

## **Resurrection: The Sacrament of Love and Life**

A Sermon for Easter Day

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Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park

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Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Today Christians all around the world join with the saints throughout the centuries and millennia in this ancient affirmation. The Resurrection is the very heart of the church's faith, pointing us to God's promise that life and love will always win over death and hate. But for Christians, there is no Easter without Good Friday. There is no Resurrection without the Crucifixion. Before we can celebrate Christ's ultimate victory, we must confront the power of evil that manifested in the betrayal of a friend; the anger of a mob; the calculations and cynicism of rulers who rely on intimidation, fear, and violence to maintain control; and the silence, inaction, and self-preservation of the good in the face of such evil.

As a priest in general and particularly who specialized for several years in children's spiritual and their academic formation, I wrestle with how much to dwell on the death and darkness that we see in the world and upon which our Holy Scripture meditates. Some experts advise avoiding talking about violence with younger children, while others say that it should be confronted head-on.

I want to tell you about one occasion that finds the right balance: our Easter Eve Walk for children and families that uses interactive storytelling to remember Jesus' death and resurrection. Yesterday the participants began by gathering in the Chapel to reenact Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Placing the story in the context of first century expectations that the Messiah would free the people of Israel from Roman occupation, we wave palms to

welcome Jesus and lead the children in chants of “What do we want? Freedom! When do we want it now!” Our protest procession makes its way to the main altar here in the church as we learn that Jesus would actually be a different kind of king, a king of love, through the Last Supper and the washing of the disciples’ feet. As we conclude our walk through the Passion, we tell the children that Jesus died, and then older children pick up the cross and carry it down the center aisle as we sing, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord? The procession ends in the narthex, where the windows have been covered to simulate a Tomb. Creepy storm sounds and eerie music come from the speakers. It can be a bit much for some children. But eventually, the volunteer playing Jesus comes out into the dark room with a single lit candle, a physical representation of the prologue to the Gospel of John: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” With the candle in one hand, the volunteer’s other hand extends in blessing in front of each child and adult for just a brief, passing moment. The Godspell soundtrack playing in the background builds to a crescendo of “Prepare Ye the Way of Lord,” the front doors of the church are thrown open to shouts of “Alleluia! Christ is Risen!” and children dig up the symbolic alleluias they buried in the garden on the last Sunday before Lent and they plant seeds for new life to grow among us.

Even though parts of the story can be scary, I think the kids need a space to explore their fears. And after facing sad and scary things, the volunteer actor’s portrayal of Jesus becomes a sign of good triumphing over evil, of the light overcoming the darkness, and love conquering all. Kids in particular need tangible signs to guide them, but really, we all do.

Many people assume that as a priest I have an unshakeable faith, but there have been times in my life before I became a priest and even afterward when

I have been drawn to more rationalist expressions of Christianity that picture Jesus more as a great teacher than a Messiah. Perhaps you are familiar with the Thomas Jefferson Bible? Our third president took a Bible and literally cut out into pieces, pasting the parts he liked onto blank paper. He called it “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth,” and it left out anything he deemed “contrary to reason.” He included Jesus’ teachings, such as the Beatitudes, but left out the miracles. The Crucifixion made it in, but the Resurrection did not. I must admit that sometimes this rationalist project sounds tempting. Religion without all the stuff that’s sometimes hard to believe. If the rationalist, materialist impulse is one temptation, an even older heresy is to spiritualize everything. Instead of fully God and fully human, Christ was simply fully God, merely in the form of a human. In this view, he did not really die on the cross, but merely shed the shell that contained his spirit, his real self. In this line of thinking, the body is just a vessel and the only thing that really matters about us is our soul. But Christianity is a both/and religion. Yes, we are spirit, but we are also embodied. Yes, we are inhabitants of an observable reality, a world that can be analyzed by science. But we are also visitors to the cloud of unknowing, sojourners in a spiritual world that is accessible only through a certain level of mystery and mysticism.

The Christian way of explaining this confluence of matter and spirit is sacrament. The world of spirit is real, but we can only access it through the material world. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. We have always been and will always be God’s children, but we come to feel and understand this at a deeper level through the outward sign of water in the sacrament of baptism. We are one Body in Christ, but by partaking of the outward signs of the bread and the wine of Holy Eucharist, we become what we receive as the Body and Blood nourish us. Just by saying the same prayers week in and week out, those words become a part of us as we become a part of the eternal story of the communion of saints at all times

and places. And so, because in our humanity we need outward signs to truly experience inner spiritual truths, God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus himself is the greatest sacrament of all. And his death and resurrection are signs that point to the greatest power in the world: Love.

What draws me back each time I experience doubt are those sacraments of love that we celebrate together. For example, what I remember most of my confirmation at age 19, after I discovered the Episcopal Church at university, was not the service itself or the bishop who officiated it, but the feeling of all my college friends around me with their hands extended in blessing on my shoulder, joining with the bishop in the ancient practice of the laying on of hands to invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Another example: I have officiated the marriages of many couples, but what I remember most about my own experience as a recipient of the sacrament of marriage was the silent moment my husband Giuliano and I took before the ceremony to just hold one another's hands and breathe together before we embarked on a new life that we had already been creating and that we would and will enter into more deeply in the years and decades to come.

In moments of doubt or when the world around me seems too dark, I remember that Christ came among us and to live and die and life again for us because he loved us. And his love brought forth love in the hearts of those around him. Jesus invites us to follow him, and even though sometimes we stumble, he is there with us all the way. He has given us hope because even though we are buried with Christ in the waters of baptism, we also share in his resurrection. And it is through love that we most fully experience this gift of new life.

As we leave here today, I invite you to consider moments in your own lives when you have felt the stirring of new life and of the love that connects us all as children of God.

To begin that reflection, I want to share with you a poem by Maya Angelou, called "Touched by an Angel"

*We, unaccustomed to courage  
exiles from delight  
live coiled in shells of loneliness  
until love leaves its high holy temple  
and comes into our sight  
to liberate us into life.*

*Love arrives  
and in its train come ecstasies  
old memories of pleasure  
ancient histories of pain.  
Yet if we are bold,  
love strikes away the chains of fear  
from our souls.*

*We are weaned from our timidity  
In the flush of love's light  
we dare be brave  
And suddenly we see  
that love costs all we are  
and will ever be.  
Yet it is only love  
which sets us free.*

Love sets us free. Christ lived and died for us to set us free, to save us from our brokenness and to show us how to love one another. And he was raised to new life to set us free. Not just freedom from death, but freedom to live – the freedom of life lived in the power of the resurrection. And that power is Love.

Amen.