

“Easter Came Early”      March 23, 2008      John 20: 1-18

“Easter is so EARLY this year!” We say this with concern in our voices -even alarm! A chilly Easter seems to be yet another a sign of the world being out of whack, on a par with climate change. It IS an unusually early Easter this year.

But quite legitimately. Easter’s a MOVEABLE season. It’s calculated not only by movements of the sun, but also by cycles of the moon. -It’s always the first Sunday after the spring full moon. You can bank on the fact that it will always be after March 21, and before April 26.

So this Easter IS actually the second earliest time it could possibly be. The only people here who have ever experienced Easter this early are those of us who are at least 85 years old. (I won’t ask you to raise your hands!) And we won’t experience Easter this early again unless we plan to live another 152 years.

Now here’s another interesting fact: Do you know how long it takes for the entire cycle of Easter dates to repeat itself? (would you hazard a guess? ) 5,700,000 years! That is such perfect symbolism for Easter: Easter IS BIG! Easter is the moment in time when God begins to make this world new- THIS IS BIG!

Some of us would like Easter to come at a regular time. So we know when to expect it. So we can plan for it- like birthdays and anniversaries and Christmas. I rather like the sliding way that Easter happens. I like the fact that we can’t pin it down.

Easter always comes as a surprise. Like something new. Unexpected.- Like a baby born without the mother knowing she’s pregnant. Like God’s promise that God will answer our prayers before we’ve prayed them.

Easter always comes unexpected. Unbidden. Early. Before we’re ready. While the world is yet dark, before we can see clearly, as the scripture says, “It was still DARK when Mary came to the tomb.

This darkness that John speaks of, early Easter morning, is not just the absence of sunlight, it’s the darkness of all our grief and hurt that blinds us, it’s the darkness of injustice, corruption, oppression, that binds us.

It’s the darkness of a world where fanatics strap bombs to children and send them into crowded marketplaces; it’s the darkness of a world where millions of children and women are trafficked for sex; It’s the darkness of a world where poisonous waste is belched into the air we breathe, dumped in fertile oceans and streams.

It's in the darkness of this world, bent on its own destruction, that Easter happens. Unexpected, and utterly surprising. Early- Before we're ready. Before, like Mary, we're ready to see or understand.

Mary goes to the tomb, expecting to find the dead body of her beloved teacher, her rabbi. Instead, the risen Christ stands before her. She sees, but she does not see. She thinks it's the gardener standing before her. She cannot comprehend what she is seeing.

What WAS it that Mary and the others actually saw? What do we believe HAPPENED that first Easter morning? Whatever it is, we need to get it right- because what happened that morning is the basis for our faith.

When I first came to faith, I couldn't see that the resurrection was any big deal. It didn't seem hard to believe, - all things are possible with God...it didn't seem to matter whether a bodily resurrection actually happened or whether his followers simply EXPERIENCED his presence and power with them.

From where I sit today, it does matter. Firstly, I want to be faithful to the BIBLICAL witness. Secondly, as a Jew who has become a Christian I need to understand this kicking off point from Judaism to Christianity, what it was about the resurrection that launched a new faith.

Jesus TEACHINGS, however wise, did not on their own launch a new faith. It was what HAPPENED on Easter.

The biblical witness is CLEAR: The risen Christ has a PHYSICAL presence. He can EAT and be TOUCHED. But his body is not simply resuscitated, it's different from before. He was not immediately recognizable to those who had known him.

He could appear and disappear, and pass through locked doors. His resurrected body is an entirely new kind of body.

What do we make of this? What did the early BELIEVERS make of it? Well, firstly, they did not take it as proof of an after life. Many Jews already believed in some continuation of life beyond the grave. They didn't need an after death appearance of Jesus, to confirm this belief, any more than many people do today.

But many ALSO believed that at the END OF TIME, the dead, the disembodied spirits, would be resurrected, given NEW bodies and God would make a NEW WORLD.

In this new world there would be no death or destruction, the lion and the lamb would lie down together, it would be a world of peace, justice, forgiveness,

reconciliation, harmony. This was the resurrection, sometimes spoken of as "the age to come", and it would happen at the end of time.

We had a funny moment on Thursday evening at the Passover Seder- one of the symbolic actions is to open a door to the age to come, to God's new world; so we sent a child to open the door and who should walk through it at that moment, but our unsuspecting choir director.

The whole room packed up.

Imagine if the one who came through the door at that moment was the resurrected Christ, like some time traveler from a future age, suddenly appearing in this age. That was Mary's experience:

Standing before her, IN time, was the resurrected Christ. It was inconceivable. And it was surely this that blew the minds of those first believers.

