed experience of all believers.

There is a great Easter lesson in all of this: No empty tomb or angelic vision, no reading of scripture, or eloquence of preachers, no succession of Alleluias or majestic anthems can ever replace that defining moment, that personal experience of encountering the risen Lord. So you see, this morning is about much more than the greatest festival of the Church year. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ has come again. And please be assured this morning: He knows your name as well as he knows Mary’s. And he calls you by name right here and right now. I wonder. In the days ahead, throughout this Easter season and beyond, when the author of all salvation speaks our names, yours and mine, how will we respond?

Now, it begins. It all begins. A Blessed Easter to you all.