

And then there was Donna's story, about the guilt she'd carried over the suicide of her beautiful, troubled son fifteen years ago; a guilt she not only felt and carried, but had to come to acknowledge, accept and own, before she could accept the reality of God's ready forgiveness and her capacity to forgive herself.

Donna stood before us all in God's sanctuary, her hands at her sides, her back straight and her head high. Her voice hardly wavered as she spoke with a calm firmness. She was so centered, so grounded in a faith that – as far as I am concerned -- it simply shouted resurrection. So that the only thing our hearts could sing in echoing reply was "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!"

Anywhere else Donna's storytelling might have sounded like a public confession, but here, instead it was a sheer gospel proclamation; as if Easter just couldn't wait till dawn on Sunday morning to hear these welcome words: "Now there is rejoicing in heaven; for once you were lost, now found. You were dead, and are alive again."

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The traditions and rituals we reenact with our Easter observances may look pretty much the same year after year. That certain sameness might be mistaken as a throwback to something that only happened once, now long ago; like the fading *alleluias* that are but an echo of former things. Not so.

While the essential message of Easter may remain the same, that message is this: things will never be the same again. Neither life, nor death, will ever be the same again. I know I won't be the same again because it is Easter. I suspect neither Judy nor Donna nor my other old friend with whom I am now reconciled once again will be either; because Jesus Christ is risen *today*.

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About Jesus' resurrection, the young man in dazzling white says simply to the women, "But go, tell his disciples he is going ahead of you. There you will see him." That is why we are not a backward faith.

That first Easter morning, the first disciples might easily have thought to themselves, if only I'd known then what I know now. If only I'd known then, when we were with him in Galilee, when he was teaching us, and healing us, and feeding us, and casting out our greatest fears, while including everyone with his living vision of the reign of God. If we knew then what we know now, how different a life we would live!

But according to the message delivered by the young man, Jesus does not say, "Go back," but rather "go forth." Jesus tells us to go forth to Galilee. Galilee is that place *where he taught and did as he would have us do now*: to love, to forgive, to reconcile, to work for what is just, and good, and true, to make peace and be at peace, and rejoice in the Lord always. So, go forth to Galilee, the *place of resurrection*. "There you will see him."

Each Easter, each year, the invitation and proclamation call us out, and call us forth. The risen Lord has gone ahead, to lead the way. We are an Easter people, we say. We are a resurrection people. We must be on our way. He is the way, we say. He is the journey, and the journey's end. And there, at our journey's end, we will see him.

Amen.

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## LIVING FAITH FORWARD - PART II

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, EASTER SUNDAY, 2006

THE REV. JOHN WM. BENNISON, REL.D, RECTOR

Appointed gospel text:

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Mark 16:1-8

*"But go tell his disciples he is going ahead of you. There you will see him."*

Last Sunday, Palm Sunday, I preached a message with the basic premise that just as life is to be lived forward, so too a *life of faith* must be, as well. Bluntly put, we are not a backward people when it comes to matters of faith; and particularly when it comes to the central tenet of Christian belief, resurrection.

We all know the benefits of hindsight. How many times has one said to oneself, if I only knew then what I know now? While we all know the benefits of hindsight, there's also a *hindrance* to be found there, as well.

Ultimately, looking backwards can be hazardous to one's religious life; particularly if one assumes God is done and finished with us; that we have no further need of God, or any new ideas God may have in mind for us, like ... resurrection! After all, we don't sing "Jesus Christ was raised yesterday," but rather, "Jesus Christ is risen today."

Last week I mentioned some of the newest ways we've discovered all over again where looking *back* can be a help or a hindrance.

There was the story of *Tiktaalik*, that 375 million year old fish fossil with fins that resembled limbs, declared by scientists to be the "missing link" to the theory of how tetrapods evolved; further threatening biblical creationists clinging to the claim intelligent design could disguise itself as incredible science rather than appropriate religious belief.

