
The Resurrection is Not About Who is First!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Sunday of the Resurrection – Easter Sunday

While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.... Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. (John 20: 1-4)

But...it doesn't matter!

Over and over again, we hear in the news about who was the first. "Such-and-such is the first type of such-and-such person to ever achieve this!" "This is the first person to hit a homerun on this particular date in this kind of situation ever!"

Or weather! Our newscasters think we cannot be interested in weather unless it represents some kind of first. "This is the first time we have ever had this amount of rain, at this temperature, on this particular day, ever in recorded history." It doesn't matter that our records do not actually go back very far. Our media hypesters play on the notion that if they can cast their information as the "first" of something, maybe we will pay more attention to it and not turn the channel.

The first one to say this! The first one to say that! The first person to be elected to this or that. It doesn't matter. We do not need to be obsessed with who is first.

Even the bible succumbs to the temptation. I smile at the bible writers who use that media technique. Today's gospel says that there was one disciple, who was the first: one disciple, the gospel of John says, who outran Peter and got to the tomb first. So what? Other people get attention by noting that it was the women who got to the tomb first, that they are the first witnesses to the resurrection. So what?

It's Ricky Bobby, all over again. Yes, the world is fascinated with Ricky Bobby theology. Surely, you remember the movie, *Talladega Nights*. (Talladega is just down the road!). In that movie, the race car driver, Ricky Bobby, is a naïve oaf, obviously pushing people around so that he can win. At one point, the obnoxious Ricky Bobby boasts to the newscaster, "If you're not first, you're last!" (I wish we could laugh at such jokes again.)

"If you're not first, you're last." The resurrection of Christ that we celebrate today, the gospel of Jesus, reminds us that it does not matter who is first.

In this resurrection story, after this apparent race to the tomb, when the commotion has subsided, it is Mary who stands outside the tomb, by herself, weeping. She sees a guy that she thinks is the gardener. The gardener asks the maudlin (Magdalene!) woman, "Why are you crying?" She says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have taken him."

"Mary," says the gardener. And then, she knows. She has waited, and not raced; and now she recognizes Jesus. Jesus is in that patient gardener, and Jesus is the person who knows us, who knows us well, who knows our name. The good and holy people who show us Jesus say our name many times. They know us, over time. It does not have to be the first person who says our name. It doesn't matter who is first.

To you who are being baptized today: Did you know that others have been baptized before you? Of course you know that. It doesn't matter how many others have been baptized before you. You are not late!

Heaven has some wonderful mysteries. And one of them is this: There are no firsts. There are no firsts in the kingdom of heaven! There is only one place in the kingdom of heaven. And it is amazingly full. Heaven is the fullness of life! Heaven is not a winner-take-all competition.

Who knows where the first blossom appeared in the Spring? Who knows when the first bird flies up from the South? The glory is that the whole fullness of growth is appearing! The glory is that more and more people are being baptized! The glory is that more and more people are finding fullness of life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

I remember a dear woman in a church I served years ago, not this church, not even this city. And she was middle-aged, I guess, around seventy years old. And she had just had a beautiful and moving religious experience, a spiritual experience. And she had this experience in church! She had had this experience in the church that she thought was so fake, and hypocritical, and boring, and even mean.

She was in tears when she told me, "I am so sorry that I didn't know this kind of experience before. I didn't know how I could find such life and joy in this place. I feel embarrassed," she said. "I feel embarrassed that I am late. I could have been enjoying this long before today."

I told her, of course, that she was not late. In Jesus, the workers in the vineyard who showed up later in the day, got the same pay as those who had worked all day. The kingdom of heaven is not about quantity. It is about quality. The quality of new life is so great that comparisons cannot even be made.

When we know resurrection, we know that life in Jesus is bigger than competition. The resurrection is bigger than who is first. The resurrection is bigger than who is the greatest. And resurrection happens, no matter who sees it first. It does not matter who is first.

Well, one last thing: here is what that really means. None of us is saved first, either! Some boast, "He or she was the first one saved." No. In the kingdom of heaven, in the new life of resurrection joy, none of us saved until all of us are saved.

Let me say that again: None of us is saved until all of us are saved. Even if I am feeling well and good – but if my neighbor is not, if my neighbor is still suffering, and in pain, and even lost – then I am not in salvation yet. This is why the Church, the Christian Church, cares about the lost, the least, the last. We are not saved until all of us are saved!

The Christian Church tells a different story from the stories the world tells. We are not about winners and losers. Not about who is first, and who is last. This is why Jesus said so many times, "The first will be last, and the last will be first."

Wait!

Maybe Ricky Bobby was right! "If you're not first, you're last." Of course! Last! Hey, that is an okay place to be! Let's be last!

Let's be the last ones to witness resurrection. Let's be the last ones to rise up. If we are the last, why, that must mean that the kingdom is here. All are being safely gathered in! Heaven is here.

Let's all get in! Let's all be last. If we are the last, then that means we're all here.

Alleluia! When all are risen, Christ is risen indeed!

AMEN.

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