

Easter Sunrise homily....

I love the Easter stories, and have always believed them to be so strange, that you couldn't make this stuff up. That would be assuming way too much creativity on the part of the early church! In fact, truth is often stranger than fiction...

I love the detail in our gospel text that Mary supposed Jesus to be the gardener, as here we are in the Memorial Garden where many of us have laid loved ones to rest. I think it's more than poetic that there is this arc that spans the whole of Scripture from Genesis to Easter narrative to the Revelation of John where the Garden is the primary context for God's activity. In Genesis of course it is all about the new creation and the Garden is the way it's supposed to be, a utopia for all living things and God's crowning glory, Adam and Eve...

And then it is in a garden that first early Easter morning where Mary meets the crucified-Risen Lord, and where a new heaven and new earth begins with God raising Jesus from the dead. Jesus as Gardener is an allusion perhaps to how God wants to grow us up and to bear fruit in and through us... It's finally in the book of Revelation where the City of God has a garden in the middle of it, where there is a river running through it and the trees' leaves will bring healing to the nations. It's fantastic, really. Jesus there is sovereign... It's a vision of the consummated, the completed and fully restored new heaven and new earth...

Part of the work of the Gardener God is restoring all who ever lived, and I like to remind those of us in the Protestant tradition that there are traditions worth considering. The Orthodox believe in what is known as the Harrowing of Hell. Have you ever wondered what was going on during silent Saturday? There's Maundy Thursday. There's Good Friday. And there's Easter Sunday. But what about Saturday?

The harrowing of hell happens on Saturday...

The tradition is likely an expansion of New Testament texts like I Peter 4:6, which says “the good news was proclaimed to the dead” by Christ. Or, in Ephesians 4:9, we read that “Christ descended into the lower parts of the earth.” It’s also part of the Creed when we confess that “he descended into hell, and on the third day he rose again from the dead...” I’ve always loved that rather raw passage, as it means to me that there is no where we can escape the saving love of God.

God will do anything and go anywhere to redeem us and all creation! And as Peter says in our text from Acts, God shows no partiality. When he says, in every nation, that’s a revolutionary thought for a first century Jew. The word here for “nation” is “ethnos,” and is the root for our word ethnic... It was the first hint that Jesus followers knew that God’s redemptive was universal in scope. The good news of God’s grace and mercy in Christ is for everyone. No exceptions. That’s the good news.

It's fascinating to me that the early church taught that Christ, true to form, helped others to experience resurrection new life before he actually experienced it himself. So, the harrowing of hell literally means the plowing or breaking up of hell by Christ. He redeems those souls who had no way out. Indeed, God has done for us that which we could not do for ourselves. This is good news!

I know it’s an obscure teaching, but today is the day to reflect on the mystery of new life for all of creation, past, present and future, and the resurrection new life that Christ has realized for all of creation. Everyone is included. It is God’s desire and in God’s power to redeem all things and at Easter we celebrate that the new heaven and new earth has begun in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s all so wonderful strange... but then, wouldn’t you expect that, as truth is stranger than fiction?

Now, listen, then to a much better preacher than I, St. John Chryostom reflect on this great mystery, in his Easter homily from the 4th century!

St. John Chrysostom Easter Homily (4th century)

Let all the pious and all lovers of God rejoice in the splendor of this feast; let the wise servants blissfully enter into the joy of their Lord; let those who have borne the burden of Lent now receive their pay, and those who have toiled since the first hour, let them now receive their due reward; let any who came after the third hour be grateful to join in the feast, and those who may have come after the sixth, let them not be afraid of being too late; for the Lord is gracious and He receives the last even as the first. God gives rest to those who come on the eleventh hour as well as to those who have toiled since the first: yes, God has pity on the last and God serves the first; the Lord rewards the one and praises the effort.

Come you all: enter into the joy of your Lord. You the first and you the last, receive alike your reward; you rich and you poor, dance together; you sober and you weaklings, celebrate the day; you who have kept the fast and you who have not, rejoice today. The table is richly loaded: enjoy its royal banquet. The calf is a fatted one: let no one go away hungry. All of you enjoy the banquet of faith; all of you receive the riches of his goodness. Let no one grieve over his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed; let no one weep over his sins, for pardon has shone from the grave; let no one fear death, for the death of our Savior has set us free: Christ has destroyed it by enduring it, He has despoiled Hades by going down into its kingdom, He has angered it by allowing it to taste of his flesh.

When Isaias foresaw all this, he cried out: "O Hades, you have been angered by encountering Him in the nether world." Hades is angered because frustrated, it is angered because it has been mocked, it is angered because it has been destroyed, it is angered because it has been reduced to naught, it is angered because it is now captive. It seized a body, and, lo! it encountered heaven; it seized the visible and was overcome by the invisible.

O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? Christ is risen and you are abolished. Christ is risen and the demons are cast down. Christ is risen and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen and life is freed. Christ is risen and the tomb is emptied of the dead: for Christ, being risen from the dead, has become the Leader and Reviver of those who had fallen asleep. To Him be glory and power for ever and ever.

Amen.