



THE RIGHT REVEREND GREGORY H. RICKEL, BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF OLYMPIA
EASTER DAY, APRIL 4, 2021
ISAIAH 25:6-9; PSALM 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11; MARK 16:1-8

SERMON FOR EASTER DAY

Happy Easter to all of you, those of you here and those of you watching from across the globe. Happy Easter. Like the just beginning blooms of spring, seeing more real faces right here in this room is a hopeful sign. We celebrate today the deep ways, that even across the miles and the distance, in this resurrection, in this Jesus, in this Body of Christ, we have been, and will always be, connected.

I have to say that in all the Easter's I have preached, I do not believe I have ever focused on the First Testament reading, or what we call the Old Testament. Of all days, it seems that Easter, is a day for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But, of course, I could make a case, and I would not be the first or the last, that all scripture is gospel. I tend to agree. But, this Easter, after this year we have lived through, I could not take my eyes off Isaiah, and its words. Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for ALL peoples a feast of rich food, God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over ALL peoples, the sheet that is spread

over ALL nations; God will swallow up death forever. God will wipe away the tears from ALL faces, All People, All faces, no matter their color, their creed, their country, their beliefs, their politics, all people.

Those words jump out more after this year we have been through. There is shroud over us all, a sheet over us all. Death has been so close, too close, all this year.

I don't know about you, but I have things that I will look back on and say, this or that, got me through the pandemic. I would be the first to say, and I know you don't need any convincing, that we, we are not yet through it, as it were, but we are certainly seeing more hopeful signs that wherever its end might be for any of us, it's getting closer. This morning is such a sign. But we have certainly lived enough of it now, to have a history, a story to tell.

This day, this Easter Day, we have a story to tell, a story of resurrection, of new life, of transformation. This whole concept of resurrection can be fairly much lost on our generation. We tend to be, or at least believe ourselves to be, an enlightened people, wiser,

smarter, more scientific than generations past. That, of course, is quite debatable. But that attitude, that posture toward the world, whether it be true or not, seems to be our most prevalent way to navigate the world, at least in this Western part of it you and I inhabit.

And so the fantastical idea of a human being raised from the dead is seen as so much myth, fable, parable, story, but indeed a huge leap for the more rational mind, who looks for evidence, facts, certainty.

I was struggling with how to share with you the attitude I challenge you to try to take. And then, one of those things, that I would point to, that has gotten me through this pandemic, gave me a thought. There have been quite a few things that have gotten me through. The beauty of our natural world that we are blessed with here helped me through, family, especially my wife, who I dearly love and never tire of spending time with, certainly got me through, and I am so thankful I like being with her, and at least I believe she feels the same, I am far more thankful for that believe me. Binge watching the West Wing has helped a lot, among other things.

But one that was a rediscovery, and one I hope I never wander too far from again is poetry. And so in my attempt to try to find the attitude I would urge you to come to this story of resurrection with, I was reminded of it in poetry, and especially today in that famous poem by former poet laureate Billy

Collins and his poem, entitled, simply, introduction to poetry. IT goes like this.

Introduction to Poetry by Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide
or press an ear against its hive.
I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.
I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.
But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.
They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

And I thought, bingo, that is it. That is the attitude I am hoping to have you take with this story we take up today. Let me reread it with all the thanksgiving I can give to Billy Collins, but also with a plea for forgiveness as I change it just a bit.

I ask them to take the story of the resurrection
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide
or press an ear against its hive.
I say drop a mouse into this story
and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside this story's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.
I want them to waterski
across the surface of this story

waving at Jesus on the shore.
But all they want to do
is tie the story to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.
They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

It is those last words that take me up short,
beating it to find out what it really means. Of
course, my point in sharing all of this is to ask
you to consider the first parts, the mouse, the
feeling around for a light switch, waterskiing
across the surface. You might sum these up
as, curiosity, adventure, joy even if you don't
understand the depths.

Let me share this another way, still through
poetry. Howard Thurman, the renowned
African American theologian, poet, pastor,
author, Christian, referred to Easter, to
Resurrection specifically, as a Glad Surprise.
I have always loved that. He begins this piece
by stating, "There is ever something
compelling and exhilarating about the glad
surprise." He then goes on to share things we
know as glad surprises.

The balance in your bank account is actually
more than you had recorded; realizing late at
night, that you do not have the key to the
house, but finding some beloved house hold
member has left a door open, just in case; the
report from the doctor that all is well, when
you were convinced it wasn't; all, of these,
and more glad surprises.

He uses the natural world, especially the
coming of spring as a glad surprise, every
year, even though we know it is coming, it is

still, a glad surprise. It is a glad surprise to see
signs of life after a long winter, any winter,
literal and figurative.

Thurman says there are also those long
tunnels of tragedy and tribulation, which we
all go through, in this life, and it is like a
person struggling in the darkness, realizing
they have made it to the bottom of the stairs
that will lead them from darkness to light. A
Glad Surprise.

Resurrection is a glad surprise.

He ends with these words. This is what Easter
means in the experience of the race. This is
the resurrection! It is the announcement that
life cannot ultimately be conquered by death,
that there is no road that is at last swallowed
up in an ultimate darkness, that there is
strength added when the labors increase, that
multiplied peace matches multiplied trials,
that life is bottomed by the glad surprise.
Take courage, therefore:

When we have exhausted our store of
endurance,

When our strength has failed ere the day is
half done,

When we reach the end of our hoarded
resources,

Our God's full giving is only begun

Come at this story, even if just for today, this
way. This is my plea. Let your deep need to
beat it with a hose, or torture it to get a
confession out of it, go.

And this is the point of Easter, its meaning, if you can keep from getting lost in the useless details, that as the poet Isaiah says, this God's full giving is for all people, all people.

In a sense, all of us, all of this world, are, or hopefully soon will be emerging from the tomb of this pandemic. If resurrection is hard for you to take in, believe in, accept, look at the miracles around us.

Folks, vaccines are science, but also, vaccines are miracles, every bit as stunning as transfiguration, or blinding lights. Just because we understand it, or think we do, does not make it any less so.

What an amazing miracle to have such a thing so quickly.

And yet, I have to admit. I think I have read more than most on these vaccines. I have studied them, and I have to tell you, I still don't really have a clue how they work, but I have faith they will. I will put out my arm and let the needle go in. Why, because I believe in it, have faith in it, and I am seeing my fellow humans in this world believe, and have faith, and doing it. All of that is miraculous, and is happening right before our very eyes. All of us are being called to be part of it. All of us. All People.

Finally, let me say today, that all of this, this celebration, my words, our glad surprise, means nothing unless it changes us. Like the budding spring, we must change, we must grow, we must move, we must act. This

resurrection story is not a spectator sport, it is a life's work.

We don't just get Easter, we become Easter. We don't just accede to resurrection, we breathe it.

We don't just speak of the Body of Christ, we become it.

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts has made for ALL peoples a feast of rich food, God has destroyed on this mountain the shroud that is cast over ALL peoples, the sheet that is spread over ALL nations; God has swallowed up death forever. God has wiped away the tears from ALL faces, All People, All faces, no matter their color, their creed, their country, their beliefs, their politics, all people.

This is our glad surprise. This is the audacious call on us this day, to become part of this story, to step into this reality, to live in its Truth.

This is why we say, Alleluia, Christ is Risen, the Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia.

My beloved, I have said these words to you in the Name of the Risen One, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.