

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

John 20:1-18
24 April 2011

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! I'll bet that the Romans didn't see that coming! Easter is something completely different. Some of you will remember the phrase from the old Monty Python TV show. Just when you thought you had caught on to what was happening, something completely different began. **Here is the first Easter truth.** If you think that you fully understand everything there is to understand about Easter, then it is not Easter that you are thinking about. Easter is something completely different. Let's look at the completely different thing that Easter is.

Today's first Easter story tells of a pastor who lost his cat. He had a kitten that climbed up a tree in his backyard and then was afraid to come down. The pastor coaxed, offered warm milk, etc. The kitty would not come down. The tree was not sturdy enough to climb, so the pastor decided that if he tied a rope to his car and drove away so that the tree bent down, he could then reach up and get the kitten. That's what he did, all the while checking his progress in the car. He then figured if he went just a little bit further, the tree would be bent sufficiently for him to reach the kitten. But as he moved the car a little further forward, the rope broke. The tree went "boing!" and the kitten instantly sailed through the air-out of sight. Have you ever seen a catapult?

The pastor felt terrible. He walked all over the neighborhood asking people if they'd seen a little kitten. No. Nobody had seen a stray kitten. So he prayed, "Lord, I just commit this kitten to your keeping," and went on about his business. A few days later he was at the grocery store, and met one of his church members. He happened to look into her shopping cart and was amazed to see cat food. This woman was a cat hater and everyone knew it, so he asked her, "Why are you buying cat food when you hate cats so much?" She replied, "You won't believe this," and then told him how her little girl had been begging her for a cat, but she kept refusing. Then a few days before, the child had begged again, so the Mom finally told her little girl, "Well, if God gives you a cat, I'll let you keep it." She told the pastor, "I watched my child go out in the yard, get on her knees, and ask God for a cat. And really, Pastor, you won't believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten came suddenly flying out of the clear blue sky, with its paws outspread, and landed right in front of her." Never underestimate the power of God who does something completely different.

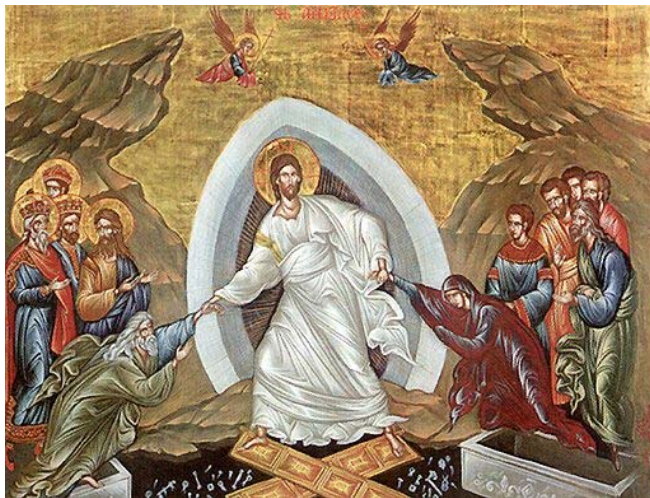


Alleluia! Christ is Risen! On Easter, God the Father brings back to life God the Son through the power of God the Spirit. That is completely different from what everyone expected. The disciples had hoped without hope, prayed without relief and feared without release. The Romans had placed his body in a tomb and pushed in front of the tomb a stone too big for several men to move. They knew Jesus was done for, receipted and filed, finished. The Temple officials understood that one more upstart spiritual revolutionary was no longer a threat. All the players knew what had happened. All the players knew what was going to happen. Then, *something completely different happened.* Resurrection happened. That is the power of the Christian God. That is

something completely different. That is gospel. We follow that event only if we accept that this is a once in all time event, something completely different from everything else we know.

Rowan Williams, pastor and church leader, reminds of the completely different truth of resurrection faith. Christianity is simple but never simplistic: “You only get anywhere near the truth when all the easy things to say about God are dismantled, so that the image of God is no longer just a big projection of your self-centered wish fulfillment fantasies. What is left? Either you sense you are confronting an energy so immense and unconditioned that there is no adequate words for it or you give up.” (Review of *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* by Philip Pullman in *The Guardian*, April 3, 2010.) Resurrection faith does not give up! We know this is real.

What do we give up to if the faith is not real? Without Christ we are faced with only two real options, utopian idealism or despair. Idealism always feels false, too saccharine, like cotton candy. I cannot stomach despair. Christians live in the absolute faith that the something completely different that is the resurrection is the source of life. **That is the second Easter truth.** Resurrection faith is new life.



