

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

April 4, 2021 – EASTER DAY (YR. B)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*An Empty Cross*”

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; Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Lord )

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When you were kids, did any of you ever play the game “Freeze tag”? Everyone tries to run away from the child who is “it,” as he or she chases after the players, trying to tag them. When one is successfully tagged, that girl or boy must “freeze” in place, exactly as they were when tagged, until another player “un-freezes” them.

There are also moments in our lives that seem frozen in time, etched forever in our memories. They can be good moments, or bad ones. Snapshots of utter joy or profound grief. Whatever else such instances may be, they are locked in our hearts and minds because of the power they hold for our lives. No matter how much time may have passed, we have the capacity to relive them instantly.

Remember? That first kiss. Or when she said, “Yes, I’ll marry you.” The minute your first child was born. The day the mortgage on the house was finally paid off. The look on the doctor’s face when he told you the diagnosis. The hour you lost the person you loved most.

In frozen moments like these, time stops. The most dramatic of them are life-and-death moments that make up the greatest and most wonderful, or the worst, most devastating, events of our existence. These are the watersheds, the tipping points, the “defining moments” of our lives.

As we gather on this Easter Sunday, we celebrate the single most important, defining moment of our Christian faith—the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Without that defining moment, the rest of our faith would make no sense.

As Saint Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15:17 (GW): “If Christ has not come back to life, your faith is worthless and sin still has you in its power.” Without being raised from the dead, Jesus would have remained an obscure, forgotten, first-century rabbi who simply died a tragic, unjust death.

Easter’s defining moment is why our processional cross does not have a figure of Jesus on it. It is not a crucifix—it is an empty cross! And the Jesus who looks down upon us from above our altar is not portrayed as dead. He is depicted as One who lives, robed in the white of salvation and the red of His blood-sacrifice for our sins, reaching out in love to little children, even as He reaches out in love to every one of us. That’s because we follow a Lord who was raised from death to life and is fully alive, Jesus, our High Priest and King of Heaven. Alleluia!

Alleluia, because the pain and suffering we encounter on Good Friday are not the end. Alleluia, because, despite humanity’s incurable propensity to sin, God does not walk away from us. Alleluia, because, in the face of our fears, griefs, doubts, and uncertainties, Jesus stands with us and says, “Don’t be afraid. I go before you.” Alleluia, because in Christ we are offered forgiveness and given redemption. Alleluia, for through the Resurrection of Jesus, God has given us pure grace; pure, soul-saving, death-defying, life-giving grace.

And for Jesus to be raised from the dead, we humans did not have to do anything. In fact, there is nothing we could have done. Jesus' followers did not have to do penance. His betrayer did not have to be punished. His murderers did not have to be condemned. For Jesus to be raised from the dead needed one thing and one thing only—the power of Almighty God.

He alone raised Christ from the dead, and then, through our Risen Lord, offered us reconciliation and peace, and an ongoing relationship of love and goodness with His Son, our Savior, Jesus.

For Christ to be raised from the dead, we humans did not have to follow the law; believe a certain doctrine; or keep any rules. We did not have to study our holy books or memorize our prayers. We could not earn it on merit, or by striving to be perfect. For Jesus to be raised from the dead took one thing and one thing only—the power of a completely loving and merciful God. A God of unconquerable, unquenchable, hope.

Through the Resurrection of Christ, the Creator of the universe, He who is able to transform all things, reaches down into our merely human, mortal lives and becomes present to us—despite our sinfulness, despite the mess our world is in, despite what humanity *has* done, or has *yet* to do.

We process and recess behind an empty cross because we know that Jesus is alive. We know that He is alive, because He has touched our lives—and those of countless others—in ways that will never be the same. Are you familiar with the Easter hymn, “Because He Lives”? The words of the chorus are:

“Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,  
 Because He lives, all fear is gone.  
 Because I know He holds the future,  
 And life is worth the living  
 Just because He lives.”

Sometimes, our problem is not facing tomorrow. Sometimes, it is facing yesterday. The past may trouble us as much as the future may make anxious. But because He lives, we can face with confidence and peace both the past and the future. And, we can live with joy today, in, and through, our resurrected Lord, rejoicing in the power of our God to make all things new.\*

Alleluia. Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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\* Adapt. Rebecca Newland, "He is risen indeed, Alleluia!" 20 April 2014, St. Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, Australia <[http://stphilipsoconnor.org.au/sermons/2014apr20\\_m.php](http://stphilipsoconnor.org.au/sermons/2014apr20_m.php)> 1 April 2015. Used with permission.