Easter Day

April 1, 2018

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All Saints’, Wolcott

 It was the morning of Good Friday. For the better part of this past Holy Week I had been wrestling with finding a fresh, new way to tell the story of this centerpiece of our faith which has been told and re-told and told again in so many ways for over two thousand years. Since it is the date of Easter which drives the entire calendar of the Church Year, I also thought it would be important to acknowledge the several significant and unusual “collisions” we have experienced in the sacred and secular calendars this year. There was the Ash Wednesday/Valentine’s Day occurrence; there was the conflating of Passion and Palm Sunday last week with the Feast of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary; and today, we have the union of Easter Day and April Fool’s Day! What to do with that, I wondered. I had been mulling over all this for days, when, on Good Friday, I received a powerful message - via the internet.

 As I opened my e-mail and prepared to delete a bunch of advertisements, one in particular just leaped out at me. “NO JOKE!” it read, all in caps; “FREE SHIPPING.” And that, after all, is the message of Easter!

It’s all about love – God’s amazing, boundless love, which is stronger than death. No joke.

This love story, in whose chapters we have been immersed this past week, tells us about the Almighty God who created this whole world, with sun, moon, and stars, trees, flowers, grass, rain - and yes, even snow - and you and me and all things living, and when human beings had become subject to evil and death, the Holy One entered this world to save us from the power of sin and death and make the whole Creation new.

To grant to all the amazing grace of the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life – God’s gifts to the beloved members of the human race, was to assure us, in a way, of free shipping to life everlasting in the heavenly places with our Savior. No joke.

To do that, though, Jesus had first to live fully into his humanity, inherited through his mother Mary. That meant he not only had to be born, but also had to die, as all human beings do, in due course, and a horrible death it was. No comfortable hospice care for him at the end – after challenging the emperor’s authority, he was executed by death on a cross, as fitting for a political prisoner of the time.

But then things took a decided turn. In a hair-raising twist to the story, after his death and burial, three days later, Jesus Christ the Son of God rose from the dead and began appearing to his followers. The Apostle Paul, in the passage we heard today from his first letter to the Corinthians, tells it briefly and in a sort of matter-of-fact way. But that event was hardly anything like an ordinary matter of fact!

As we heard the story from John’s Gospel this morning, it was in the wee hours of the morning, on the first day of the week, that Mary Magdalene came to his tomb to complete the burial ritual, and found her life changed forever. The tomb was empty! What a shock! What fear, what sorrow and grief, what anger she must have felt. She ran back to town to get help, to corroborate her story, and to help *her* believe it. My guess is that Peter and John, who came back to the tomb with her, went along with her just to humor her. Even in the days before April Fool’s Day, they probably expected that someone was playing a joke on her. But it was no joke.

They, too, saw the empty tomb and, dumbfounded, returned to their homes to figure out what could have happened. So they missed encountering their risen Savior. But Mary stayed, weeping, at the tomb. Through her tears, she almost bumped into Jesus, whom she believed to be the gardener – a little joke by John to identify the Lord of all Creation. Mary stands for everyone whi was ever hopeless; though she didn’t know it, she was face to face with God. When he called her by name, and Mary finally recognized Jesus, she tried to cling to him, but he told her he can’t stop to chat right now; he’s on his way to the living God. No joke.

Mary ran back to town again, found the disciples gathered together, and then spoke those electrifying words which established her as the first witness to the Resurrection, and the first apostle and evangelist: “I have seen the Lord,” she proclaimed. No joke.

It’s Mary’s courage and persistence in telling her story that gave others the encouragement to look for Jesus and, throughout the generations since, to tell their own story of his resurrection and of their resurrections from all kinds of deaths and dis-ease. I believe today in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ because of the testimony of all those witnesses, and I hope I, too, can be a faithful witness to the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior. The good news for all of us is that, whatever ills we may experience, Jesus has been there, too. Scriptures tells us he comes to us each in the darkened, troubled gardens of our lives and calls us to follow him into the light. He was born, lived, loved, laughed, carried out a ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing, was faithful in attendance at synagogue, prayed, wept, felt abandoned by friends and even by God the Father, was a refugee, a prisoner, was homeless, was betrayed by one of his closest friends, was beaten, mocked, scourged, and finally put to death on a cross and buried. An earlier version of the Apostle’s Creed reminds us that he descended into hell. All of this for us. For love. For the forgiveness of our sins and life beyond the grave for all.

And what must we do to receive this incredible gift? How much will it cost us? Nothing. There is nothing we can, could, would, or should do in order to be worthy of this amazing love. It’s all free. The Grace of God – FREE SHIPPING to our new and eternal home – is the Truth, then, now, and forevermore.

No joke.

Alleluia!