

“A New Creation”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
Easter Day – 21 April 2019
John 20:1-18

*This sermon begins in a similar way to the one preached at the Great Vigil,
but after the first page, it shifts to address the new Gospel reading
in a very different way.*

I think it’s important to render credit where credit is due. They really tried. They tried hard to get the job done right. Judas’ insider-information on where Jesus would be that night, the well-choreographed trial by the priests, the public pressure put on Pilate to hand Jesus over. It’s tough to see much room for improvement there. In fact, if it weren’t so evil, you could almost admire the cleverness and efficiency.

The Roman soldiers knew what they were doing. After all, they’d had plenty of practice, and how hard can it be to drive three nails and hoist a person up? When somebody stops breathing and goes limp as a ragdoll, that’s usually a good sign they’re dead, and Jesus was. But despite everyone’s best efforts, it didn’t work, at least not for long, because when you’re going up against the God of all creation, prepare to be disappointed, because no matter how hard you try, you are going down.

This is the God who made the palm fronds we waved around last week and the iron in the nails that went into Jesus’ feet and wrists. This is the God who made people! People created in His own image. As the very first chapter of Genesis reveals, everything exists because God said so, literally. To borrow from the Beatles, “Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be,” and whatever God said after that just happened. And this wasn’t a one-off that happened in a span of six solar days, but over the course of billions of years God has kept creating time and stars and tiny grains

of sands. Even now, God is singing your name, just because He loves you, because He enjoys you, and if God stopped singing our names for a fraction of a nanosecond, we wouldn't die. We'd disappear.

To create order from chaos, light from darkness, beauty from nothingness. **That** is real power. **That** is glory. Think you can shut that down with a cross? Think again. The cross was beyond awful, and Jesus has earned our everlasting thanks for the sacrifice of suffering he offered there. But the people who nailed Jesus down actually lifted him up. What they thought would be permanent was only temporary, and far from a setback, they ironically and unwittingly helped God emerge victorious over death, breathe new life into creation, and bring hope for the restoration and redemption and reconciliation of all creatures, including us.

Yet when dawn broke on the third day, the people who worked so hard to kill Jesus probably woke up feeling pretty good. Best Passover ever! Across town, though, for the disciples the past few days had been the worst of their lives. Neither group seems to have known that the man who died was also very same divine Word who said "Let it be," who sings the name of every living creature. So Mary Magdalene set out before dawn to mourn at the tomb in the garden.

Imagine how horrific it was for her to find the stone set aside. Who could have done this, and why? Grave robbers? Someone who didn't think death was enough, but felt the need to steal Jesus's body and desecrate it. Who knows what was running through her mind as she rushed back to the disciples? Breathless, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

That sent two of the disciples running, Peter and the other one whose name we don't know. They were hoping that Mary had made some sort of mistake, maybe gotten confused in

the dim light and gone to the wrong place, but their worst fears were confirmed when they leaned inside the tomb and saw only the linens that had been wrapped around Jesus's dead body. The body was gone. So they left. What else could they possibly do? But Mary Magdalene stayed. She wasn't ready to go.

As she wept, Mary took another look, and inside she saw two angels seated on the shelf where Jesus' body had lain. "Woman, why are you weeping?" they asked, and we can imagine her choked voice, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do know where they have laid him." I must confess that I'm a little disappointed by the angels. You might have expected them to do their job. They're messengers, after all. That's what the word angel literally means. Messenger. They could have said, "He's alive. Don't you remember what he told you?" But they said nothing, no words of comfort or hope, no grand revelation that Christ had risen. So Mary turned away and saw a man she mistook for the gardener, who asked the same question as the angels, plus one more "Whom are you looking for?"

Suspecting that maybe he had something to do with it, that he might be one of the "they" she blamed for taking Jesus away, she pleaded. She begged, "Tell me where he is. I'll do anything. This man meant everything to me. He changed my life. He saved me," and then Jesus called her by name, and her eyes, blurred by tears, saw her Savior. Can you imagine the shock, the ecstasy, the sheer joy of that moment? Jesus had not been desecrated, but liberated from the grave, from the power of death.