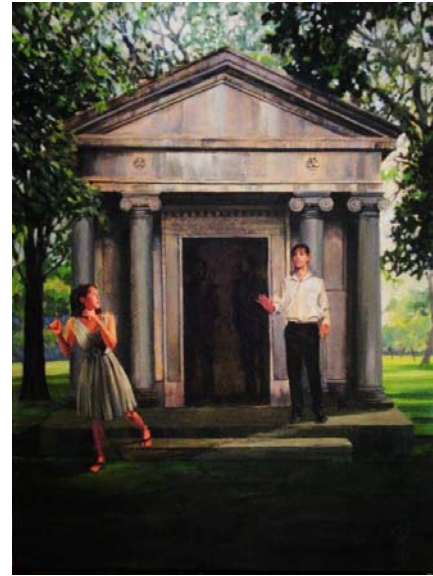
There is an icon, a religious painting, which you can find in Orthodox churches. The painting shows Jesus pulling Adam and Eve out of their tombs. The truth of that painting is something completely different. The truth of the painting is that with resurrection, what we think of as reality is reversed. Death is defeated. Death, our fear of death, our despair and sense that nothing matters has no power. We are free from that captivity. Death has no dominion. That is something completely different. The resurrection stories of Jesus are completely different from all the supposedly similar stories. With resurrection the garden of Gethsemane becomes the Garden of Eden. We are born all over again new to new life. The world is re-made and hope beyond hope is let loose once again. You who have followed the process leading to this day, you know the joy, the release, the happiness offered to us now. You have spent a solid week drenched in the sweat of separation, soaking in the pain of betrayal and experiencing the truth of suffering.

Now in the early morning, before the first light of dawn, Mary encounters the deepest grief and greatest joy when the empty tomb passes away before the light of life, the light of new creation, the light of resurrection. What Mary expected disappears in the morning mist in face of the something completely different that God introduces to Mary, the disciples to you and me and the entire world for all time. Life, light and love are released, never again imprisoned in death's cold embrace.

That is good news. That is gospel. That is something completely different. Alleluia! Christ is Risen! **Here we find that third Easter truth.** We know the power of God, we celebrate the new life given to us and we live anew not by doctrine, words or lofty thoughts. We have resurrection faith by the relationship we have with God through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have Mary's witness to thank for this.

Mary goes to the garden looking for her teacher. What she finds is completely different from what she expects. What she finds is completely different from anything that any religion would ever do. What Mary finds is not one more revelation, but the Jesus she loves, not a doctrine for the mind but joy for the heart, not a way to think but a path to walk and life to live. There is no deep, scriptural discussion there in the Garden, there is life. There is Jesus, the child of God alive and offering us the life we are invited to embrace, share and live, not talk about but live.

Mary's witness lets all of us in on this gift. She seeks the one who is everything to her. She embraces the One she loves. She acts in response to the Christ's words. The faith is not *thought* anywhere near as much as it is *behavior*. This is resurrection faith. Not simply belief, but life in belief.



“Christian faith itself was the experience of Jesus’ continued empowering presence.... It was the continued presence of absolutely the same Jesus in an absolutely different mode of existence.” John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 210.

We are not so terribly different from Mary, any of us. We think that we understand what has happened only to discover we have been thinking about the old life, not the new. We think we know what every symbol means only to discover that a cross can be a tree of life. We think that the world is frozen in one condition only to discover that God's work of something completely different can turn despair into joy.

God is doing something completely different on Easter Sunday. Seen this way, resurrection is not a violation of natural law. Seen this way, resurrection is a sign post pointing the way to something beyond our human centered, well-calculated understanding of the universe. Christian faith accepts that there are greater possibilities for the universe than any other way of thinking can imagine. Christian living knows that just because Easter is beyond our comprehension, it is not beyond our experience. Christian living knows that truth is found in the human heart more than in any set of rules or doctrines. Christian living knows that resurrection never contradicts the universe. This is because Christian living knows that resurrection re-shapes, re-directs, and re-births the entire universe.

Resurrection is something completely different. Thanks be to God because we have tried everything that we humans could think of to make the world better, bring our lives meaning and

rescue the future. Resurrection lifts our hearts to new life and teaches us to sing God's new song of life.

We are free to live as we are created to live. We are free to act in ways that are eternally just. We are free to accept forgiveness for all our sins and to offer that forgiveness to others in the name of and through the power of God who in a completely different act of love recreates the world on Easter Sunday. This is our Easter gift of new life: "Made like him, like him we rise/Ours the cross, the grave, the skies." (Charles Wesley, *Christ the Lord is Risen Today!*) That is something completely different.



Alleluia! Christ is risen and so are we!