

1 Easter Day (4 April) 2010

Pr. Franklin Wilson
Luther Memorial Church
Isaiah 65.17-25; Psalm 118
1 Cor. 15.19-26; St. Luke 12.1-12

Isaiah proclaims, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”

St Paul writes, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

According to Luke, the two men asked the women, “‘Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.... But these words seemed to them utter nonsense, and they did not believe them.”

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When it comes to Easter, there isn't a lot to remember, and yet we tend to forget even what little there is: *He is risen*. It's not much to remember and, yet, we live as though we had either forgotten it or, worse still, that we didn't believe it.

He is risen. The sentence is either utter nonsense, or the truest thing we shall ever hear. Either Jesus has been raised and death has begun to die, or (as Paul has it) we of all people are most to be pitied. Why? Because we will have staked our very lives—everything that really matters—on utter nonsense if, in fact, Christ has not been raised.

But, you may be thinking, “He doesn't believe that. He doesn't think the resurrection is utter nonsense.” That's just the trouble. Sometimes I do think that. And I'll wager you do too. Here's the thing: reasonably speaking, the women's report *is* utter nonsense. It doesn't make sense. Yet, I do *believe* it even though I often *think* it nonsense, and I'll wager you do too. We think *and* we believe. This is the struggle at work in the Easter Gospel.

Two weeks ago our confirmation class gathered in the columbarium. We went there to consider the Second Article of the Creed and Martin Luther's explanation of it. Surrounded by the names and ashes of people who have died, we considered the death and resurrection of Christ in relation to what we think and believe—our fears and our hopes. A confirmand said, “This place creeps me out! Can't we leave?” Any place of death *is* creepy, but it's also more than that. It's a place of penultimate grief framed by ultimate hope. It's the locus of what we *think* framed by what we *believe*, an architectural statement that the women spoke *both* literal nonsense and utter truth.

We tend to remember what Easter bids us forget (pain, suffering, humiliation, and death), and we tend to forget what Easter bids us remember: that Christ Jesus has taken all sorrow, death, and terror unto himself; that with his own death, and resurrection, death has begun to die.

We live in terror of facts like pain, suffering, humiliation, and death. But the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ frees us from the terror of these facts. Not that Christ has put an end to suffering and death, but his resurrection makes all such facts temporary. The risen Christ confines suffering and death within the parameters of time. Christ's resurrection frees us from the constraints of time, suffering and death. Baptized into Christ we are free to live toward others in their loss, misery, anxiety, and death. Baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, we are called away from our own terror to live for all who do not understand or accept what we ourselves cannot understand either, but what we nonetheless believe to be true. That the resurrection of Christ fulfills Isaiah's promise: the beginning of a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth free from the terrors of death.

We may get no closer to Christ Jesus' tomb in this life than the graves of our own loved ones, friends, and acquaintances. We may get no closer to Christ Jesus' suffering and death, than when we share the suffering and dying of our own loved ones and friends. But it is just there, precisely in the suffering and death of people we know and love, that all theory and speculation come face to face with penultimate reality framed by the true nonsense in which we stake our hope, our lives, and our ultimate purpose.

This Easter, I cannot help recalling last June 6th, kneeling with my 4 year-old nephew, Jonas Matthew, in the Yankton Cemetery, and placing the cremated ashes of our father and grandfather, David Austin, in the earth above Milton Creek. Three miles distant, Columbia River waters flowed toward Pacific salt water as salty tears flowed down our cheeks: the very water through which Israel passed, the very waters in which we, David Austin and all the saints, are baptized—forever joined to the crucified and living One.

Remember how he told you? Remember how he told you that he must be handed over to sinners, suffer, die, and on the third day rise? In his resurrection, Christ has become the unreasonable memory of our future fact. He has become the future memory of a time without time, of a day without death, of a life without end, of Jerusalem without pain, when children no longer die, when wolf and lamb lie down together, the lion eats straw like the ox, and the serpent of our ancient downfall consumes the dust of our death. *And we shall be raised!*

Then we too shall sing and be glad—even as we sing and are glad at Easter. Then we too shall rejoice and feast—even as we rejoice and feast at Easter. Then we too shall know in fact what we now believe in faith—that Christ is the One in whom the future now lives. Then we too shall see with our eyes what we now taste in our mouths: the

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bread and the cup—the body and blood of the crucified and risen Lord. He bids us live as though resurrection nonsense were more true, more real, and more everlasting than the grave, the rising sun, the river, the ocean, and the tears. Remember what he told you? *He is risen.* The nonsense is true. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.