
Easter, and The Past Is Never Dead

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Easter Day – Year B

“Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, 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 16:8

I was eighteen years old, and I was walking on to my new college campus for the first time. On the first day I got there, I wasn't carrying much at all. I had deliberately left everything back home. In fact, I had hardly ever seen the place. I was from here, Georgia; and I was going to college way out in Los Angeles, California. I had no idea.

My parents did not drive me out there, either, or even fly out there with me. They had no desire to go to California. They weren't fools!

It was the end of August, and it was hot. I was wearing the only sport coat I owned, which was gray flannel. Don't ask me why that is the only one I had. All I took out there were two large suitcases. One had my clothes in it, and the other had all my sheet music. I intended to study music.

From the airport, LAX, I took a taxi, and the taxi driver seemed never to have been to this place before. He dropped me off on a random side entrance to the college, where there was not a soul in sight. I was completely alone, I was burning up in a gray flannel jacket, and I was heaving around two huge suitcases. I was lost.

So began one of my greatest experiences of new life. I was quite aware that I was leaving home, deliberately leaving a familiar name and identity. In fact, that was why I was leaving the South. I was leaving all that. I was a southerner, and I wanted to be somewhere else. I was choosing a new life. But the first thing I faced was a kind of terror, amazement, silence, and fear—maybe like those first people at the empty tomb of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. The last verse of our Easter gospel says their first reactions were terror, amazement, silence, and fear.

Later, during that first year in college, in Southern California, my new friends would stare at me and say, “Say something.” I would ask why. They said they just wanted to hear me talk; they wanted to hear a southern accent. It took me years to understand that, yes, I was discovering new life out there, but I was still a southerner. I would still have my past identity, even if it was being renewed.

That's the principle I want to talk about this morning. Today is Easter! A celebration of resurrection and new life! But here's the thing. Even after we experience new life, we still have some of the old life, and the old identity, with us. This can be a hard thing. But it can also be the very essence of renewal. We don't start all over. We bring our past with us.

On that first Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, all ran to the tomb, they were carrying things. They were carrying their old selves. They were carrying what they knew best. Spices and anointing. Tradition. And they were carrying worries and fears. Maybe even dreams and hopes.

When they realized the tomb was empty, the gospel says they were not just amazed. They were also afraid. It is good, so very good, that we hear they were afraid. Such acknowledged fear is a good thing. It means they were realistic. It means

they were being honest and self-aware.

This morning, what if that which needs to be made new in you, is something in your past? What if what needs to be renewed in you, is not the future, but is something in your past? That is actually the most common place of renewal—not the future, but the past.

God does not make things new out of nothing. God makes things new out of our past. God makes things new out of what we have been in the past.

Maybe one of the most important questions of Easter is the simple question, “Who are you?” That question sure comes to me every day. Who am I? The answer to that question is the very place where God wants to make something new.

It’s like a young boy having a dream, maybe a tough dream, maybe even a nightmare. “Make it go away!” the young boy hollers at his mother. Make it go away.

But it won’t go away. Whatever it is, it is part of him. The past will not go away. The only way through is to be who we are and to keep going through.

It was the renowned southerner, William Faulkner, who declared that “The past is never dead; in fact, it is not even past.”

So goes the American South. American southerners actually have an important principle to teach the world about new life. We have not succeeded any better than anyone else but nor have we failed any worse than anyone else. But the principle is this: Every southerner, every true one, is about redeeming his past. Or her past.

William Faulkner wrote about making something new out of what was old. Go down, Moses, said Faulkner. Or was it God, Yahweh, who said that? Or Paul Robeson? Or the Hebrews, or even pharaoh? Gather these oppressed people and lead them to the promised land. But we will all still be carrying our past.

As glorious as this morning is, all of us are still carrying things from our past. Southerners. Northerners. Californians. West Coast. East Coast. Christians. Non-christians. People who come to church on Easter. People who don’t.

