

Message for April 17, 2022

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

The Easter Egg in all of its varied forms is one of, if not the best known and best loved symbols of Easter. They have certainly always been a part of my own Easter celebrations. When I was a child, my sister and I often decorated hard-boiled eggs. When my own children were young, we usually spent Good Friday afternoon doing the same. And every Easter morning the kids were up bright and early searching the house for the candy eggs left by the Easter Bunny. Many towns also have their own community Easter egg hunts. I remember for example back in Colborne when the children of the village, including my daughter Rebecca, had a field day in Victoria Park looking for the candy eggs hidden amongst the trees and bushes. And of course, Easter eggs come in a variety of different forms other than the ones decorated at home or the candy ones. Some Easter eggs are even works of art that are decorated by professional artists and eagerly sought after by collectors. And then there are also the really expensive ones that are based on those made by Faberge for the Russian Tsars. Some congregations have even incorporated Easter eggs into their Easter morning worship service. The worshippers exchange Easter eggs with one another with the first person saying “Christ is risen”, and the reply being “He has risen indeed”.

Truly the Easter egg in all its varied forms is an integral part of our Easter celebrations, but we might well wonder ‘why’ as there is absolutely no reference to them in the Biblical accounts of what happened on that first Easter Sunday.

The answer of course lies in their symbolism. First of all, the eggs symbolize new life. It is a treat for example to watch a chick or some other bird peck its way out of an egg, and to watch the emergence of a new life from out of that enclosed space. And just as a chick, a new life, emerges from an egg so too did Christ emerge from the tomb. To take this one step further, the eggs are also symbols of our own resurrection since one of the most basic messages and promises of Easter is that while like Christ we shall die, like him we too shall be raised and live forevermore. But while the eggs symbolize the resurrection of both Christ and ourselves, they also symbolize something even more specific

associated with that first Easter morning and that is the stone that sealed the tomb shut.

Back in the days of Jesus, many bodies were not buried in the ground. Instead they were placed in tombs that were often hollowed out of the hillsides. At that time and place wood was expensive and certainly too expensive to be used as doors for the tombs. What people did then was use huge stones to seal the tombs shut. These stones were so big and heavy that it usually took several men to move them, and this by the way is why the women on the way to the tomb that first Easter morning wondered who would move the stone for them. Without being sexist about it, they knew that they couldn't possibly budge it on their own. Those stones were not very round either; rather they, like an egg, were oval in shape. And this is yet another reason why eggs are such an integral part of our Easter celebrations; they symbolize the huge stone, the removal of which proclaimed the triumph of Jesus over death with all of its glorious implications.

Not everyone though believes that the resurrection did in fact take place. Back in the days of Jesus for example, the authorities claimed that the disciples themselves had stolen the body and then made the whole resurrection story up. And since then there has been no shortage of other so-called 'rational' explanations for Jesus' resurrection.

One common one is that Jesus never died, rather he was simply unconscious, revived in the tomb, and then walked away. How he, suffering from his injuries including having a spear thrust into his side, could have possibly rolled the huge, massive stone away from inside the tomb and then walked away, is never really explained. Yet another theory is that Mary, along with the other women and the disciples, simply went to the wrong tomb that morning, an empty one. And as for their encounters with the angels and even Christ himself? They were all just hallucinating! And on it goes; there are certainly no shortage of 'rational' explanations for the resurrection. In all honesty though these 'rational' explanations are harder to believe than the resurrection itself. Truly by any objective standard that we may care to use, something very wonderful and mind-boggling did happen that spring morning. Even so, people including some Christians, still insist on trying to comprehend and explain it.