Then there was the university professor who postulated his theory about unusual weather patterns that could have occurred roughly between 1,700-2,400 years ago (in the ballpark of Jesus' brief lifetime), when a sudden drop in temperature on what was once known as the Sea of Galilee could have caused a thin sheet of ice to form, sufficient to support the weight of a Galilean peasant rabbi walking on it! Looking back, would we really say modern meteorological science threatens the deeper miracle of the place to which Jesus was leading the way?



"Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you ..."  
Mark 16:7

It is backward thinking and a backward kind of faith that concerns itself with such things.

Now there's the newest unveiling of the 1,700 year old apocryphal Gospel of Judas, which recasts the legendary betrayer as Jesus' most intimate, trusted companion. Surfacing several hundred years after Jesus' crucifixion, it tells the tale of the one who – at the bidding of his master – obediently and faithfully helps Jesus the man rid himself of his physical body, in exchange for a spiritual one.

As I summarized in my Maundy Thursday homily ("Night Moves"), one might tally up that story like this: Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, the other frightened disciples abandon him to save their own skin; and even Peter denies him (three times) when push comes to shove. In the end, they all kiss him off. That is, until after something that came to be known as the day of resurrection.

After that strange, and wondrous, and ultimately inexplicable day, it now seems indisputable that once-timid souls became emboldened by a faith that would lead them to utterly abandon themselves, instead of their Lord; along with all fear for this life of theirs. They would now proclaim a gospel of resurrection that – while often misunderstood as a way to save your own skin – led those who would leave self behind to a new kind of a life; a place where Jesus had not only gone before, but showed them the way. And, my own life's story has suggested to me, you can only get there, from here, by living your *faith forward*.

Well! With these extended introductory remarks, let me say, "Happy Easter!" I'm glad you're here. Why? You're my favorite people and I care about you! And because I care about you so much, I want what's best for you. And, according to a recent study, you're gonna be healthier and live longer if you go to church! That was the findings detailed in the latest issue of the Journal of *The American Board of Family Medicine*.

We all know there are certain things you can do to increase your life expectancy: exercise, eat well, take your medications, *and now ... go to church*. The new study finds people who attend religious services *weekly* live longer. Specifically, the research looked at how many years are added to life expectancy based on the following: Regular physical exercise could add 3-5 years to your life. Other proven therapeutic regimens could give you 2-3 more years. And regular religious attendance could give you almost as much as those other "regimens."

That’s why we Episcopalians incorporate liturgical calisthenics into our one-hour workout every Sunday; where we jump up to sing, drop to our knees to pray, exercise our brains to listen and reflect, juggle books and bulletins to hone our coordination skills, shed unwanted pounds (the sticks and stones), and, oh yes, hug a lot; all the while whipping our heads ‘round to be sure we’re doing the right thing at the right time with everyone else!

“Religious attendance is not a mode of medical therapy,” said research study’s leader Daniel Hall, a resident in general surgery at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (and who is also just happens to be an Episcopal priest.). At the same time, he said, “There is something about being knit into the type of community that religious communities embody that has a way of mediating a positive health effect. Being involved in a religion can then decrease your level of stress in life, or at least increase your ability to cope with stress; as well as make meaning out of your life.”

Hey, that’s something I’ve always believed.

At the same time, apparently there’s *another* brand new scientific study on the power of intercessory prayer, which alarmingly suggests having someone pray for you can be hazardous to your health. Have you seen this one?

The statistical study looked at 1,800 patients about to undergo cardiac bypass surgery. The first group was informed they would be prayed for, and they were. A second group was informed they might, or might not, be prayed for, and *they* were as well. Finally, a third group was told they may or may not be prayed for, and they weren’t. The results?

Of the two groups who *didn’t* know if they would be prayed for or *not*, 52% of the patients in each group developed complications following surgery. Whereas 59% of those who knew they’d be prayed for developed complications. Conclusion?