All she wanted to do was embrace him and never let go, but Jesus told her, "Do not hold on to me, but go." There was a message to deliver. Unlike the uninformative angels, nothing would keep Mary quiet, because the tomb was empty, and that opening in the stone unleashed

the divine Word of life, a new creation full of possibilities. Jesus had returned full of glory, so transformed that Mary couldn't recognize him until she heard his voice calling her name.

The oracle God spoke through the prophet Isaiah had been fulfilled in a way that nobody ever thought it would be. "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice." So that first witness to the Resurrection, the one who waited at the tomb after the others had gone home, ran with an energy she'd never felt before, heart bursting to share.

And for the moment, that's where the story leaves us. To hear further installments, come back on subsequent Sundays. Now it might be hard to summon up the excitement Mary felt. Hers was a unique experience. Most of us grew up with this story, and even those who didn't know it well. Every year we gather in celebration and praise of the most wondrous event in the history of the universe our God created. But that's why we worship, to try to re-live those holy moments, and allow them to enter our hearts and minds anew, because we need to.

Sometimes, we feel powerless and afraid, exploited and abused, broken and shattered, crying out for help, for relief, for rescue, and we are far from alone. We can feel like the disciples after the crucifixion, frustrated and disappointed. We can feel abandoned by God with no hope or clear sense of purpose, and so many others feel the same way.

Resurrection power rarely fixes any of that in the blink of an eye, because the greatest pains in life can't be healed with a simple fix, and the resurrection is so much more than a mere fix. It is the inauguration of a new reality in which evil's days are numbered, and the faster we run to spread the good news, the faster evil's days count down. If Jesus can defeat death itself, evil doesn't stand a chance.

We who know the story need to share it, without shame. The Word of life sings our names, every name, endlessly. We need to sing the praises of Jesus without ceasing. Beyond words, powerful as they can be, there is a witness to be offered in the priorities we set and how we treat people with kindness and conduct our lives with dignity and integrity. But perhaps most of all there is a singular lightness of being, a peace which comes when the Resurrection lives in us.

I've been thinking about that a lot lately, especially this past week. It's been busy, but even when things around here are running at a more normal speed, I can be focused to a fault and tend to move quickly, a human blur that sometimes misses things that need to be seen and heard. Don't pretend that you haven't noticed.

Now that type of energy may reveal something about the intensity of the resurrection power of Christ. After all, there was a lot of running around on the morning of the Resurrection, and sometimes Jesus needs us to move swiftly and nimbly. But my Lenten discipline, and I rarely share what it is without anyone, has been to focus on slowing down, waiting by the empty tomb, like Mary Magdalene did, and learning to walk like Cary Grant. Look him up on YouTube and watch a clip from one of his movies. He glides like a man without a care or a worry in the world, and part of me suspects that's sort of how Jesus might have strolled out of the tomb and into the garden.

That's just me. It's up to you to figure out what it would be, what it would mean for that lightness of being to be expressed in you. Figuring that out takes some work, and a good place to start is to ask yourself, "Whom are you looking for, and where are you looking?" because Jesus can pop up where we least expect him to be, in the refugee and the homeless, in fractured relationships, and even in a proud person desperately trying to hide their insecurities.

When we can accept that the gardener just might be Jesus, or we offer grace and the mercy of forgiveness to the person we like the least or who hurt us the most, we proclaim the Risen Christ, and every time we do, the opportunity arises that the peace we so desire, the peace that comes with the presence of Jesus, can be released, both for us and for others.

You don't need me to tell you how the world can be: silly, superficial, mean. There's much excellence in our world, but every day we also live with lies and cruelty, a bottomless cauldron of sin and misery. The world needs hope, the prospect of joy, in troubled times like these. People need to see and hear and know that Christ is Risen, transformed by glory, singing their name with love, and people need to know that nothing can take away the Lord, not anymore; nothing can nail him down again; nothing can stuff him in a dark empty hole, not anymore. Amen.