

Spring Does Not Come in a Day

“He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all Creation, for in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – All things were created through Him and for Him.”

Colossians 1:15-17

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Charlotte, North Carolina
Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009**

There is something fresh and new about spring in the Piedmont of North Carolina when it finally decides to come. You have to be patient though; spring is a little fickle around here. Peggy and I lived in SE Florida for 25 years. There, while prediction is easier, you have to keep close watch or Spring will creep back in before you know it. Around Charlotte nature seems to get a little confused: the daffodils and tulips pop up through the ground only to be rudely whacked upside their pretty heads time and time again when the frosts of winter will not go away.

In Western Pennsylvania where I grew up, got married, and pastored for twenty years, it was a far greater challenge: spring would come and go at will. More than once our Easter Sunday mornings were disasters: not the Easter message of course, but we had to shovel the snow and stoke up the furnace so those who made it to the church could get in and stay warm. I preached a sermon one year called “Snowfall on an Easter Morning,” relating how all of our considerable efforts of preparation the previous year were buried under twelve unpredicted inches of snow; and don’t you know, it snowed again that very Easter Morning?

Oh dear, as I was writing this sermon, an article appeared in the Charlotte Observer, almost as if reporter Steve Lytle had penned it as an introduction to my sermon. It read, “Cold Snap Surprises Spring!” It went on to say that Spring Break this year felt more like Christmas vacation time, even some snow in the mountains. Some years it gets you down when winter hold its ground and won’t let go. A friend told me it snowed in Atlanta, Georgia, last week. In Scotland it used to snow in May.

(By the way, speaking of preparations: think of all the care which went into this Holy Week at Sharon Church. We peered at the calendar sometime last fall, then we began planning in earnest with the Worship Committee just after Christmas. Then David Mayo laid out his musical plans. Sandra Breaux, the Choir and guest musicians all joined in. The pastors and office personnel even had to step it up a little. We planned the Lenten worship so that Christ would lead us to Jerusalem – and on towards Easter, stopping to examine the difficult and trying steps which Jesus took to get there. Six bulletins were prepared in seven days without a miscue, including that cherished honors and memorials list of lilies. Then the Ushers, Elders, Worship Ministry and others joined in. Lisa and her crew made the communion preparations, twice. Our sexton, Bill VanDeBogart, hoisted tables, lugged chairs and scoured all around to make the Church fit for so grand a celebration; and now punctually on time, we all are here. Praise the Lord!)

Now I know you did not come to Church this Easter morning to get the long range weather report, nor to hear my commendation of our Staff. But think about it for a minute, why did you come this morning? “Because it’s Easter,” one of our younger members answered enthusiastically when I asked him last year. Others said they came out of historic reverence to the Holiday. One son was honest and said his mother made him come; a timid husband whispered that too. A couple of folk were puzzled by my question. But more than a few told me that they came to hear some good news about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ Lord.

Well now, to make a transition to the sermon, I turn to my trusty Uncle Bill again, who quipped when I complained that frosty days had come again: “Ah, but Richie,” he said, “Spring does not come in a day.” Spring does not come in a day.

Now I hasten to say that Easter is far more than spring—far, far more than sap rising in the trees, or woods blossoming with flowers or the pleasant aromas replacing the olfactory desert of winter. What

we celebrate on Easter is a special gift of God, not a part of nature's renewal; it is entirely original and other-worldly. But even here (Are you listening?) I have come to learn that Easter does not come in a day.

