

Easter 2018

Welcome to our Easter service today. Never in the history of this church has Easter been celebrated in this room. But a small fire in the church kitchen just three months ago sent smoke and airborne particulates to every corner of the building, leaving a coating that had to be cleaned off. We thought we'd be back in Skinner Chapel by today, but it was not to be. Maybe in a couple more weeks; we'll be ready!

According to people who study these things, Easter is the most important holiday in the Christian calendar – even more important than Christmas. Easter is about resurrection: about Jesus arising from the dead. All around the world people recite, “*He is Risen: He is risen indeed!*”

But there's never been hard evidence of what happened. So people have constructed storylines to suggest what might have happened.

The Gospel of Matthew says that soldiers guarding the tomb were given a cover story by their superiors: that Jesus' disciples came by night, and stole his body away while they slept.

The Gospel of Mark didn't say much more – only a promise that Jesus would meet up with some of his disciples later on.

In modern times, Nikos Kazantzakis wrote “The Last Temptation of Christ” in which, for one fleeting second, Jesus viewed how his life would have been if he had just been a regular human being – including raising a family.

I saw “Jesus Christ Superstar” on Broadway just before it closed. What a passionate portrayal of Jesus – fully human, trying to follow God’s call.

The DaVinci Code made Mary Magdalene out to be Jesus’ wife, bearing a child to carry on Jesus’ blood line.

Philosophers and Theologians have come up with all kinds of theories about what happened at the end of Jesus’ life. Was the resurrection biological – so that actual bones and muscle came back to life .. or was it more spiritual -- an apparition?

You might find all that speculation interesting, but I don’t think it answers the deeper longing of the heart.

There is something more to the event that invites all who hear the story to arise and re-enter life with a stronger faith.

Our sense of loss due to the fire in our church is nothing, compared to real devastation affecting people around the world. Think what it must be like in Syria, Puerto Rico, or even right here in Holyoke, when someone’s apartment building burns. In the big picture, our little fire has been little more than a minor inconvenience – with the upside that it will be cleaner and brighter than it’s been in a hundred years. Even so, I can tell you that some of us are growing tired of it. We are eager to get on with things.

Before that first Easter sunrise, the little band of followers witnessed the crucifixion of their leader, and saw no way forward. Yes, they had known that Jerusalem was a dangerous place for

prophets and rebels. They carried that stress and just kept following Jesus. But upon witnessing his arrest, conviction, and death, their whole world shattered. You know that moment when you just want to give up and go away? I am pretty sure that some of the disciples thought, “Okay, that does it; I’m outta here!”

And who could blame them? When you have been on the path for three years and then run into a dead end with nowhere to go, you just want to be done with it. You go numb.

Most of us have said those words at least once. When you can see no future, and everything you thought you were building collapses, you say, “I’m outta here.”

But then those women came running back to the disciples with news that Jesus had risen from the dead. The disciples didn’t believe them at first -- had to go see for themselves.

But as the morning and afternoon wore on, something changed in that little group of misfits. Here’s what I think: they had one of those moments when everything suddenly comes clear. That moment in a classroom when all the memorization suddenly organizes itself into an “Ah Hah” moment. That moment when a light goes on and suddenly you see a way forward.

I think the disciples were able to let go of something; maybe let go of holding Jesus as the one who always set the day’s agenda. I think they woke up to the fact that it was now their turn to step up and take responsibility for the work of the Kingdom. They kept the vision of Jesus alive by doing his work (and by the way, that’s not such a bad vision for Christians, today, either).

But we witnessed many losses. We wait. We wait. We wait for resurrection every day. Some wait for the return of Jesus with an army of angels. But I don't think that's the vision Jesus would hold up for us. He didn't teach his followers to sit around and wait for a heavenly host. He commissioned them to go into all the world, baptizing and teaching, and healing. He commissioned his followers to become alive with ministries that nourish the human community – feeding the body, the heart, and the mind.

So, here we are, observers to a world that often seems to be coming apart at the seams. We long for a return to comfort and familiarity, but we will never see a risen Christ by sitting on the sidelines. We have inherited a magnificent place to worship God – and I'm not just talking about this building. I'm talking about the whole creation. We are blessed to be alive in this time, when we are so needed as witnesses to the Kingdom of God, present right now.

If your soul aches for a fresh start; if you feel as though you are just trudging from moment to moment, this may this be the day to arise in the light.

If your mind seeks some new pattern of navigating the world of ideas and events, this may be the day for a transformation of vision and purpose.

If your heart is clogged with fear – or sickness – or if it is chomping at the bit to reaffirm your commitment to a holy calling, may this be the day to rise up and claim your journey.

Our building will recover. In a week or two we will be back in the chapel, and it will be cleaner and brighter than ever. But that's not really our hope. Our hope is in the vision of a new day. Some will say, "I'm outta here," but even then, the vision will keep presenting itself to anyone who is awake and searching.

Whatever it is you seek, this may be the day when Easter surprises you and surrounds you with hope -- or peace -- or Joy -- or Love. We'll let the sacrament of holy communion gather us, and we will see what breaks forth! Happy Resurrection!