One of the greatest theological minds of all time is St. Augustine who lived more than sixteen hundred years ago during the last days of the Roman Empire. He is famed for his books, "The City of God" and "Confessions", both of which are still considered to be Christian classics. Now as brilliant as he undoubtedly was, Augustine could not get his mind around what happened on that first Easter Sunday. The fact that he could not really explain Jesus' resurrection frustrated him to no end, but then one day as he was walking along a beach he saw a young boy playing. The child dug a hole in the sand, took a seashell down to the water, filled it, walked back to the hole, and poured the water in. As Augustine stood there and watched, the child continued to try and fill the hole with the water. Finally Augustine couldn't contain his curiosity any longer and asked, "What are you doing?". Very seriously the child replied that he was going to pour the entire sea into the hole. It was then so-to-speak that the light went on for the saint. He realized that as smart and as educated as he most certainly was, even he could not fully understand or explain what we remember here today. Trying to fully understand the resurrection is like trying to pour the vast ocean into a hole, it simply cannot be done.

I have long thought that the meaning and promise of Easter are best felt rather than explained. In fact the resurrection is like being in love, and the more we try to understand and make sense of being in love, the less we really do. Perhaps the tremendous music of Easter such as this verse says it best:

Soar we now where Christ hath led,
Following our exalted head.
Made like him like him we rise,
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

To put it another way, quoting the words of a modern-day theologian:

"The resurrection of Christ cannot be argued or demonstrated, much less proved. It must simply be told, proclaimed, witnessed."

The reality is that the resurrection of Christ, and by implication our own as well, is a mystery, the ultimate mystery. Can we prove that Christ is risen? No, we cannot. Can we prove that we will be raised? No, we cannot. Even so, we still believe that he who was truly dead is alive again. And because he lives forever, so too shall we. And it is this, the fact that we do indeed live

forevermore, that gives our lives here and now, value, purpose, and meaning. One person who was well aware of this was Sir Winston Churchill.

Churchill knew that after his death his funeral would be a state occasion and so, in keeping with his forceful character, he planned the entire service. In accordance with his wishes the service began with a bugler playing “Taps”. This was appropriate since Churchill was a war veteran as well as the leader of the United Kingdom during the Second World War. Taps of course is the traditional way of marking the end of a day in the military, and playing this symbolized his death. After this beginning the service continued, but once it was over everyone in the church was startled when the bugler unexpectedly launched into the “Reveille”, the stirring trumpet call that marks the dawn of a new day. But why did Churchill order that this be played at the end of his funeral service? Because he wanted everyone to know that while his life here on earth was now over, a new day had dawned and his new life had just begun.

This is the great promise of Easter. A new day will dawn for all of us, and what better symbol for this new day than the Easter Egg. Christ is risen, we are risen, thanks be to God!

Pastoral Prayer

Almighty God, by whose power our Lord Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, hear us as we come to you on this, our most joyful and triumphant day of all.

We thank you that the one who was truly dead is alive again, both now and forevermore. We thank you for what this, the last, greatest, and most ultimate mystery of all means for us; that while like Jesus we shall die, like him we too shall live. We thank you for what this means for our lives here on earth, that they have value, purpose and meaning.

We thank you that since your Son is alive, he is also a living, present reality in our lives here and now as we make our way on life’s journey. We confess that nothing in ourselves makes us worthy or deserving of your great

love as revealed to us by the resurrection; all we can do is say thank you, and so we do.

We pray this day for your church here on earth, that she may fearlessly proclaim the wonderful promise of what we celebrate this Easter Sunday.

We pray for all who need to hear the wonderful promise of this day, and especially those who are lost in a world of grief, despair, and hopelessness. We pray for healing in the lives of those who are ill and those feeling overwhelmed, even as the pandemic surges once again.

We pray for all who need to hear the great promise of this day: that love will triumph over hate, that good will triumph over evil and that life will triumph over death. We pray this Easter morning for all the places in this world where it seems as if the exact opposite is true, those places where it seems as if hate, evil and death will surely prevail. We especially offer up our prayer for the people of Ukraine as the Russian onslaught continues. We pray for the injured, the homeless, and those who mourn. We pray for an end to the invasion and wisdom for leaders everywhere as they wrestle with what should be done, and how to stop the needless aggression and barbarity.

On this day when we remember and celebrate your victory over the greatest enemy of all, we pray for your triumph over all that is contrary to your will. May the day come when your will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Until that day dawns, may we truly live as an Easter people. In your Son's name we pray. Amen