The Easter story in the Scripture is a straightforward matter, although not without some mystery wandering around the edges. According to the Gospels, no one on earth witnessed the actual Resurrection. Matthew says a great earthquake accompanied the Angel's descent from heaven, and "for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men." (Matthew 28:3) But they didn't see it either. It happened sometime before the dawn, in the dark, while Jerusalem was still asleep. That very morning stories began to creep around the town that Christ had risen from his grave, just as he said he would. But marching in step was another story circulating that his Disciples had stolen the body and hidden it away. (Matthew 28:13)

No one on earth really saw it happen and as our need for evidence goes, and that is a pity. Wouldn't it be nice, I keep thinking, if only someone had taken the time to tell us how God did it? But then the Bible is not worried about our need for evidence. It is not a courtroom or a college debate society. It tells the simple story: they put him in the grave on Friday, and on Sunday Morning he was gone. Where did he go? Good question. What kind of heavenly resuscitation did the heavenly father use? We want it to fit into the other categories of things we know. The way it happened is exasperating. Something so critical, so central to the faith and yet, no one felt the need to explain what went on. Sometimes its spiritual power overwhelms me. At other times I fight to hold my ground against the questions in my soul.

But it was just like God to do it that way. It is the way he likes to do things: like in time out of mind, he brought the universe into being, which also is clothed in original mystery. If you had been standing there when the earth and universe were born, you would have said: "Wow, how did he do that?" First there was nothing then there was a universe. Or like a little later, he breathed his breath into a form that looked like a human but wasn't, and presto, whatever it was it became a living being. How on earth did he do that? We stand dumfounded. I don't know. God never feels the need to explain himself; he does not worry about dotting our "i's" or crossing our "t's." The ways of the Lord are beyond our comprehension. "Your thoughts are not my thoughts; neither are you ways my way," says the Lord. The same is true on Easter Morning.

Of course, we who seek to know it find it to be truer the further we look. The more we look, the more we see. But if you try to wrap it up in the words of everyday parlance, or try to find a catchy phrase or two to nail it down, you will be severely disappointed. One day I can explain it and the next day I am befuddled. Try as I will, it will not fall into step, or stay in line. I have worked a lifetime on it, and it has been as frustrating as waiting for the spring to come.

Spring does not come in a day. It took ages to fashion a living man and woman. Step back and ponder the eons it took to get us where we are today. The sea and the firmament are old beyond imagining. Light years separate us from the nearest star. The wonder is not the evil in the world; the wonder is that we have good. The wonder is not that life breaks down, but that it ever built up. The wonder is not that a vast explosion was the means God used to form the universe, but that the universe ever managed to blow up and out to form a living, loving human-being-person. The ultimate in wonder is not death but life. Like "the arrow point of evolution," as Father Teilhard called it, we need to be reminded how far human life has come, not how far we have to go.

In the enormous advances of our modern civilization, we need another kind of basic resurrection. On the centennial anniversary of New York State University, poet Alfred Noyes had the temerity to say, "The first need of modern education is to recover faith in the risen Christ." An educator said that, not a preacher. I think he struck a familiar chord with most of us at Sharon Church. But outside our company it might be that he has taken us to the very heart of our modern predicament: that Easter is missing from the world and hope is lacking, and the demise of the moment has become the measure of eternity. The decline of love, the rise of immorality, the search for peace, the preoccupation with trivial matters: all these and many more are partial explanations of how we hit the downward spiral of the times. But it is more, or less, than that.

"They have taken our Lord away," Mary told the man she saw standing by the tomb in the Garden, "and I do not know where they have laid him." But remember, it was the risen Jesus standing there beside her, although John adds that "she did not know that it was Jesus." Then, in her befuddlement the Risen Jesus comforted her with the simple calling of her name. "Mary," he said, and that was enough. When she heard her name, she recognized him. If you listen, he is calling your name and mine this morning too. "Hey Mary, Tom and John and Skip and Bill and Linda, Drew and Jennie, Joe and Buck and Andrew, Gene and Ray and Pete and Ken and Chuck and Peg and Eloise, Carolyn, Bill and Eleanor Mike and Randy, Susan, Sarah, Maddie, Wil and Ron and Cam and Cathie, Jim and Jane and Charles, Chip and Doug and Court and Rock and Anne and David, Pam and Eloise and Nancy, Kaye and Elgerine and Susan.

