

Easter Sermon 2017
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*O, Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder,
consider all the worlds thy hands have made!
..I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder...
..And when I think, that God, his son not sparing
sent him to die, I scarce can take it in. (from "How Great Thou Art")*

The expansive grandeur of God and the intimate lovingkindness of God — all of that! And somehow, right here! It's hard to comprehend. Like standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon— Sometimes you just have to say, "Wow. How did that happen? I sure didn't have anything to do with it." You don't doubt it, you just try to take it in. It's not about me. It's not about you. Yet we are included in the very fabric of it. Seeing the Grand Canyon or standing over Niagara Falls —or seeing millions of stars on a cold dark night—the experience puts things in perspective. You stand there with no self-awareness. You stand there in pure awe. It is frightening and wonderful at the same time!

A few years ago, a number of us from Epiphany traveled to South Dakota to attend the Niobrara Convocation—an annual church convention, a gathering of 600 people, 600 Sioux or Lakota People with their Bishop. We arrived at the airport — we and the children we had brought with us. We packed our equipment in a van— and headed north to the central region of Standing Rock Reservation, a hundred miles or so to our destination, which was to us "in the middle of nowhere." We were excited to experience new sights and make new friendships. We helped construct a gathering place out of cottonwood. Benches were nailed together. 600 people working together to "set up" tent. It was everything we had hoped for. We dug cooking pits and tasted new food. Listened to prayers and songs in Lakota — "A te yah pe, chin hin to kin. Na woni ya why con kin heh." (tune: doxology)

On the third night as we climbed into our sleeping bags, the shadow of a man came to the window, the flap in the nylon tent. "There's going to be a storm," he said. A storm. What does that mean? I remember saying, "Are we going to be alright?" There was a pause. Then, he said, "Yes." Afraid to go out and look, we huddled together and waited. You see, on the plains you can see a storm coming long before it gets to you. From inside the tent, we could see the sky light up. We could hear the thunder roll. The rain came. We wondered if the wind would take us away. Sometime during the night our tent collapsed. We decided not to get up to fix it. We were too frightened. We slept with it on top of us. It was the best we could do.

I kept remembering the man in the shadow and my question— "Are we going to be alright?" His answer had the depth of a religious answer. "Yes" I trusted his answer. I knew that he knew more than I. Whenever we get a glimpse of the world that is bigger than our own safe places, we ask the big question. Is the God who created "all of this" a loving God, who has his eye, his concern, on "even little me." The expansive grandeur of God and the intimate lovingkindness of God — all of this, somehow, right here, right now. It's hard to comprehend. Imagine Albert Einstein coming to church and saying to an inquiring usher, "I saw a million galaxies last night and I came to hear about the One who created these stars." What would

Einstein hear from us? He would likely hear a sermon on “How to do this or that” or “How to be a better Christian at this or that.” But what about the measureless power and greatness of Almighty God? And what about hearing that voice who is the midst of the storm and answers, “Yes.” “Yes, you are going to be alright.” Sometimes you just have to say, “Wow. How did that happen? I sure didn’t have anything to do with it.”

When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb at the break of dawn to take care of Jesus’ body, they thought for a moment about darkness of the garden, their vulnerability, the huge stone that sealed the opening to the tomb. Their concerns didn’t stop them though. They must of thought, “We’ll figure it out when we get there.” But then when they got there, when they enveloped in the dark and empty place where the dead are laid to rest...when they got to the cave-like tomb— There was this bolt of lightning! Out of nowhere. Crack! There was nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. First the flash. Then the count—One one thousand. Two one thousand. Three one thousand. How close was the storm? When there is no time to count that means it’s right on you, all around you. There is nothing you can do. When was the last time you were out in a storm with the threat of striking lightning bolts? It’s not the place to be. It’s not safe. You know it’s coming when the wind turns the leaves upside down and the black sky seems to swallow you up. Then come the bits of rain. Then, a nearby strike.

In today’s Gospel, the lightning is followed by an earthquake. This is no retelling of a lovely story about two women going to anoint the body of a loved one who has died. We are told that the guards who were posted at the tomb were struck like dead men. This is a frightening story. It’s no place for two women alone or anyone else for that matter. This is the place where the dead are laid to rest. The women should have known better than to travel in such a dark and dangerous place and with a storm coming. What were they thinking? This isn’t the picture of Easter morning that I remember portrayed in picture books as a child or on greeting cards. According to Matthew, Easter morning is not about a beautiful sunrise in a peaceful garden. According to Matthew, this is no picnic-in-the-park. Somehow, we’ve tamed the story. Colored it with pastels and bucolic county life. What have we done? By taming it, we’ve taken away the majesty and the glory that is what the story is all about! We’ve sucked the power right out of it.

Easter is not about the predictable. It’s not about the usual. It’s not about what we expect. It’s not about what we can be comfortable with. It’s not even about what we can comprehend. Easter is nothing less than the power of God, breaking into the world and breaking irreversibly into our lives. Easter is nothing less than God taking charge of a world that has gotten messed up, out of balance, too big for its own well-being. Too full of itself. Too self-assured. Easter is about electrons colliding, moisture rising, and the reestablishment of God’s created order. It’s the shattering of our self-aggrandizement. It’s the undoing of our sense of control. It’s the exposure of our misunderstandings and misguided sense of reality. And we thought, we were in charge!