Comic commentator, John Stewart, clearly deduced with over half the patients developing problems regardless of which group they were in, we should be praying for the surgeons! But the obvious conclusion I draw from combining these two new scientific studies is this: One can increase one’s chances of living longer by going to church more often. Except once you get there, it’s best to avoid praying for those you care most about; and, if your brothers and sisters in faith really care about you as much as you do them, they’ll refrain from praying for you too ...

There’s only little problem I see in such a prescription. Sooner or later, everyone’s luck will run out, and we’ll desperately find ourselves in need of prayer. And then some *well-intentioned* folks are gonna get on their knees and fervently pray for us, and make matters worse; and even potentially hasten our eventual demise. And then, we’ll be no better off than Jesus, when it comes to matters of our mortality and the grave.

Which brings me to Easter morning; both the *first* Easter morning and, going forward, to today.

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When it comes to Easter, we say it is the renewed affirmation of what God did once, long ago, *embodied* in Christ’s resurrection; reflected in the promise lived by faith of what God will do again, and again, and again. When we sing, “Jesus Christ is risen today,” we are not looking *back* to the life that once was. That’s backward thinking, and it goes nowhere.

In the same way, we believe what God did once in raising Jesus to new life has something in it for you and me. Otherwise, good for Jesus! But, excuse me, what about *us*? What about resurrection for us? What is this place we call resurrection? Where is this place to which the Lord has gone before us?

First, as in many matters of faith, it’s easier to say what it is *not*; then begin to move towards the place of resurrection less encumbered by a process of elimination. This is what I believe:

Resurrection, then, is not resuscitation. It wasn’t for Jesus, and it isn’t for you or me. Folks who argue for or against the believability of the physical, bodily resurrection of the man Jesus misses the point. Whether or not one believes Jesus’ physical body was somehow revived and reconstituted so as to appear to the women and the disciples again in tangible physical form, only to walk through locked doors and spontaneously vanish from their sight, seek to verify the inexplicable nature of faith

Here’s another misbegotten notion of resurrection floated out there sometimes. On the Mississippi coast, Bay St. Louis has been undergoing a renewal since Hurricane Katrina flooded and ravaged the town last fall. I read yesterday where a pastor of St. Rose de Lima Parish would be preaching a sermon today about town’s physical reconstruction. That’s fine. But resurrection is not reconstruction. Resurrection is not a matter of rebuilding some semblance of what once was before.

Here’s something else resurrection is *not*. Sometimes I’ll hear people speak of how one will continue to live on through the memories of those who outlive you. Generativity is part of the driving force and natural urge I feel to procreate and leave a little of my own gene pool around in future generations of my lineage & offspring yet to come. But that’s not what I’d call resurrection, or how I’d want to domesticate the notion of eternal life.

Now, if resurrection is not about generativity, what about regenerativity? I recently read that, while stem cell therapy has long captured the limelight of regenerative medicine, other scientists are now studying the long-known and little understood fact that many species, notably amphibians and certain fish, can regenerate a wide variety of their body parts.

The salamander can regenerate its limbs, its tail, its upper and lower jaws, the lens and the retina of its eye, and its intestine. The zebra fish will re-grow fins, scales, spinal cord and part of its heart. Even mammals can renew the liver. I never knew this before, but if 75% of a human liver is surgically removed, it can regain its original mass in only two to three weeks. In terms simple enough for me to understand, such regeneration begins when the mature cells at the site of a wound start to revert to an immature state, then re-grow the missing part. (There’s a powerful metaphor in there somewhere.)

It is not certain why other organs and limbs have lost this useful capacity, but scientists theorize perhaps only the liver was damaged often enough during the evolutionary cycle to develop this capacity out of necessity to repair its own function and reason to exist in the first place. But as fascinating as this all is, I’d still say resurrection is something other than, more than, the capacity to reconstitute oneself.

So, if resurrection has nothing to do with resuscitation, reconstruction, generativity or re-generativity, what do we mean and understand this central tenet of Christian faith to be?