Take heart, open up your eyes, wipe away your tears and look at the one who is standing there. It is Jesus, alive and well, thank you. "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." Well Mary, let me tell you where he is; turn around and look. If you fill your eyes with tears you will never see him. Thoreau once cautioned: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake."

Some try to take the mystery and awe away from the tomb. Our first need is to recover the impetus for life when death was conquered. The choice is a personal one. And, if that it is not true, pray tell me, what on earth is going on? If the message of Easter is not true, then head for the hills my friends, and hide forevermore. If there is no surety against the machinations of calumny and hate and tragedies; if there is no retribution, no balance, no answers we can count on, then a madman is in charge of the universe, one who has no heart or hope or power, and I want no part of it or him at all!

If goodness does not ultimately triumph, if there is no trustworthy answer to why things go wrong, say why a lovely young mother and her child can be whisked away in a stupid accident, or why three policemen were shot to death answering a domestic call, or why some kook can enter a nursing home and shoot the residents, or worse shoot at college students; if the earth belongs to those who take their vengeance out with tommy guns and Uzzis; then let us abandon our faith, turn out the lights, catch as catch can until our catching days on earth are though. If all we have are hints and guesses only, if there is nothing we can count on to get us through the night, then out damned spot and cursed be the day that I was born to set it right!

You see, the Easter you need today is not only about how one magnificent man came back from the grave to the abundant life, it is about how God can set things right again there and here and everywhere. And ah, if it is true, if God is playing the game by his own rules, unknown to us in part, hidden in the haar, "through which you cannot see clearly, but you can see" as Donald Ballie wrote; if

he made the world and placed mankind upon it for a purpose, if it is true enough to bet your life on, as Pascal counseled, then we had better give ourselves up into the arms of Easter before we all go crazy.

In Lloyd Douglass' novel, The Robe, Marcellus said to Justus, "If you think Jesus is alive, pray tell me, where is he?" Justus shook his head and said, "I don't know where he is, but I do know he is alive." I don't know where he is, but I'm looking for him every moment of the day, all the time. Every time a door opens, at every turning of the road, on every street corner, at every traffic light, in every field I see and at the crest of every hill, in every teeming crowd down in the city centre, or out on the farmlands beyond Mint Hill. I don't know where he is, but I do know he's there somewhere, alive and here, and I am always on the lookout for him.

The whole world wants to know that if Christ is alive why doesn't he do something to assuage our pain within, to give us some direction to change the course of human life? The saints on earth are hurting, and laughter echoes in the hallways of the wicked. If Christ is alive, if he has this awesome power, then why on earth does he fail to use it? And as tears stream down our cheeks, the question comes, "O God, why? Where are you?"

Now and then, we feel his presence and know that he is near. In our better moments, we can cross the great divide and peek up over the garden wall to see our Risen Jesus standing there with Mary. I have my deep convictions, even if I told you that I tend to waver now and then. I don't know where he is either, but I believe he is in the people that we meet and in all the things we do. I know he lives inside a Christian's heart and soul. I know that he is here at Worship. I touch the center of his Good News every Easter morning. But, honestly, I don't know where he is or why he waits so long. Yet I don't sit down and cry all day that my search often ends in cul-de-sacs. I keep waiting and watching, proactive in my search, lest he come again and I miss him, as people often have.

That's what Dostoyevsky was getting at in his novel, The Brothers Karamazov. Remember? The Grand Inquisitor came to visit Jesus, who had returned to earth and performed several miracles, only to be arrested and put in prison because the people began to follow him, just like it happened in the Gospels. The Inquisitor told him he had misjudged humanity; they could never manage on their own with all that freedom. They need to be led around like sheep. In his case the Church authorities were the shepherds. "We no longer need you," the Inquisitor shouted to Jesus, "You must be done away with."

