

A SERMON PREACHED ON EASTER
SUNDAY 2018 AT

BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE

It is said that the late great agnostic, Robert G. Ingersoll, used to tell this story: "I was never nonplused but once. I was lecturing one night and took occasion to show that the resurrection of Lazarus was probably a planned affair to bolster the waning fortunes of Jesus. Lazarus was to take sick and die. The girls were to bury him and send for Jesus. Lazarus was to feign death till Jesus should come and say, 'Lazarus, come forth.' To emphasize the

situation I said, 'Can anyone here tell me why Jesus said, "*Lazarus*, come forth"?''

Down by the door a pale-faced, white-haired man arose and with a shrill voice said, 'Yes, sir, I can tell you! If Jesus had not said, "Lazarus," he would have the whole graveyard of Bethany coming out to him!'""

Today being Easter Sunday, it's as if we had all heard our name called and decided to come out. The whole of the church, plus family, friends, visitors, walk-ins, part-time residents are all here this morning to celebrate with us the greatest day of the church year: Easter

morning. But unlike the women who visited the tomb in today's gospel reading, we have the advantage of knowing the whole of the story. When they get to the tomb, they find it empty and have no idea where the body is. The angel therein tells them that Jesus has risen from the dead, and instructs them to go tell Peter and the other disciples what has taken place. But, at least according to Mark's gospel, they are too afraid to do anything, fleeing from the tomb and keeping quiet all that they had seen. We need the witness of the other gospels and the writings of Paul to help us fill in the rest of the story about how everyone finally gets the full impact of Jesus' resurrection. It comes in parcels

to each of the believers, not all at once. Some who are not there to see the empty tomb or hear the witness of the women and a few of the disciples find it hard to fathom. Others finally understood what Jesus had long been talking about in all the days leading up to his death. Yet others were satisfied with what they had merely heard and realized that the Scripture about a Messiah had finally been fulfilled. Each could now call themselves a believer, for it had been done for them what had been long promised, and even if they had not seen it for themselves, it was now a reality hard to deny: the tomb was empty, there was an angelic presence waiting and speaking inside, the body was

missing; unless it had been stolen and hidden by the disciples; could it be possible that he would even be seen and walk amongst them? Throughout the rest of the day, according to the other gospel writers, he does just that. The fact that he is truly risen is the major tenet of our faith as Christians, and resurrection is our promise, whether we buy into it or not. For just what is at stake here?

While it probably is not surprising, I would say that all of life, and life eternal, are at stake in our belief in the resurrection. After all, do we want to live a life where there is no renewal, no

chance at change, no rebirth in Nature,
no realization of love?

Biblically speaking, resurrection is not a new concept - - it is said that the Pharisees had believed in it and taught it as part of their precepts for many years. In his epistles, Paul sees it as something that happens to individual souls that is current and ongoing. Or at times he and the author of the *Book of Revelation* speak of it as the rising of the dead in the rapture at the end of the world. For me, all that pondering of bodily movement and location at life's end is too transient. If the truth be known it is much easier to ponder the man Jesus, through whom we come to know the

risen Christ; what was accomplished in him through human form is promised to us likewise - - a bodily resurrection from the dead, with Christ awaiting to greet us. Hence we can exclaim like the Easter songs for today that death has no more power of us, it has no sting. And thanks be to God who gives us the victory through the risen Lord, Jesus Christ! It is a glorious vision for such a wonderful morn as this! Which reminds me of a true story about the Methodist Church in the year 1870 that was having its annual conference in the state of Indiana. At one point, the president of the college where they were meeting said "I think we live in a very exciting age." The presiding bishop said, "Oh,

really! What do you see?" The college president responded, "I believe we are coming into a time of great inventions. I believe, for example, that men will fly through the air like birds." The bishop said, "That is heresy! The Bible says that flight is reserved for the angels. We will have no such talk here." After the conference, the bishop, whose surname was Wright, went home to his two small sons, Wilbur and Orville. And you know what they did to their father's vision!

Which raises the question, what will you do with this morning's heavenly vision God has prepared for us? Can you envision today as a day of liberation? Because if we can put all things into the

hands of God and in God's grace and mercy working through us, what a life we will live!

Nearly immediately after Jesus' death the church had already come to understand that dying is not the end; in fact, it is necessary, and the keystone to a new life: raised, delivered, sanctified, blessed, forgiven, and teeming to be alive. Do you recall Mame teaching Young Patrick what would then become his mantra?: "Life is a banquet," she shouted, "and most poor sons of guns are starving to death!" The point, of course is that the signs of Easter are all around us; we need to open our eyes to the possibility of new beginnings, or they

cannot be realized within us. To me, this means that whatever you believe will become your truth. It may sound a little bit too much like *The Little Engine that Could*, but positive thinking is life affirming, and life changing, as it is contagious. Despite the setbacks it's important to press forward, because remember, even when you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there! If you believe in resurrection, there is no alternative than that you will be lifted up, both figuratively and literally. That is something to really look forward to!

