

The Rev. Seth Dietrich  
Easter Sunday – March 31, 2024

### He Goes on Ahead of You

It is good to be together on such an important day. From wherever you have traveled, from whatever spiritual path you walk, you are most welcome here. Be at peace in this space.

On Easter Sunday we attempt to experience the joy of resurrection with all our senses. The smell of thick white lilies mingles with a touch of incense. The heavy crucified corpus has been moved to the back of the church, the white sheets rolled away. The Feast of victory at the altar will flow seamlessly into a feast of baked goods after worship. [Brass and percussion thrust us into the shock and awe of resurrection. Our new music director has brought onto the Ark, trumpets and trombones 2 by 2. The other timpani player must be stuck in traffic]. Alleluia Christ is risen. And you all respond, “The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia.”

The sensory nature of our worship reflects the sensory nature of many of the resurrection stories. Words alone will not do the trick - not for an event in which the earth shakes and the Roman guard falls down in a heap. For Matthew and John we get not only an empty tomb but a visible, risen Lord. The women drop their burial spices and grab hold of Jesus’s feet. In John’s telling, we hear his voice as in the tender exchange with Mary Magdalene who mistakes him for the gardener.

But this year we are given a different story of the resurrection. Mark’s version is more sparse, more stripped down. No earthquake. No Roman guard. And there is no Jesus. In this scene, the three faithful women have come at dawn to anoint the body of their friend, but they do not find him. Instead, there is a young man in a white robe on the side of the tomb. He looks at the women and he says, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; He is going on ahead of you to Galilee you will find him there.” In Mark’s story the women are amazed but they are also terrified, so terrified that they vow not to tell anyone what they have seen. And to make things even stranger, the oldest manuscripts of Mark’s gospel stop right here. Scholars are almost unanimous that this is the end of Mark’s story: Trembling fear. And a promise. He goes on ahead of you.

This gospel might seem strange in the middle of a festive Easter Sunday Choral Eucharist. But hold on to it. You’ll likely need it one day. As many times, as I’ve been near the bed of someone in their last days, I still have no idea what it’s like. But in my limited experience, this is the time when the resurrection becomes urgent. Is God’s connection to us more powerful than death. Will we be held or will we be lost? Maybe in those last weeks or

days, we are lucky enough to be mostly distracted by big groups of friends and family passing food and telling stories like an extended Easter brunch. But even so, surely there are also moments that are more stripped down. A quiet room at dawn. Maybe a single friend asleep by the bed. So much time to simply be with our own thoughts. And in those moments maybe we will be afraid.

People are often ashamed that they feel fear about death. Like it should be otherwise. But aren't most of us afraid of things we've never done before? We don't blame babies who clutch the coffee-table with one hand and reach to mom with the other, this look of terror about letting go and taking a little step towards pure, beaming love. So even when a life-long disciple of Jesus confesses that they are afraid, I say, it is good to name it, to acknowledge it, but in the end it is just an emotion. God's most faithful servants have been afraid: from Moses to David to Mary Magdalene. Fear is just fear. It doesn't change the promise: He goes on ahead of you.

And our tradition says that he goes on ahead of us not just into Paradise but he also goes on ahead of us darkest most seemingly God-forsaken places. You know there's this short, strange line in the Apostles Creed. We read this Creed at baptisms and funerals. See if you can catch it: *He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.* Instead of descended to the dead, some translations of the Greek say: *He descended into hell.* It's a provocative 4 word line. Because it proclaims that in the resurrection, there is no place where the Light of Christ cannot penetrate. There is no darkness too thick. He goes on ahead of you, even into the depths of hell.

Some of us know a little about this darkness, not a supernatural place after death, but a reality here and now. The dark lonely hell of fresh grief. The torment of addiction. Some know what it's like for the doctor to come into the room with the MRI scan in her hands. To swing open the door to the chemo lounge for the first time, with all those worn recliners and the chatter of day-time talk shows. To taste fear. But in the midst of whatever you might feel, you do not move into that room alone - the risen Lord moves on ahead of you.

A parent was recently telling me about what it was like to visit their teen in a psychiatric hospital for the first time, to see their little baby so lost in the tangle of their own thoughts, like they're curled up against the back of a cold, dark tomb. All I could think to say was that "Christ is with her, even if she does not know it, can't feel it."

Perhaps there is no greater hell on earth right now than Gaza. On a personal level, I get so muddled when I think about this part of the world. The politics are so complicated, the evil so widely distributed, the path to peace so cratered and seemingly impossible. I recognize

that the emotional content of the events there, the pain and suffering of the innocent people sometimes cannot filter through the dense layer of my head. I keep it at bay. I'm on guard.

There is a church there, St. Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church, where many of the 900 Christians in Gaza have gone to seek shelter. It was originally built on the site in 425 AD. It briefly became a mosque in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Crusaders built the beginnings of the current church in 1150.

The church displays huge colorful icons on every wall and piece of ceiling. One of the icons is called the *Anastasis*, which means Resurrection in Greek. It's a staple of most Orthodox churches, and a small piece of this icon is on your bulletin cover. The icon is the Church's attempt to illustrate Jesus descending to the dead, moving into the darkness of hell. Christ grasps the hands of Adam and Eve and pulls them out of captivity, up into new resurrected life. I think about the women and children living and eating and sleeping under that icon. People hoping and praying that it is true, that the Living Christ meets them in that darkest hell, hoping and praying that they are not abandoned, that they are not lost. We hope and pray with them.

In our lives we do what we can do. Yesterday afternoon, I stopped by St. Mary's on the Lake to see Ken Baumeister who's had some health challenges. Whenever I make such a visit I am simply an ambassador of the whole parish, I bring you all there with me. Ken's husband, Tim, was there, too. Tim and Ken were married here last June after being together for 40 years. Yesterday, was also Tim's birthday and one of the nurses had made a simple Happy Birthday sign, trying to bring in some light into a hard day. You should feel proud that you all bought them both identical arrangements of flowers so each could think of the other when they were separated, as they are most days. Tim does not drive.

We had a very small Easter celebration there on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, overlooking the lake and the art museum. And then as I was leaving Tim wanted to show me a picture of a surprise that some of you left on his door that morning. This gourmet carrot cake, a reference to the world-famous cake that Ken will make again once he's better. It was a joyful Easter surprise, and they were both so incredibly moved. I know you all are doing these things all the time. It is so often in these small acts of kindness that bring light into the darkness, that help people know they are not alone, that the living Christ is with them, no matter how dark the path.

So let us glory in the sensory pageantry of this day, that it might help us catch a glimpse of resurrection. May such a glimpse bring us peace now and at the hour of our death. And may we remember that no matter how feel, no matter the anxiety, the hopelessness, the confusion, no matter the trembling fear, he goes on ahead of us. Let us follow in his Way of Light and Love so the whole world may know that a new day is dawning. Amen.