Upon which Jesus, who had been silent all the while, instead of answering or arguing, simply kissed him on the cheek. "The kiss glowed in his heart," Ivan comments, "but he could not surrender his ideas." But he released Jesus, instructing him never to return again. So Jesus left and still silent, walked on down the dark alleys of the city. He was there, come again to set things straight, and they all missed their golden opportunity; they let him walk away and gave up their second chance. If Christ should come again in our time, I would not want a one of you to miss him. And yet, I think we miss him every day as we hurry along our chosen lives.

Oh, it takes a long, long time. Spring does not come in a day. The earth is unbelievably old; mankind was impossibly long in coming; the world God wants is not yet here. Since Eden is gone, and heaven has not come, we live on, as Paul Tillich named it: "between the times."

Adam and Eve's disobedience and refusal to listen to the Lord God was the identified start of it. It began in Eden with an original disobedience which had never been erased. The first man Adam got us all off to a horrid start and drove us out of the presence of God. Then it got worse in the desert and in the time of the Judges, the Kings and the Prophets. Samson, Josiah, Saul, David and Solomon were as strong, or as weak, as you and I. A glance at the 12 Disciples reveals a similar pattern in people all across our land, and in our churches, too. The first man started it. But, the second First man Jesus Christ stopped it; he put us back together with each other and together with God again. The atonement really is at-one-ment!

It takes a long, long time for spring to come and stay in matters of human dignity. Yet I sense a movement there, don't you? Perhaps I am just imagining it. But, I see people rising up again after life has knocked them down. That takes a long, long time. As my old friend Bill once said, "When I think how far we have yet to go, I get discouraged. But when I think how far we've come, I get the courage to go on."

Now and then I see a weakening in the web of human hatred. I see a thinning of the dark clouds behind which the beauty of the heavens dwells. I see green buds peeking out on naked branches where leaves were never seen before. I notice bigger chinks in the armor of injustice. I see life blossoming in some of the driest deserts of the world. Isaiah says that the dry lands shall rejoice and blossom when the Living Water comes. I see miracles in medical and surgical treatments almost every day. But I also see them in the courage of God's people and in the way we try to treat each other. Prompted by the love of Christ and powered by his Resurrection morning, I see people more concerned with human rights. I watch them becoming more concerned with the future of the earth. I find them doing more to save their homeland Earth. I see springtime coming closer. When I think how far we have come, I get the courage to go on.

Sometimes it is difficult to see it, and harder to remember it when things keep going wrong. No preacher I know is protected from feelings of despair. Even Mother Teresa bemoaned before her death how she always had to live with doubts and often felt far away from God.

We keep saying that good triumphs over evil, and that God is working out His purpose, but saying is not believing, and in neither case does it make it all come true. I have my moments. A man once came to tell me that the mother of his children had died that morning. "What kind of God is this?" he asked me. "Our prayers did not help at all. I believe in Christ, and I prayed for her healing, but she died anyway. Now, I drink myself to sleep at night."

They say that the third day will always come, but where is it in the Middle East? Or in Afghanistan? Or in the drug trafficking on the Mexican border? Or in the violent use of other people, even young girls and children? Will peace ever come in race relations, or in the broken lives and homes around us? Others are asking when it will come to ease the problems of an aching heart, or my life, or marriage, or my parenthood, or in my search to find a job, or in the ghettos of our Cities? Oh, it takes a long, long time. If life has forced you down those sad and scary paths, I invite you to take your full share of Easter Joy with you when you leave today.

The words in Colossians we chose as a Biblical text for this sermon belong right here. St. Paul was addressing those who wrestled with the ultimate meaning of life, the question of how the origin of the universe was connected to the truth of Christ. Paul writes: "He is the image of the invisible God, the

first-born of all creation; for in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through Him and for Him.” That’s a mouthful I know. Think of what it means if you understand what Paul was saying.

What Paul meant is that the universe, with all its glories and endless movement, reflects the meaning and the purpose God intended the day the world was made. The universe is not self-contained. It does not contain God within it, but rather God contains it within himself; his providence controls it. The potential for every moment and movement was in the mind of God on Creation Day. John says that Jesus was there at the beginning of creation: “All things were created by him and for him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” (John 1:2-3) St. Paul concurs wholeheartedly here in Colossians. Christ is the first born of all creation. The universe belongs to Jesus Christ and he is willing to share a part of it with us. It does not belong to the principalities and thrones and powers of the earth! No, never, ever!

