

April 17, 2022

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

The Death of Jesus - The Birth of Christ

(An Easter Sermon)

Matthew 28:1 ff

“As the first day was dawning, Mary and Mary Magdalene went to visit the tomb. Suddenly there was an earthquake and a heavenly angel came and rolled back the stone, and appeared brilliantly light and dressed in white as snow. He said, ‘I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified, but he is not here. He has been raised...go and tell the other disciples...So they left the tomb filled with joy and fear...”

John 20:3 ff

“So Peter and another disciple set out running for the tomb, but the other outran Peter. When he got there, he bent to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been over Jesus’ face...Nearby, Mary was weeping. ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ Jesus asked her. ‘For whom are you looking?’ Not recognizing Jesus, and thinking he was the gardener, she said, ‘If you have taken him away, please tell me where.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary’. She turned to him and said, ‘Teacher’ and Jesus said to her, ‘Please don’t cling to me...’”

2 Cor. 5:17

“From now on we see no one from a human point of view, even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we do no longer. If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has passed away and all things have become new...”

As I child, I thought that “Christ” was Jesus’ last name!
Since then I’ve learned that “Christ” is not his last name,
Christ is an experience;
a life-changing spiritual experience
that takes everything that Jesus meant as person;
what he taught, how he loved, how he healed,
and expanded it, magnified it, raised it up
and spread it around all who believed in him.
It lived on in even larger terms
once Jesus died,
to become the energy that invites us here today.

Over the years, I’ve come to see the Easter story
as A BIRTH STORY -
the death of Jesus and the birth of Christ.

Think about various pieces of the Easter story
sound similar to an ancient birth story.
Women were always the most involved in both.
At birth, midwives stood at the ready
to help deliver, anoint and wrap in swaddling clothes
that newborn life.

At Easter, it was the same.
There the Marys stood dutifully - filled with fear & joy -
around the outside of that dark but opened tomb,
as if it were a fully dilated womb.

Matthew's Easter story even adds contractions
of earthquake proportions -
because it takes as much to deliver
humanity's great "Deliverer".

At both tomb and womb white ^{lines} and light are everywhere.
White for purity, and light for clarity.
and angels figure prominently at both times
and carry the very same message, "*Be not afraid...*"
because, let's face it, birth and resurrection can both
be overwhelming!
And - in both birth and death stories,
men came running after!

With the snow greeting us on Easter morning,
I was so tempted to say, "Merry Christmas".
Well, there's more than snow that connects the two.
And so I wrote this little poem, entitled "*Tomb & Womb*"

*At Christmas time we celebrate
the birth of the Jesus-child.
But there amongst the joy so great
were hints of death and trial.
Gifts of myrrh and frankincense
to mark his birth they gave.
But they became his spices hence
when he lay in the grave.*

*But be not sad at Easter time
God's springtime for the earth.
Death and life are intertwined
and tomb is womb for birth.*

The death of Jesus allowed for the birth of Christ.
The death of Jesus from Nazareth
birthed a timeless and global spirituality.
The death of a single individual
birthed the life of a world-wide community.
The death of one body
unleashed a spiritual presence that never dies.

Fr. Richard Rohr is famous for his celebration of
“The Cosmic Christ.
He reminds us **“Christ is not Jesus last name”!**
Christ is before all things, in all things,
holding all things together
and is still alive.”

And Sir George MacLeod,
the great Scottish preacher says,
“Christ” points us beyond the historical figure of Jesus
to the “conjoining of the divine & the human
spirit and matter, found everywhere and in everyone.”

Dear friends, the meaning of Easter is universal.
The Christ experience flows beyond boundaries of any
one religion hoping to unite all religions.
The Christ experience is larger than any one person
speaking a truth beyond any one dogma,
any one vocabulary, any single scripture,
to all races, all creeds, all cultures, all classes.

I remember my surprise when a rabbi friend once told me that many Jews believe the Messiah has indeed arrived.

He explained,

**“Whenever people of different faiths & backgrounds
all come together to work for love and justice,
The Messiah has come, the Messiah is alive.”**

In his own way he was describing the Christ who was birthed at the death of Jesus.

But sometimes births have complications.

One of the most common is the umbilical cord getting wrapped around the baby’s neck.

While in the womb that cord is the baby’s life-line, but during birth it sometimes gets in the way and can squeeze things.

The Easter story has a similar kind of birth complication.

“Don’t cling to me...” said Jesus to Mary.

Ironically, the loyalty & closeness that fed Jesus in life and brought life to his followers, ended up being a hindrance to the birth of Christ, like an umbilical cord.

And the sad thing is, many Christians still cling to Jesus - as if they possessed him and he belonged just to them.

For many the body of Jesus is the only basis for ritual life
and any who believe otherwise aren't invited to join.
For many the person of Jesus is the only salvation,
and any who believe otherwise aren't saved.
Yes, there are many just like Mary -
who cling to Jesus.

Indeed, one of the beautiful things about Jesus
was that he never "Clung" to himself!
He never meant his life to be about HIM.
He was never about his own ego,
never about his own greatness.
He was never about his own body, his own beauty,
his own celebrity.
There was never any "Jesus Christ Superstar!"

And this clinging-thing pertains to us all.
Anyone who clings to themselves
will have a hard time experiencing the resurrection
in their lives.

In closing, in so many ways, this death and birth process
reminds me the life of the caterpillar, turn chrysalis,
turn butterfly.
Jesus life is like that lovely caterpillar.
And his death and burial is like that amazing chrysalis.

And his resurrection is like that beautiful butterfly -
the butterfly of Christ
that comes flying forth to greet the world
out of that cocoon,
out of that tomb,
out of that womb!

Amen.

PRAYER OF PASTORAL CARE Easter April 17, 2022

Our prayer response on this Easter morning is: **Make of this world your new creation;** following the words, Living God, hear our prayer.

Before we call, you answer, O Lord. Before we speak, you know the words. Let there be joy in Jerusalem, and peace among the nations. We pray wholeheartedly for the people of Ukraine and other war-torn countries. Strengthen the hands of all humanitarian workers, and all defenders of sovereignty and freedom for Ukraine in this hour and these days. We pray for peace that the time may come when sounds of weeping and cries of distress turn to shouts of joy and laughter. Living God, hear our prayer. **Make of this world your new creation!**

As we celebrate Ian's baptism this day, we pray that infants and children may grow and thrive. Strengthen all families that they may be places of support, trust and love for all ages. We pray that those who are old may be able to dance to life like children. Living God, hear our prayer. **Make of this world your new creation!**

Let every person find a home and enjoy the fruits of their labor. We thank you for all who are working to resettle refugees, for the support of Bennington County Open Arms, for the Afghan families in our midst, and the continuing opportunities for service. Help us in our country to continue to partner with others in helping refugees worldwide. Living God, hear our prayer. **Make of this world your new creation!**

Living God, by your Holy Spirit, open our eyes to see the new light of this day; open our lips to you for your saving love revealed in the resurrection of our Lord. Open our hearts to believe the good news. Living God, hear our prayer. **Make of this world your new creation!**

We lift before you those on this church's immediate needs list.

Show us, O God, the new heaven and new earth you have promised, so that we may be glad and rejoice in your presence all our days; through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.

OFFERING

As we give our Easter offering, we are reminded:

We belong to Christ Jesus; all things are his, for he is Lord of all.

*DOXOLOGY

*PRAYER We praise you, O God, and give you thanks that you have given us such hope, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Let our lives be proof of that good news. Let our words and actions, our love and service bear witness to your resurrection power; in the presence of our living Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.