It doesn't take a suspension of belief to get to a place where resurrection is real,

actuated, taken in. Sometimes a simple approach of merely watching and listening to others is all that is needed. Consider the story of young Jeremy Forrester, who was born with a twisted body, a slow mind, and a chronic, terminal illness that had been determinately killing him all his young life. Still, his parents had tried to give him as normal a life as possible and had sent him to St. Theresa's Catholic Elementary School.

At the age of 12, Jeremy was only in second grade, seemingly unable to learn. His teacher, Doris Miller, often became exasperated with him. He would squirm in his seat, drool, and make grunting

noises. At other times, he spoke clearly and distinctly, as if a spot of light had penetrated the darkness of his brain. Most of the time, however, Jeremy irritated his teacher. One day, she called his parents and asked them to come to St. Teresa's for a consultation.

As the Forresters sat quietly in the empty classroom, Doris said to them, "Jeremy really belongs in a special school. It isn't fair to him to be with younger children who don't have learning problems. Why, there is a five-year gap between his age and that of the other students!"

Mrs. Forrester cried softly into a tissue while her husband spoke. "Miss Miller," he said, "there is no school of that kind nearby. It would be a terrible shock for Jeremy if we had to take him out of this school. We know he really likes it here."

Doris sat for a long time after they left, staring at the snow outside the window. Its coldness seemed to seep into her soul. She wanted to sympathize with the Forresters. After all, their only child had a terminal illness. But it wasn't fair to keep him in her class. She had 18 other youngsters to teach, and Jeremy was a distraction. Furthermore, he would never learn to read and write. Why waste any more time trying ?

As she pondered the situation, guilt washed over her. "Oh God," she said aloud, "here I am complaining when my problems are nothing compared with that poor family ! Please help me to be more patient with Jeremy."

From that day on, she tried hard to ignore Jeremy's noises and his blank stares. Then one day he limped to her desk, dragging his bad leg behind him.

"I love you, Miss Miller," he exclaimed, loud enough for the whole class to hear. The other students snickered, and Doris's face turned red. She stammered,

"Wh-why, that's very nice, Jeremy. Now please take your seat."

Spring came, and the children talked excitedly about the coming of Easter. Doris told them the story of Jesus, and then to emphasize the idea of new life springing forth, she gave each of the children a large plastic egg. "Now," she said to them, "I want you to take this home and bring it back tomorrow with something inside that shows new life. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Miss Miller !" the children responded enthusiastically -all except for Jeremy. He just listened intently, his eyes never left her face. He did not even

make his usual noises. Had he understood what she had said about Jesus' death and resurrection ? Did he understand the assignment ? Perhaps she should call his parents and explain the project to them.

That evening, Doris's kitchen sink stopped up. She called the landlord and waited an hour for him to come by and unclog it. After that, she still had to shop for groceries, iron a blouse, and prepare a vocabulary test for the next day. She completely forgot about phoning Jeremy's parents.

The next morning, 19 children came to school, laughing and talking as they

placed their eggs in the large wicker basket on Miss Miller's desk. After they completed their math lesson, it was time to open the eggs.

In the first egg, Doris found a flower. "Oh yes, a flower is certainly a sign of new life," she said. "When plants peek through the ground, we know that spring is here."

A small girl in the first row waved her arms. "That's my egg, Miss Miller," she called out.

The next egg contained a plastic butterfly, which looked very real. Doris held it up. "We all know that a caterpillar

changes and grows into a beautiful butterfly. Yes, that is new life, too"

Little Judy smiled proudly and said, "Miss Miller, that one is mine!"

Next, Doris found a rock with moss on it. She explained that moss, too, showed life. Billy spoke up from the back of the classroom. "My daddy helped me!" he beamed.

Then Doris opened the fourth egg. She gasped. The egg was empty! Surely it must be Jeremy's, she thought, and, of course, he did not understand her instructions. If only she had not forgotten to phone his parents.

Because she did not want to embarrass him, she quietly set the egg aside and reached for another. Suddenly Jeremy spoke up. "Miss Miller, aren't you going to talk about my egg?"

Flustered, Doris replied, "But Jeremy -- your egg is empty!"

He looked into her eyes and said softly, "Yes, but Jesus' tomb was empty too!"

Time stopped. When she could speak again, Doris asked him, "Do you know why the tomb was empty?"

"Oh, yes!" Jeremy exclaimed. "Jesus was killed and put in there. Then God raised him up!"

The recess bell rang. While the children excitedly ran out to the school yard, Doris cried. The cold inside her melted completely away.

Three months later, Jeremy died. Those who paid their respects at the mortuary were surprised to see 19 eggs on top of his casket, each and every one of them *empty.*ⁱⁱ

Thank God for the wisdom of children!

It is my hope that you will remember and understand today as the day when any of the cold inside melted completely away, as the day you started over, started something new, renewed a vow, vowed to do what you were so long planning and begin to celebrate, as the time for mourning has passed. And along with a prayer each morning of “this is the day God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,” in full acknowledgement of what the earliest witnesses experienced, might you dare to add the Easter chant, that the tomb was empty, and “He is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!”

Amen.

(The Rev Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.

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ⁱ <http://www.moreillustrations.com/illustrations/resurrection%205.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://rightwingnews.com/religion/what-was-in-jeremys-egg/>