All things were created for that first Easter morning. It was the moment mankind had waited for, when the last enemy—death—would be defeated. It was the eternal moment; and it is the moment you have been waiting for. But curiously, mysteriously, it is a moment we keep running away from, or maybe rather, that we keep chasing it away. For it asks for the one thing we are so reluctant to surrender: our own control of things, our need to march along our chosen paths. It asks for our surrender to the Christ who lived and died and was raised again for you and me. “There are two great days in your life, two irreplaceable and eternally meaningful days,” wrote Professor William Barclay. “There is the day when you are born, and then there is the day when you discover why.” I trust you have your why.

There was a cross planted in the heart of God long before one was planted on Calvary hill outside Jerusalem. Theologian Emil Bruner once stated that the atonement cannot be confined to a single occurrence 2000 years ago: it must be remembered every day in the lives we choose to live. We need to have a re-creation every time Easter comes, and every moment is potentially an Easter moment.

Henrik Isben, the famous Norwegian playwright, in the most famous of his Dramas, Emperor and the Galilean, told the story of the Emperor Julian and his struggle with the Christian faith. The Emperor dreamed of a world where Jesus’ name would be eliminated. He wanted all the commotion caused by Christianity to go away. One night Julian dreamed of a world in which his wish had been granted. The name of Jesus had been removed, just as some critics are trying to accomplish in America. The Emperor stood crowned with glory, grateful that this weak and suffering Christ had been erased from time, just as he knew He would.

But later, as he stood on the top of the hill, he spied a slow procession of people coming up behind him from way down from the bottom—soldiers, judges, priests and executioners—and in the middle of them, tired, stooped, and stumbling on, was the one he called “that crazy Galilean,” carrying a cross on his shoulder. The Emperor Julian demanded to know what was going on, since, in his dream at least, Jesus had been eliminated from the earth. “Who is this?” he demanded. “What is this procession I see coming up the hill?” And the answer came back: “We are a procession up to Golgotha to cure the sins of the world,” the Galilean was speaking, “back again to save the world from sin.” He keeps coming back again. He will never go away, ever.

Julian missed it. You could miss it, too. You can wander up to the top of any homemade hill you have; you can try to run away from yourself, but everywhere you go, every time you turn around, in the height of your successes and in all the moments of your failures, and in the hour of your departure, at the moment of your deepest worry, you will see that proud procession going up the Via Dolorosa, and the same Galilean will be staring at you, carrying the cross on his shoulder.

A little girl in Vermont awakened one early spring day. The snow was gone, the grass was green again, a touch of color was at the edge of the garden and bright yellow forsythia was blooming outside her window. She bounded into her grandparents' room saying, "Wake up, everybody, wake up! The world is beginning again!"

I offer that little closing story as a precious and personal gift. Spring has sprung, brought to you not so much by the location of the spinning earth in its orbit, but rather arriving from within the longing of your soul, from the little voice that urges you to step into the realm where logic does not matter quite so much, to feast on the power and peace of Resurrection morning.

It is time to catch it now, for spring goes by as quickly as it comes. Annie Dilliard wrote in Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek that one spring she blinked her eyes and it was gone, on down the Creek. Edwin Way Teale, in Wandering Through Spring taught us that spring moves north from the Everglades down in Florida up to Bangor, Maine, at the astonishing rate of 13 miles per day. It might take more than a blink to miss it; but honestly one year I was so busy working Holy Week and Easter, that I, too, blinked my eyes and I missed the arrival of the Spring. It goes back and forth, the cold of winter changing places with the rebirth of spring. Catch it while you can, and hold on to it. The earth withers, the flowers fade, but the Risen Christ is here, for now and forever more. Amen.