They saw in the resurrected Christ a sure sign that the age to come had begun. And they responded by living as though this new age had begun. They sold all their possessions; they shared what they had with one another. You can read about it in the book of Acts.

In the midst of the harshness and oppression of the Roman Empire, while darkness was all around them, they prayed and worshipped and tried their darnedest to love their enemies and to forgive –to live Easter, to live the resurrection, to live the new world, that had come so early into the present darkness.

In preparing this sermon, I thought about my own Easter experience, and realized that actually the truth of Easter came early in my life, "while it was still dark". I have been trying to grasp it, process it, understand it, learn it, ever since. It was like this:

I was a new teacher in an all boys' school in England. And I was given the impossible task of doing "something" on the last period of a Friday, with 26 twelve year old boys", all with learning and behavioral problems.

And to make matters worse, my class room was near the principal's office. I didn't want him to hear a riot there every Friday afternoon. So I was pretty mean.

One night, in a dream, Jesus appeared in my classroom. You have to realize that I had never read the New Testament. At that point I could be described as a Jewish atheist. I was not interested in Jesus. But in my DREAM, I was glad he'd arrived, because I needed HELP.

Thing is, he didn't take MY side, as I'd hoped he would-- he took the KIDS' side. Even though I felt afraid and vulnerable in front of these kids, it seems that I was one with the power, not them. And Jesus always takes the part of those who do NOT have power.

He told me to love them. I said I'd tried. He repeated "love them". I said "I've tried." He repeated a third time, "love them". I said "I've tried and it doesn't work". I woke up crying. Perhaps at my helplessness.

In my second year at that school it was open warfare between me and one of the boys- Stephen. He devoted himself to making my life a misery -and more than once I ended the day in tears, in the principal's office.

Thankfully, the following year I was moved to a different part of the school, but eventually Stephen would reach that part of the school. I had to make a plan. Somewhere from the recesses of my memory that dream returned, and the words Jesus had spoken.

I thought, OK. I'll try again. I saw Stephen in the corridor. When he saw me, his face immediately contorted into the familiar snarl. I smiled my brightest, warmest, friendliest smile and said, "Hi Stephen, how are you doing?" as though I was really pleased to see him.

There was confusion in his eyes, the snarl went a little slack, and I thought, "gotcha".

I continued in this way. Not feeling love, you understand, just behaving as though nothing bad had ever happened between us- I think that's called forgiveness- when by a sheer act of will, we let the past go and we start again.

The change in Stephen was remarkable. It seemed he was relieved to be able to let go of the defenses he'd erected, and BE the basically decent kid that he was. He turned out to be really earnest in wanting to learn.

And I was so relieved myself to be able to leave behind the nasty person I'd become and to start again.

This is one of the ways we can live into God's new world, to live as if all things ARE being made new. We're not going to do it right. we're going to stumble, we're going to fail, the new world order wont come in our time.

But our efforts are not in vain. We have seen God's future in the risen Christ. Like yeast, God has come into this world and has begun to raise up, to resurrect the world. And so our efforts are not in vain.

Today, a tiny group of activists in Europe are trying to get the laws changed so that horses who are being transported for slaughter may spend their last hours treated humanely, not crowded together in transport cars, unable to move for days on end, without food or water.

A small attempt at compassion. But not in vain, because God is at work making all things new.

A 14 year old girl in Kenya, caring for her sick mother and siblings, finds there is no food to cook for the family. Her mother tearfully sends her to the fisher men at the Lake side. The tears are because those fishermen won't be giving her daughter fish for free- they'll expect a trade.

And they prefer very young girls because they are less likely to be HIV/ AIDS positive. Once an African girl has found she can support her family through prostitution, her life expectancy is perhaps 20 years.

Our friends, the Obara family, have taken in this girl to give her a chance at life, an education, another way to support her family. A small action, but not in vain, because God is in the world making this world new.

We managed this Lenten season to pack 8 back packs with necessities for a man coming out of jail. We hope each man who receives this back pack will know that someone cares, and he will be encouraged to make new beginnings.

A small action, but not in vain, because God is in the world, making this world new!

We try at this church to reduce our use of hydro and water, and now we're focusing on reducing paper. Small steps in reducing our carbon footprint, but not in vain, because God is in the world making all things new.

Easter is God's "yes" to this beautiful created world. It's God's "yes" to life and the goodness of life. It's God's call to us to choose life not death. To walk gently on the earth and with gratitude, to seek justice, peace, harmony between all peoples.

Easter is God's affirmation of this world, and all that is in it. Easter is God's promise to us that this world is not headed for destruction, but the turn around has begun- this world is headed for life.

And every time WE choose life, in however small a way, every time we choose life, our action is not in vain for Christ has risen. God has BEGUN to make this world new.

To God be all the praise the honour and the glory.