

Easter Sunday
March 27, 2016
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

The Last Enemy

It has been a very strange week. Holy Week, beginning last Sunday with the Procession of Palms and Passion Narrative, is always strange. Many go on vacation. Grace Episcopal School is out, so it's very quiet around here. We have many, many services, culminating in the Three Great Days – Thursday, Friday and Saturday – and the first Easter service last night, The Great Vigil, with our Bishop, an adult baptism, and several teenagers and adults being confirmed and received.

This year Holy Week was even stranger, different, since the last time I was in this pulpit (last Sunday, reading the Narrator's part of the Passion) I fainted, collapsed, was helped to the floor before getting up, walking to my office, being treated by the EMTs, then going to the hospital. I was overcome by dehydration due to an intestinal infection I had for several weeks.

Last Sunday's event reminded me of two realities I have come to associate with Easter. Everything can change in a moment. We can never really know what might happen next. And we are very connected, dependent really, on our physical being, our health, our bodies. Yet we balance this by our concept of the soul. St. Paul writes a great deal about the flesh and the spirit. We are both.

And then, last Tuesday, we all awoke to the devastating news from Brussels; the terrorist attacks and more mass killings. Again the realities of Easter – everything can change in a second, in the blink of an eye. And we know how fragile our physical world really is, how quickly death and injury can change our world.

The earliest Easter proclamation can be traced to St. Paul's letters, most especially 1st Corinthians, Chapter 15, "*I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the 3rd day... that he appeared to Peter, then the 12...*" (15:3-5)

Paul wrote these words some 10 or 20 years before the Gospel narratives were finalized. Paul had his own Easter experience on the road to Damascus when he met the living Christ through the power of the Spirit. His conversion experience changed everything in a moment of time, struck down, blinded, the voice of Jesus ringing in his mind. The flesh and the spirit undergoing a new birth, changed forever.

Paul continues in 1st Corinthians, Chapter 15, "*Christ has been raised from the dead... in Christ all shall be made alive... the last enemy to be destroyed is death...*" (15:20-25) For Paul the experience of Holy Baptism was an Easter experience from death to life, from darkness to light, changed forever.

Last night we had an adult baptism, and it's always a very powerful witness to see an adult decide for Jesus and go through public baptism. Jarrett, our newly-baptized adult, sent me an email last week asking if he would need a change of clothes. Of course we just sprinkle the holy water over the heads of those baptized here. But the ancient tradition of full immersion symbolized a death and resurrection, a drowning and a saving, darkness to light.

The physical and spiritual reality of Easter was overwhelming for the women, for Peter, for all the disciples and for many others who experienced the Risen Christ for 40 days. Paul writes, "*Set*

your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God..." (Colossians 3:2-3) This Easter reality is proclaimed in our hymns as well. *"The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won... The powers of death have done their worst, but Christ their legions hath dispersed..."* (Hymn 208)

The witness of the women in St. Luke's story shows us a way forward, a way to live into the reality – everything changed in a moment with the reality of the spiritual and the physical defeating the "last enemy," death.

First comes the event – the empty tomb. All of the Gospels have different Easter stories, but they all start with the empty tomb. If the women had really believed Jesus, they would not have gone to the tomb expecting to anoint a dead body. Death is the "last enemy." The angels ask the women, *"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"* Sometimes we look in the wrong places. Sometimes we let death define us, consume us. What will be our "event," our empty tomb?

Next comes the remembering – remembering Jesus' teaching, remembering Jesus love, remembering the scriptures, remembering the hope – for new life, for love stronger than death. When we remember we experience healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption. We remember that God is stronger than the last enemy, death. Jesus brings everlasting, eternal life.

The great Anglican 17th Century priest and poet, John Donne, expresses Easter with these words:

*"We think that Paradise and Calvary, Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place. Look, Lord, and see both Adams met in me. As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face, may the last Adam's blood my soul embrace..."*¹

Finally, after the event, after the remembering, we come to the sharing, the proclamation, the witness, the proof that the last enemy has been defeated. The women tell the disciples the good news. Peter races to the tomb. He meets the Risen Christ. Jesus appears that afternoon, later that evening, a week later, at least four more times over the next weeks, first in Jerusalem, then in Galilee (more than 100 miles to the north), then back in Jerusalem.

There will always be those who think all this is an "idle tale." There will always be those who doubt, who lose their faith, who wonder if there is a God. Last Tuesday's events in Brussels show us once again the power of evil, of death as our last enemy.

So let us follow the women, the disciples, all those ever since the first Easter who know life can change in a flash, in a moment; who remember life's both a physical and a spiritual reality; who live not just with hope, but with the reality, day by day. That yes, the last enemy has been defeated, once for all.

Acts 10:34-43
Psalms 118:14-17, 22-24
Colossians 3:1-4
Luke 24:1-12

¹ Quoted in *We Preach Christ Crucified*, Kenneth Leech, Cowley, Boston, 1994, p. 98.