Easter morning begins like the rumbling thunder of God’s voice to Job,

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me if you understand.
Who marked off its dimensions?
Surely you know!*

*Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone—
while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?*

*Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,
And I placed boundaries on it
And set a bolt and doors,
when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther;
here is where your proud waves halt'?*

*Have you ever given orders to the morning,
or shown the dawn its place...
Tell me if you know—*

In the flash, in the thunder, in the the wind, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary hear the voice of God, clearly. It is clear and loud as their bounding hearts. And they know in whose Presence they stand. And the stone, the hugh stone—remember the stone that sealed the entrance to the tomb? “Who will roll away the stone?” Not the women. Not the guards. Who will roll away the stone? That’s the question of the day. “Tell me if you know.”

The earth’s foundations shook, the rocks shifted, the ground rumbled, the stone turned and began to roll. The entrance opened. This is like Moses seeing the burning bush, receiving the stone tablets. His face was changed, transfigured by the light so that he had to cover it with a cloth before he could return to his people.

Like lightning, the messenger of God sits on the huge stone. He leads the women inside the tomb to look and to see that Jesus is not there. It is then that they realize what is happening— it is then that they being to realize. And then, that they put it all together. And they run like crazy to get out of that place. But they got it. They got the part about God. They got the part about God acting—the expansive grandeur of God and the intimate lovingkindness of God. Sometimes you just have to say, “Wow. How did that happen? I sure didn’t have anything to do with it.”

And they got the part about getting the “H” out of Jerusalem. They got the part about going home to Galilee, back where God in Jesus met them before and taught them and would surely be with them again. They remembered the part about Jesus telling them to go to Galilee. And they ran to tell their brothers. And as if this isn’t a disturbing experience enough for one morning, before the women get too far, a man appears out of nowhere startling them. This is a remarkable story. It’s remarkable from beginning to end. You know, in some bad translations—Jesus, this man who appears out of nowhere— says “Peace be with you.” As if to say, “Rest in Peace!” Like it’s all over. But the word “peace” is not in the text. It’s not in the Greek. Jesus, the man who appears out of nowhere says, “xaipete.” Xaipete. Hel-lo. Hey there. Surprise. Yes, surprise!

That's what the word means. The women faint. Of course they faint! They fall at his feet. Sometimes you just have to say, "Wow. How did that happen?"

One of my greatest challenges every Sunday is a challenge that may surprise you. My greatest challenge each and every Sunday when I stand before you as a priest and preacher is to make sure, to try anyway, not to make God too small, or too predictable, or too comfortable. I am keenly aware of our human tendency, maybe even our human need, to come before a god that is smaller and safer than the awesome, all-powerful God—who is truly God—and who, if he wanted to, could blink us out of existence. Worshipping a smaller god than God the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of life is the essence of idolatry and it is a sin of which we are all guilty.

So let this Easter Sunday be for us, the reestablishment of honoring and worshiping God, who is beyond our comprehension, beyond our imaginings, through whom all things came to be. Let this Easter be for us the "sometime" when we just have to say, "Wow How did that happen? I sure didn't have anything to do with it." Maybe, the most important task of the Church today, our biggest responsibility, is to elevate the world's concept of God—to let the world know that "things that are old are being made new, things that were cast down are being raised up! We are called to elevate, to magnify, as best as is humanly possible, the measureless power and greatness of Almighty God. And in Christ, the amazing surprise—God's remarkable, life-giving lovingkindness that reaches across the divide—over, under, outside, inside, wherever we may be found.

Let this Easter be for us an experience when we acknowledge that the god we often worship is too small and that we are created for something bigger, infinitely more important than ourselves. We are created to stand in awe and to worship the God of the universe. In Christ our hearts and minds, bodies and souls are lifted up—not by our own doing, but by the One who loves us and speaks to us even in the darkest of times.

In Ecclesiastes we read, *God has set eternity in our hearts.*

Augustine wrote, *God has made us for Himself,
and our heart is restless, until it rests in Him.*

Easter is precisely about the greatness and the power and the majesty of God who by his mercy and through his unspeakable lovingkindness, has rolled away the stone that separates us from him—the stone that marks the great divide—even death. God has reached across the chasm. Easter makes it possible for us to know God's will and follow God's paths, to be God's children, even to be God's servants in the world. Sometimes you just have to say, "Wow." All that majesty, all that glory, all that power, reaching across the chasm, lifting us out of the darkness, raising our sights, redeeming our lives, giving us hope—"How did that happen? I sure didn't have anything to do with it."

On Easter morning, as the storm passes and things get put right, we hear the voice of God—that same voice we heard in the night has become the voice of the morning that sustains us and raises us with an assuring, redeeming, and life-giving "Yes." Sometimes you just have to say, "Wow."
AMEN.