

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

April 9, 2023 – RESURRECTION SUNDAY / EASTER, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Shock and Awe*”*

Acts 10:34-43 (God raised Jesus from the dead so that forgiveness could be preached to all nations)
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 (A psalm of praise for God’s marvelous works)
Colossians 3:1-4 (We have been raised with Christ, and so are to seek heavenly things)
St. John 20:1-18 (Jesus’ followers find the empty tomb and Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Lord)

A man from Michigan took a vacation to Florida at the height of winter. When he arrived, he was so excited about the semitropical climate, he was in a hurry to email his wife, whom he was expecting would follow soon. However, in his haste, the tourist inadvertently typed one letter of his spouse’s email address incorrectly. Soon after, back in Delaware, a recently widowed pastor’s wife was found by her children to have fainted dead away in front of her computer. Looking around for the cause, they read the message that appeared on the screen: “Hi Honey. Arrived safely. Hot as blazes down here. Can’t wait for you to join me. Your loving husband.”¹

Cute story ... but the reality is, no one has ever been able to communicate to us about life beyond the grave—no one except God in human flesh, Jesus Christ. Everyone had seen Him crucified. The disciples, His mother Mary, the Jews, and the Romans who had accused, taunted, and tortured Jesus, the passers by, and the morbidly curious. All of them knew Jesus had died on the cross three days earlier. And Jesus’ followers were struggling over how to come to terms with their Master’s death; they were in mourning.

This morning, some of you may also be grieving the loss of a loved-one, whether recent, or many years ago. You may occasionally go to the cemetery to clear away the dead flowers and put some fresh ones on the grave, or perhaps, simply stand by the headstone, remembering, and speaking a few words in prayer . . . But imagine, for a moment, that when you got there, you found the grave open and your loved-one gone! Talk about a bad shock . . . Your first reaction would like be: “Where is she?” or “Who’s taken his body?” Next, you’d probably whip out your cell phone and call the Police.

Then imagine further, as you stood there anguished and bewildered, your deceased husband or long-departed mother came walking along the grassy plots, *alive!* —and he or she called you by name and began talking to you. Talk about *awesome*. It would be terrifying and wonderful all at once. And in picturing such a miracle, perhaps you can relate to what the women at Jesus’ tomb experienced that first Easter morning. First, a terrible shock. And then a tremendous awe, when the One whom they loved appeared to them *alive!*

Unfortunately, we will not find our loved-ones risen and walking in the garden—at least, not yet. However, Saint Paul testifies in 1 Corinthians 15 (vv. 20, 23 CEV): “Christ has been raised to life! And he makes us certain that others will also be raised to life.” Further, the Apostle assures us, because “Christ was the first to be raised to life ... his people will be raised to life when he returns.”

Praise God! Alleluia! This news is our greatest hope, both in this life and in the life to come. Jesus risen from the tomb proclaims for all the world that death and the grave need not have the final say. “All will be made alive in Christ,” the Bible declares in 1 Corinthians 15:22(b).

The late Dr. Paul Stuckey, who was a pastor in Dayton, Ohio, recounted a story about an eye-catching ad in a Milwaukee, Wisconsin newspaper’s classified section. Big bold letters advertised: “Used Tombstone for Sale.” The text of the ad continued: “Real bargain for someone named ‘Dingo.’ For more information call ...” The image of a used tombstone may, at first, seem to us morbid and creepy. But think again. A “used” tombstone means that its previous owner no longer has any need for it. It’s a castoff, an unnecessary item. Christ’s resurrection conveys the same message: The stone that closed the grave is no longer needed! *The tomb is empty!* Jesus Christ is risen!²

Now some would dispute whether Christ rose *bodily*. But be assured, Jesus was not a ghost. Our risen Lord walked, talked, and ate with His disciples. St. Paul records in 1 Corinthians 15 (:5-7) that apart from revealing Himself to Mary Magdalene and the women, Jesus also appeared to John and Peter, “then to the twelve [and] to more than five hundred brothers and sisters . . . [to] James, then to all the apostles.” St. Luke agrees in Acts 1:3, where he writes that “after his suffering [Jesus] presented himself alive to [the apostles] by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” That many witnesses could not have been hallucinating.

