

“An Early Easter Every Year”

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Anyone here who is over 95 may remember an Easter Day as early as this one. But certainly there's no one living today who will ever again see an Easter Day as early as this one.

You can decide if that's true or not either by checking it on page 880 of the Prayer Book, **after** the service, or you can listen to this sermon for some words that relate to your life more than the date itself!

For what we're here today to celebrate is the promise that Easter can come early and often into your life **EVERY** year. If you just read the newspaper headlines it mostly seems that pessimism is seeping through the plaster and pouring through the cracks in our social and economic structures, whatever they may be. That's why it's good that you're here this morning to hear another message and to discover a new spirit, a new hope, and a new inspiration for your life. For to hear the Easter word early and often in life means that you start your life from the faith and conviction that hope and love and beauty are stronger than death, discouragement, doubt and disturbance.

And it means that the Easter greeting, “He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!” is not an optional message, sort of tacked onto the rest of life. It is not something to be sung just on one day of the year, but it's where we start from, the very core and meaning of our existence.

As now we know, that's what it turned out to be for the disciples of Jesus, coming to the tomb to mourn his death, thinking that the Cross had been the last word in the story of their beloved teacher's life. What does the Gospel say this morning? “Early on Sunday morning, as the new day was dawning they went to the tomb...and found it empty.”

Then St. Matthew records that an angel said to the women, “Don't be frightened...He is risen...and *he goes before you* to Galilee, there you will see him...then they departed from the tomb, badly frightened, but filled with joy”

“Frightened”—of course they were, wouldn't you be?! Be honest: aren't you uneasy sometimes and apprehensive when you think how quickly life changes around you?

You need to have this Easter celebration open up a window and a door for you so that you can embrace the future with a new spirit and so that you can enter into life more

fully and creatively. That happened for the frightened women who had gone to Jesus tomb very early on that first Easter.

The key meaning of “early” for us this morning is “in advance of”. Jesus had gone ahead of them into Galilee, and now he goes ahead of us into a new future. HE has won the victory over all the deaths in life, and we enter into it. We can’t create the victory of hope and love, God knows, but we CAN enter into it!

Whatever happened on the third day after Jesus’ crucifixion, and however it happened, nothing could ever be the same again. There is no turning back, but the meaning of Easter has to be refreshed early every day as the first word of life, as we move daily from confusion and doubt toward his hope and love—going on before us.

Like you, I certainly know how hard it is to keep that Easter focus. Just because I say all this, certainly doesn’t mean that I act like it all the time. When my alarm goes off in the morning I either literally or figuratively sometimes pull the covers over my head. We all have a tendency to retreat back defensively to old ways and old comforts for security.

I read a review recently of a new biography of Senator Jesse Helms of South Carolina, who was so well known for his long battle to hold onto the old social and political traditions of the past. The reviewer observes that Helms’ face was actually on wristwatches that ran counter-clockwise, telling time backwards! How different that is from the Easter message of new life, a celebration of Jesus’ going before us into the future.

Powerful evidence of that for me is here in the passage from the book of Acts that we have as our first lesson this morning.

What a change we read here about the apostle Peter! It’s hard to believe that he could give such testimony to the risen Christ. This is the same headstrong and impulsive apostle who had actually denied even knowing Jesus’ in the hours before his crucifixion. But now Peter is one of the first disciples to hasten to Jesus’ tomb, and one of the first to show us that the risen Christ was better known in the world 40 days after his death, than any of his time on earth before that. Peter’s new hope was born out of his personal experience that flawed human beings are capable of transcending their pasts and their failings and finding a new life.

And now in one of the earliest recorded sermons after the resurrection, what does Peter say? He declares that “**God shows no partiality**” God plays no favorites. He doesn’t value one person, one church, one religion, or one race more valuable than others. That expansive and inclusive witness of Peter would prevail in the early Church, and soon the world would hear Paul’s message that in Christ the old human barriers had been broken down.

“God shows no partiality”, Peter proclaims. This, if you think about is really the key to the incarnation we celebrate at Christmas that God’s love is expressed in the human

flesh of Jesus. He was born to save all—not just a select few, but all. Not persons of one race, but all races. Not persons of one culture, but persons of all cultures.

Peter debated that with the Jewish hierarchy and won, but did he? In real life it's difficult for us in so-called "middle-class America" not to believe that God has been partial to us. But is it that simple? Well, no, it is not. However, when a black man and a white woman can be considered as nominees for president this year we are all reminded of Peter's message for us this morning that God shows no partiality, he doesn't play favorites.

In the indivisible global society we live in, whether we like it or not, the old cultural and economic and religious gates we used to rely on just don't work anymore, nor should they. You remember Yogi Berra saying "the future just isn't what it used to be." Well, it never was. We may still cling to the old things that divide us, but just read the words of our Easter hymns, and you will know that we are celebrating an Easter hope that is far beyond "what used to be".

In these early years of a new century I don't know how much any of us will change inside as we meet the challenges of a changing world. But as we strive to live beyond all the old boundaries of our prejudices and divisions and mind-sets, we can do something. At St. James' we have a growing congregation whose average age is about ten years younger than it was just five years ago. We have an opportunity to tell the good news of Jesus Christ in a new way by the life we lead here and by what we communicate to our children and their children.

Yes, this is the earliest Easter on the calendar you will ever know, and it can be one that will keep being early in spirit every day of your life. It is not too late for the wonderful promises of that first Easter to come alive for all of us as we go out this morning singing from our heads and hearts "Jesus Christ is risen, **TODAY!**"

AMEN