

*“Now Comes the Good Part”*

*Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; I Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18*

*Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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“The Lord is Risen!” “He is risen, indeed!”

This ancient antiphon is the “good part” Kent Miller tells, as his family watched a movie of Jesus’ life. Their six year old daughter was deeply moved at Jesus’ crucifixion and death. Tears ran down her cheeks as they took Jesus from the cross and laid him in a borrowed tomb. Then, suddenly, despite these tragic events, a big smile broke out on her face. She quivered, bounced up and down said with great anticipation, “Now comes the good part!”

Now comes the good part! He is risen, indeed!

Easter declares that Christ is alive. Because he lives we can live abundantly here and with the promise of life eternal. Do we claim this truth for ourselves? If we struggle with this claim—as nearly all do somewhere along the journey—the community of faith, the church, can claim it for us.

Kevin, a 35 year friend, and I always speak at Easter. Kevin is a Methodist lay speaker in Texas but originally from Queens. He always reminds me, “It’s a simple story, Brian. Don’t make it complicated.” So it is. Christ is alive. Now comes the good part.

It is not the story’s simplicity but our complexity that confounds us. Americans, especially Protestants, don’t do so well with mystery. But what is resurrection if not a mystery: a body that disappears, only to reappear; recognized by some but not by others? Those who like iron-clad certainty of the “Jesus said it, I believe it, that settles it” variety will find it hard to respond to genuine questions in search of genuine faith.

21<sup>st</sup> century skepticism? No. Look again at the Gospel: three principal characters, three different responses. Mary finds the

tomb open and immediately tells Peter and the “beloved disciple,” John himself. John wins the footrace to the tomb but inexplicably stops short and Peter enters first, taking in the details of the scene. John then goes inside, sees and believes. Yet neither understands and both return home.

Mary, lingering, peers in as well. She sees grave clothes, and angels! They ask why she is crying and, before the echo of her answer fades away, another voice asks her “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Not by sight but by sound, the sound of him calling her name, she recognizes the voice is not the gardener but the Risen Christ!

What a marvelous picture of the varied responses God welcomes to this holy mystery. Praise God! We do not all hear or see the same. Some peer cautiously from the edges. Some charge in boldly, grabbing evidence, sizing things up. Others stand still, questions and griefs closely held, before we move inside. We must be patient—with ourselves when we struggle, with others when they do not believe as we do—that such different responses to resurrection are Biblical and date to the earliest days of our faith.

And yet the signs, sights, sounds and stories point us to the truth that “now comes the good part.” Our wide-ranging responses do not change the simplicity of the story: Christ’s victory over death gives us the extraordinary promise of resurrection.

Who dares preach this mystery without recalling that this means new life, here and now? Ohio Senator Rob Portman’s recent decision support gay marriage made national news. What was not reported until this past Monday in the “Yale Daily News” was that his decision rested significantly on his son Will’s coming out. Whether Will Portman describes this as a resurrection moment I do not know. I do know that whenever we claim who we are as God made us it is a resurrection moment.

And who dares preach the resurrection without remembering those who have died? You know them; they are your dear ones. Some passed tragically, life ended far too soon. The children of Sandy Hook, yes; but others in our own church with loved ones dying well before their time as we humans measure such things. Others, after lives long and well-lived. Still others, like my mother this past fall, ending the race with a struggle. The resurrection promise is today as urgent as ever. Will we claim it as “the good part” that promises life beyond the death and decay that surrounds us, or not? Will we claim it as “the good part” that offers us new life, here and now, in the midst of the living death that some of us call life, or not? St. Paul places our answer in sharp focus in the first verse of today’s Epistle: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Here I might be accused of “leading the witness.” How does one answer, “Reverend, I’m still not sure?” Guess what: nearly all of us have! That is why we need the church! With all of its imperfections and frailties—and they are many, because the church is made up of people—it is still the place that enables us to live out our faith when our own resolve will not. Whatever loss we grieve—death, divorce, employment, betrayal among many—we are sustained by personal faith and by corporate faith.

There are times when we cannot claim the resurrection promise. Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Augustinian monk whose reforms launched the Protestant Reformation, went through such a dark night of the soul at the death of his daughter, Magdalena. Though Luther knew his beloved daughter was safe in God’s keeping, he told his pastor that his grief was so deep that his faith did not send away all the sadness and fear.

Luther’s wise pastor listened. He neither scolded Luther for lack of faith nor exhorted him to have more faith. Instead, he said simply, “Until such a time as you take hope again, we (the church) will hope and trust for you.”

What hope-filled promise! Our response is within God's gentle leading; and we have the church when we cannot respond. Either way the mystery of resurrection is also reality. Jesus comes, as the children like to say in "Hide and Seek," "ready or not!" In the computer room of my parents' home there is a print-out my mother made before her illness. As many know, she was legally blind from macular degeneration the last 15 years of her life. The print out quotes II Corinthians 5:7: "We walk by faith and not by sight." So Jesus comes to us resurrected—not resuscitated—in a body perceived not by sight but by faith, an anticipating faith that trusts "now comes the good part."

He comes, to name for each of us that death is defeated.

He comes, bringing life, free and full!

He comes, bringing hope for despairing hearts like ours!

He comes, bringing healing for the bruised and broken!

He comes, bringing joy unfettered by circumstance.

He comes, bringing promise for new beginnings.

He comes, bringing us strength in weakness.

He comes, bringing power against temptation.

He comes, bringing new tomorrow's to answer old yesterdays.

He comes, bringing redemption from sin.

He comes, bringing salvation from destruction.

He comes, he comes, he comes us us, for you and for me, not only long ago but today, today, today.

Let us say "Yes!" today! With whatever we bring to him at this moment, let us know "now comes the good part!"

The Lord is Risen! He is Risen, indeed!