The lesson is the same for every one of us. No matter where we go to try again, even if we leave everything and go out to California, no matter how we try to create new things in our lives—Nobody gets to create themselves out of thin air, out of nothing. To attempt that is sheer folly. The reality of the world will catch up with us.

Yes, “The past is not dead; it is not even the past.” The past is now. But the power of Easter is that it is being redeemed. It is the past that is being saved. It is still the past, but the mystery of Easter is that it is being made new. Today is a day for getting in touch with our past, and then letting God touch it, too.

What was going on when Jesus was resurrected? The world did not really change. We say it did. But, the outer world did not change.

It is the inner world that has changed. But our journey has just begun. That journey is to make our inward renewal part of our outward selves. All of us have an inner past, something that longs to be saved. Redeemed. Being perfected as we plod toward the promised land.

My man, Leonard Cohen (from Southern Canada!), towards the end of his life, wrote a beautiful poem-song called, “Going Home.” He said he was “Going home, without my sorrow...going home without the costume that I wore.” He said he wanted “to write a love song, an anthem of forgiving, a manual for living with defeat.”

That’s the phrase! “A manual for living with defeat.” That might be the definition of Easter: a manual for living with defeat. When we celebrate Easter, when we practice resurrection, we are following a manual for living with defeat.

Easter is for people who know our past. Easter is for people who know how to lose. It was when I left the South that I learned an important thing. The South knows how to lose. True southerners know how to lose. In fact, true southerners know we should have lost. Knowing how to lose is one of the great secrets of life.

William Faulkner knew that. So he created Yoknapatawpha County, his small postage stamp of soil. But in that small

space, he described every drama of the human condition.

Each of us is only one person, one small piece of the whole. But in our own hearts is every universally human condition.

Last week, a little boy played his first baseball game. He's only five years old, and it was opening day of the season. And what a great metaphor for Easter and Spring and New Life is the opening day of baseball season, no matter what league you are in.

The little, five-year old boy, played well! He got on base. He ran around and scored. He fielded a ball. He threw it back to the right place. It was great fun.

But, after the game, when he came over to speak, the first thing he said was, "I made an out." How in the world did that Out outweigh all the other good things of the game?

Because, even at a young age, defeat knocks us down far more easily than a win picks us up. And then, as we grow older, it gets worse. It begins to take us so many great accomplishments to overcome the taste of defeat. Someone has said it takes ten compliments to us to equalize one critique. Why do defeat and failure stay with us so much?

They stay with us when we do not practice Easter. Easter is the practice of living with defeat, exercising new life. New life does not come out of nothing; it comes out of our very defeat.

Sports are good practice this way, aren't they? In most sport, we do not succeed all the time. In tennis, we lose many a point. In baseball, we get on base, at best, 3 or 4 times out of 10. In football, we are tackled. In basketball, we miss shots. In soccer, my God, we hardly ever score. But we play on, practicing bringing victory out of defeat.

Our human condition needs the assurances of victory, over and over again. We need a manual for living with defeat.

For us Christians, today is the manual. We call it Easter. It is not a denial of failure. It is not a denial of pain and death. It is a stark reminder of failure, a very real reminder of suffering and defeat. Death happens.

And, yet, and yet, we live. It is actually a terrifying thing to run to the tomb, ready to celebrate Easter, and then to find it empty! Why terrifying? Because the only thing that is there, besides the place where his body was, the only thing that is left is....Us! We, our selves, our old selves, are all that is there.

All we have here, this morning, is our selves. Our simple selves, our past failures and defeats, and pains and death. Our tombs, too, are terrifyingly empty. But, this morning, and every morning when the sun rises, the spirit of the Christ and new life is also here, eager to enter our old selves, our past, and to make us new. Just as certain as the sun renews each morning.

"The past is not dead; in fact, it is not even the past." Well, the same with Jesus. Jesus is not dead; in fact, Jesus is not even the past. Alleluia! Christ is risen! An amazing thing, maybe even frightening. But the Christ is a powerful reality. Jesus, the Christ, is a reality bringing new life to our old selves.

AMEN.

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