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When it comes to Easter, we say the affirmation of what God did once, long ago on that first Easter day is *embodied* anew in Christ’s resurrection; but *not* in looking back to the life that once was for this Jesus from Nazareth; but now the startling new presence of a risen Lord and the Christ of faith. As the ethereal appearance of the young man said, in effect, to the frightened women in Mark’s account, “Look, that is the place they laid the old Jesus.” And the place they laid the old corpse was empty. So at the very least, Easter is about the absence of what once was, and is no more. And, if that is so, then *stop looking back*.

More so, Easter is about what *shall* be. “But go, tell his disciples ... he is going ahead of you.” The resurrection is as much a startling invitation as it is an outrageous assertion, even proclamation. “Go!” it says. Leave wherever you are, and go. Seek the place to which he has gone ahead; the place we would not necessarily seek to go ourselves, as if our life depended on it. Risk it. Go in faith. *Live* your faith *forward*.

I think most people find it difficult to move forward, in faith; to trust God still has something new to say to us, something new to do with us, that may have nothing to do with whatever we (or God) have said or done in the past. Some find it impossible to do nothing more than look back and cling to the dead past. And sometimes the Church is the best worst example, in this regard.

A couple weeks ago the Emmy-winning scientist, Bill Nye, more affectionately known to millions of kids as “Mr. Science,” angered a few audience members at a community college in (oh-oh) Waco, Texas, when he evidently criticized a literal interpretation of the biblical verse Genesis 1:16: “God made two great lights — the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night.”

The speaker pointed out that God also made other stars, that our sun (the “greater light”) is but one of countless stars; and that the “lesser light” referred to is the moon, which really is not a light at all, but only a reflector of light. With this blasphemous pronouncement, several listeners jumped to their feet and stormed out of the room, visibly angered by what was perceived as the irreverence of scientific inquiry. “We believe in a God!” one woman yelled, as she fled with her three young children, covering their ears and covering their eyes.

To which I’d say, don’t give me that ol’ time religion. Give me resurrection.

Those who know me well know this: I’m as much an entrenched homebody as anyone. Surely there is a kind of comfort in the familiar, tattered, tried and true. But I also know that -- like it or not -- our lives are a journey of leave-taking, and moving inevitably forward in *some* direction or other, in *some way*. And, as a people of Christian faith, *there is a certain way about us*. And this is the way it goes:

You can’t have an Easter without a Good Friday. You can’t have resurrection without the cross and dying to the old self. Around a place like Saint John’s, that means living life forward by laying down, and leaving behind, the sticks and stones of the past.

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In my Easter sermon last year, I told you the true story about a former parishioner couple who’d left the church over my perceived lifestyle and a wrestling match of leadership. Soon afterward they had moved out of the area.

A year ago, on Good Friday morning, they suddenly made the decision to jump in their car and speed 300 miles to arrive just here just a few minutes after the evening liturgy had begun. At the end of the service, after they had joined in the ritual of laying down our last sticks and stones of our Lenten pilgrimage for the year, and the blazing bonfire of sticks was being reduced to dust and ashes, Sherry came up to Germaine and me for a tearful reunion of forgiveness and reconciliation.

A year passes. It’s another year, and on Friday morning another former parishioner from that same *mean*-time several years ago, who’d been driving past this church time and again just couldn’t pass by one more time without pulling in when they saw my lone car in the parking lot. Why? Because it was Good Friday, and they knew from their own past what we do with sticks and stones around here. So there were some simple, sincere words of apology, some mutual asking for forgiveness, some tears, some reconciliation, and something that comes about as close to resurrection as I may experience this side of the grave.

Then, on this last Friday evening, we conducted once again this strange and wondrous liturgy to prepare us for a *new* Easter. Two parishioners courageously shared with us their personal reflections of their pilgrimage this year. There was Judy’s magnificent story of laying down her anger, self-pride, impatience, arrogance and ignorance she discovered in her blindness to another human being as being a real person, rather than an irritable intrusion.