

Easter Sunday

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Resurrection Life

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People aren't the only ones who die. Death comes to relationships, projects, businesses, and even churches. A friend of mine who was in seminary with me experienced this reality very deeply when in 2008, a year after he was ordained a priest, he was assigned to a tiny congregation in Smyrna, Tennessee called All Saints Episcopal Church. All Saints had seen better days. In 2006 the former rector of All Saints had left the Episcopal Church for a more conservative expression of Anglicanism and had taken the majority of the congregation with him. The remaining members, numbering only about 20, were unable to pledge enough money to pay the bills, including the mortgage. When my friend the Rev. Michael Spurlock and his family arrived at All Saints, he did so with the bishop's instructions to help the parish close. Like Mary Magdalene in today's Gospel, he arrived at a parish already seen as dead and buried in a tomb. He was instructed to give it the loving care needed to help the parishioners accept their situation with grace.

My friend helped the parish put their building and the 22 acres of former farm land the building is located on for sale. He helped them have the painful conversations about what to do with their sacred vessels, the chalice and paten, the linens, the vestments, the altar. These could be donated to other parishes where there the Holy Spirit is Present and active. It was a dark time, my friend said it was like they were in a pit. Or a tomb. There was no life there. Only sadness and loss.

But, today is Easter Sunday, so you already know I am not going to tell you about a death without resurrection. As writer, minister and speaker John Ortberg has written, God does some of God's best work in tombs. But how Resurrection Life manifested itself in my friend's parish might be a surprise to you. Maybe as surprising as the emptiness of the tomb to Mary and the other disciples early that morning.

As my friend was deeply engaged in the ministry of closing a parish, a group of refugees from Myanmar (the country formerly known as Burma) came to All Saints. These refugees were from the Karen province of Myanmar, and before coming to America had been in a refugee camp, as they had been forced out their country by its military. The refugees had attended the Anglican Church in Myanmar, and since the Episcopal Church is part of the Anglican Communion, the bishop of Myanmar encouraged the refugees to attend All Saints.

Fr. Spurlock remembers when the refugees came the congregation wasn't prepared to help them; they needed jobs, places to live, furniture, clothing, food. This was a burden to parish that couldn't pay its bills. My friend said it would have been

easy for the parish to turn the refugees away, they were grieving and financially struggling themselves. Their building and land was up for sale. They were closing. There was no life there. There were in a pit, a tomb. But God does some of God's best work in places like that. And my friend's parish opened their hearts and lives to the Myanmar refugees.

It wasn't long before one refugee asked my friend if they could plant crops on some of the church's land, as it was perfect for farming, and many of the refugees had been farmers before they were forced to leave their country. At first my friend said no, because the land was for sale and he feared it would be sold before the refugees could harvest their crops. But one day, while walking on the grounds, praying about what was next for All Saints Episcopal Church, my friend heard God answer that prayer with the words: "I gave that land for a reason." And he knew what God meant.

A local dairy farmer offered to plow the land for the refugees, and the day he arrived to do so found about 60 refugees waiting to help. The parishioners of All Saints joined the refugees in planting and tending and harvesting the produce. The first year was an incredible success, harvesting 20,000 pounds of produce. Some was used by refugees, some sold, some donated to food pantries. The refugees were given a percentage of the sales of the produce as well as a percentage of the food itself. And guess what; the sales of the produce helped turn the parish's finances around. Parishioners said that it was by welcoming and working with the refugees that together, with God's grace, the church was saved.

Today All Saints Episcopal Church in Smyrna, Tennessee is a beautiful expression of Resurrection Life that was started early that morning when a weeping Mary and breathless disciples discovered a tomb empty of Jesus' body was really a tomb full of hope, hope because death is not the power we have believed it to be. In addition to the farm, All Saints offers classes to the refugees that teach English as a second language and life skills like driving. Two services are offered at All Saints, both Episcopal services, one in English and one in the language of the refugees. The sign in front of All Saints no longer says, "For Sale"; instead it names the parish and its services in the two languages of its lively parishioners who no longer worry about survival but are focused on the mission they were called to, making it a sign of the incredible truth of Resurrection Life.

Too often it seems to me that we can mistake the amazing account of Jesus' resurrection to mean that when a person dies, they will go to heaven. And while I am not going to refute that, and it is part of our belief as Christians, I feel that stopping there is to miss the point of the resurrection and the truly great and glorious hope it

embodies. Resurrection isn't just about life after death, it is what scholar and retired bishop N. T. Wright calls life *after* life after death.

This is what the author of John's Gospel may have trying to tell us when Mary Magdalene, left alone at the tomb after Peter and the other disciple ran off again, encounters the Risen Jesus. I don't think the author of John was trying to be cute or clever or was trying to make Mary seem hysterical when she mistook the Risen Jesus for the gardener when he asked her why she was crying. There are lots of theories about why Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener. One theory is Jesus had risen and left his burial clothes in the tomb which meant he was naked, so he needed something to wear, and wandered around until he found the gardener's clothing and took them and put them on. I'm not sure how I feel about the first act of the Risen Christ is stealing someone else's clothes. Maybe.

But maybe there is another reason the author of John put in that little detail about mistaking Jesus for a gardener. Gardeners know a lot about new life. They are planters of seeds and bulbs. Gardeners have faith that the dead looking bulbs they bury in the earth will die, and begin to grow into something new and beautiful, like our Sunday school children showed us when they planted daffodil bulbs this past fall and we all enjoyed their bright, cheery, beautiful and fragrant yellow flowers this spring. In fact, those brave daffodils bloomed when the days had been gray and cold, and those bold yellow blooms really lifted my spirits and the spirits of many others who saw them every day.

Gardeners also understand that sometimes plants need to be pruned or pulled back so they can grow. Sometimes gardeners even have to remove things that are dead to make room for what is growing beneath. When we think about it, it seems quite appropriate that the Risen Jesus is mistaken for a gardener when we understand Resurrection Life looks like my friend's parish that had to die to its worry for survival and live into the mission God was calling it to be, life that came from the unexpected arrival of refugees from Myanmar. Resurrection life isn't just going to heaven when we die, it is the Kingdom of Heaven slowly being made real here on this earth, and Jesus is the first part of that work, the planting of the seeds and bulbs of new life that spring up and burst forth in bloom in ways that we sometimes can miss, but are real just the same. Which is what my friend, his parishioners, and the refugees from Myanmar experienced.

This is the work the Risen Christ calls us all to join him in; the reconciling work of cultivating new life that is God's Kingdom, the way God has always dreamed would be what this world would be like. Isn't that what God called the first people to do in the first Garden back in the beginning, cultivating life?

Church of the Good Shepherd, there are many ways you have engaged in Resurrection Life as a parish and as individuals, too many for me to list in this sermon today. Some you are still doing, some have been pruned, others are in the past. Perhaps the message for us this Easter Sunday is that Resurrection life is a lot like gardening in that it keeps going, it isn't ever all done at one time, and that challenges or situations that feel like a pit or a tomb are still where God can do some of God's very best work, work we are called to participate in. That work may not look like what it did for my friend's parish in Tennessee, but let's keep our eyes open for what the holy gardener, the Risen Christ, might be up to.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!