

## Sermon for Easter Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Happy Easter! You know, Easter's an impossible thing. As if God taking on a human body 3½ months ago wasn't impossible enough, today we come together to celebrate the dead and buried back on their feet. And not only do we see Jesus full of breath again, in the coming weeks, he'll walk through walls, show off his scars, levitate all the way to heaven, and even join his friends for a lakeside fish fry. But none of those are even the most impossible thing we remember during Easter! Jesus appears before a couple of women first -- Mary Magdalene and "the other" Mary -- and when they go and tell the disciples -- a room full of men -- the men actually listen to them! (Sidebar: I kinda feel bad for "the other Mary." Imagine being one of the first people to see Jesus rise from the dead, and history just remembers you as "the other one.") But yeah, we're celebrating impossible things today. The grave has lost its sting, death and decay pose no threat, grief is shattered by unfathomable relief and tangible joy. Things which were cast down are raised up, old things made new, eggs magically appear on lawns. I'm reminded of the White Queen's line from *Through the Looking Glass*: "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!"

The thing with Easter is, while it is a joyous occasion (as evidenced by your fancy clothes and this beautifully decorated church), while it is a joyous occasion, we miss some of what this day meant the first time around. See, on that first Easter, nobody knew it was Easter. It was just a regular day, not even the Sabbath, a Sunday before Sundays were Sundays. The only thing that made that day notable was the burial a few days earlier. People'd been waiting for a messiah for a long time, and while some thought Jesus fit the bill, dying kinda put a damper on that. No, that first Easter, the Marys simply went to see the tomb, visit his grave, and pay their respects. Over the course of Holy Week, we've imagined ourselves in their shoes, mourning the loss of not only a leader but a dear friend. But affecting as those services've been, as faithfully and deeply as we've walked their path, it was their path we walked. And we knew Easter waited on the other side. But they didn't. They didn't know he'd be back, in spite of everything he'd told them. They didn't know that 2,000 years later we'd look forward to Easter every year. They didn't know their sorrows would be eased, their pain lifted, their heartbreak mended.

No, what they knew was that the people in power won. The influence of religious leaders combined with the strength of the empire made for an impossible adversary. They knew they'd glimpsed something special in the life of Jesus, but that glimpse of something special was now among the treasured memories of their lives, but simply, memories. Where we've had the advantage of hearing the story before, they lived it in real time, and as desolate as the last few days've been, I can only imagine the ecstatic disbelief that came with that first glimpse of the risen Christ. We've gotta understand, this meant more than seeing an old friend again. This meant more than the impossible defeat of death. This meant more than the fulfillment of scriptures, vindicated belief, or even the power of God over death. This meant the impossible adversary did not win. The combined power of empire and religion held no sway where once they seemed to hold it all. Easter testified that no matter how terrible things get, bad news is never the last news.

I can imagine few things more important for us to remember. We know Easter'll come around again. We know the story of Jesus, we know the ending, we may even know where we fit in all that. But while we're not living with the uncertain darkness of Christ in the tomb, we are living with plenty of uncertain darkness. Religions are dressing up in the robes of empire all over again, and some religious leaders embrace that unholy alliance. Just last week, the spiritual advisor to the White House compared the death and resurrection of Jesus to the president. Because Jesus sacrificed himself, you see, America is guaranteed military victory. That we've gotten to a place where such a comparison could be made is abhorrent, yes, but it also casts an enormous

shadow over today's celebration. The same kinds of forces that put Jesus on the cross back then now use his peaceful sacrifice to justify wars today. Y'all, a golden calf doesn't have to be a literal golden calf. It could be any number of things that attempt to replace God. A golden-hoofed goat covered in \$100 bills, hypothetically speaking of course, a particular political affiliation or commitment to war or profit or a single person.

The Bible calls this sorta thing idolatry. People, money, power, destruction, greed, gleeful oppression -- they all place some failing of the human spirit above the teachings of scripture. And that's condemned all over scripture. There's Revelation, where a figure categorically opposed to the teachings of Christ gets all the accolades only God should receive. There's Lamentations where a people wail as their city's leveled and their children slaughtered. There's prophet after prophet lambasting the rich and the perversely powerful as the ones who pose the greatest threats to the people of God. There's Jesus himself who favors the poor and the oppressed, the Tower of Babel where hubris is the downfall of humanity, even Eden where the word "no" gets ignored.

Every day we wake under an impossibly dark shadow with no way forward. We're witnesses to a large-scale affront to the moral and ethical system modeled by Jesus, and many cheer the downfall of what our nation and our faith purport to stand for simply because the ones cashing in on everything crashing down wrap themselves in the flag and claim the name of Jesus for themselves. Their act is about as convincing as a barn cat putting up a sign that says "mice get free hugs," but their promises carry just enough seductive temptation to get away with murder...and worse. And by being just tempting enough, they've convinced far too many that the greatest threat to our safety is the existence of minorities (sometimes tiny minorities) rather than the clear rise of fascism wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross.

Now, I know I may've just lost some of y'all for coming off too political, but we're not talking about who you should vote for. We're talking about the soul of our nation, the integrity of the name of Christianity, the undue suffering of innocents, and the slashing of social support networks in favor of funding and justifying ego-boosting conquest at home and abroad. I'm not talking about who you vote for, I'm talking about what kind of people we want to be, what kind of values we want to stand for, what kind of grace and mercy we want to model. I'm talking about light shining in darkness, and as you people of St. Thomas' have heard me say before, from the Gospel of John, when light shines in the darkness, the darkness comprehends it not. And that, that is what Easter's about. Light shining in the darkness. As far back as Aristotle, maybe even further, we've known that evil carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Evil's so ravenous that the corruption, the ruthlessness, the greed that helps you get ahead in befouled systems inevitably consumes itself. And while evil's distracted by its unflagging appetite for more, light shines, quietly, perhaps, but light shines. Evil may seem insurmountable, but Easter people always win.

Ya know, I wonder what Mary Magdalene and The Other One imagined their remaining days'd hold when they were certain the empire had won and hope was buried. I wonder what ways forward they held to, what their escape plan was if things got even worse, where they'd flee to, or how long they imagined they could hold out before the crushing power of empire came for them, too. I wonder, but I'm glad we didn't get that part of the story. I'm glad we got the story of Easter instead. The story of the impossible, the impotence of weak leaders claiming to be strong, and the evergreen lesson that no matter how bad the news gets, it's never the last news. And so we can say, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!"