But why, on that first Easter morning, didn’t Jesus’ disciples believe the women who came racing from the garden tomb proclaiming they had seen the risen Lord? Was it because the Lord appeared in His resurrection body?

St. Paul indicates that our spiritual bodies will differ in their properties from our earthly bodies, and Mark 16:12 notes that Jesus “appeared to them in another form.” Or, were these disciples unable to recognize Christ because they were looking for a *dead* Jesus?

To this day, many still make that same mistake. For them, Jesus is merely a figure who lived in Palestine over two thousand years ago and may have done some impressive things. But just as the popular Broadway musical “Godspell” ends with the Crucifixion—leaving out the best, most meaningful, part of the story—19th-century poet Annie Johnson Flint wrote:

“Some of us stay at the cross, some of us wait at the tomb, quickened and raised with Christ yet lingering still in the gloom. Some of us ‘bide at the Passover feast with Pentecost all unknown, the triumphs of grace in the heavenly place that our Lord has made His own. If the Christ who died had stopped at the cross, His work had been incomplete. If the Christ who was buried had stayed in the tomb, He had only known defeat, but the way of the cross never stops at the cross and the way of the tomb leads on to victorious grace in the heavenly place where the risen Lord has gone.”³

The way of the cross doesn’t stop on Calvary’s hill. The path of the grave leads onward and upward. The same God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will not only raise us and our loved-ones on the Last Day, but can *raise up* whatever is dead in *your life now*.

A few years ago, a letter appeared in the national news that was sent to a deceased person by the Indiana Department of Social Services. It read: “Please be advised that your food stamps will stop on March first, because we received notice that you passed away. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances.”⁴ Well, if you are dead, unless you happen to be Jesus Christ, it’s highly unlikely there would be a change in your ‘circumstances’—at least, not immediately. Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead, something so shocking and so awesome that I couldn’t resist titling this homily “shock and awe”—a phrase that gained public attention during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq—Christ’s resurrection from the dead is our *guarantee* that when He returns in glory to claim His kingdom on earth, we will live forever with the Lord.

Christ rose from the grave for you. And He ever lives to love, save, help, and pray for you and me. Like those first disciples to whom the risen Christ appeared, we are not alone or bereft of His presence. Even in the midst of what seems to be a global *mess*—of natural disasters, war, disease, poverty, oppression, violence, and suffering of every kind—Jesus Christ is working His resurrection power, whether or not we can perceive it, or will ever see its fulfillment in our lifetime.

As the angel promised Jesus’ friends in St. Matthew’s account of the Resurrection, “He is going on ahead of you . . . there *you will see Him*.” May God give us that confidence to trust that Jesus goes before us into every situation we may face. And on this blessed and holy Easter Day, I pray that God will open the eyes of our hearts, so that like Mary Magdalene, we, too, will be able to say with exuberant joy, “*I have seen the Lord!*” *Alleluia! Amen.*

² Adapt, N. George Hacker, 20 April 2003, Wesley Grove UMC, Gaithersburg MD; and N. George Hacker, 4 April 2010, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

³ Anonymous source / traditional humor remembered.

⁴ Adapt. Brett Blair, “Used Tombstone . . . Real Bargain,” *Sermons.com*, n.d. <https://sermons.com/search/results?term=Used%20tombstone&category=sermon&sermon_filters=Illustrations&tab=Illustrations&page=1> 31 March 2023. Used with permission.

⁵ Adapt. Annie Flint, “The Way of the Cross,” *homemakerscorner.com*, 2019 <<http://www.homemakerscorner.com/ajf-waycross.htm>> 31 March 2023. Used with permission.

⁶ Adapt. Traditional illustration, “Noticed That You Passed Away,” *Sermons.com*, n.d. <https://sermons.com/search/results?term=Notice%20that%20you%20passed%20away&category=sermon&sermon_filters=Illustrations&tab=Illustrations&page=1> 31 March 2023. Used with permission.