



An Easter Message, 2022, delivered at All Saints Anglican Church, Fountain Valley, California by The Rt. Rev. Owen R. Williams

The Good Friday service is the end of Holy Week. It is the end of Lent.

The whole season of Lent is brought to a single point in time, Jesus of Nazareth dies on the Cross. The service ends abruptly, the altar bare, the lights are turned out. The door is locked.

What happens next is the same as ever. The corpse taken down from the instrument of death and, by all appearances, disposed of -- to return to whence it came, "Ashes to Ashes... Dust to Dust."

For the Apostles and the women who followed Jesus it is a time of grief and sorrow... and fear. All their visions of glory or delusions of grandeur were crushed. It was the Sabbath and by Levitical Law there was nothing more that could be done.

On the first day of the week, even before dawn, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the mother of James, left the safety of their hideout, presumably in the upper room and went to do what burial rituals were expected. Then, the earth quaked, as is recorded in St. Matthew's telling of the event. The stone had been rolled away and the tomb empty.

And the Race was on!

Mary Magdalene then raced {τρεχει} to relay the Good News to Peter and John. Can you picture two men running... a foot race to a graveyard? Why run, unless there was some urgency. The Sepulcher was open -- the grave, empty!

In the Gospel appointed for today, "So they raced {ετρεχον}, both together, and the other disciple [John] did outrun Peter."

What they found, has shaken the world. The tomb's emptiness was proof that man's ancient enemy, death, been destroyed. Peter and John ran to the tomb because they had an inkling that the battle had been won.

They didn't know "how," John's Gospel is quick to admit. They were caught up in what is, for you and me, an emotion of inexpressible thanksgiving for victory.

So they ran. Grown men. Their race to a grave has now established a pattern of joy and action. The message -- the Good News -- has gripped the followers of Jesus, the Christ, even to this day.

Can you remember the first time you "got the message" that the tomb was empty?

Growing up, my family celebrated Easter in a typical way, a hunt for chocolate bunnies, colored hard-boiled eggs and Peeps.

There was an odd Easter tradition from my grandmother. On Easter morning, my sisters and I would wake up and find a newspaper rolled up with a rubber band, placed on our beds at the foot. She never disclosed to me [that I remember] what it was about. It wasn't until years later that I put it together... It was a symbolic sign that there was news -- The Good News -- as if we would be expecting there to be a headline...

"Extra! Extra! Read all about it, Jesus Christ Has Risen From the Dead!"

Then we would get dressed in our “Easter Best” and go to church.

Being brought up in The Rectory, there was other privileges. When I was five years old, I was allowed to be boat boy for Easter Midnight Mass. I fell asleep during the sermon. Often, after Church I was allowed to sit in, as clergy talked, sometimes argue, about theological matters.

But, I had no feeling or emotions about what I was learning by osmosis.

It wasn't until, the early “70's, a gentleman at the parish volunteered to provide a type of Sunday School for us teenagers. I remember picking up our folding chairs from the Parish Hall and going out to the patio or lawn while the Sermon was being preached.

This was the weirdest Sunday School I was ever a part of. We were all Confirmed – and supposedly knew what was “necessary for salvation.” This was different, advanced, more than soaking up information.

The teacher led us through the “Creed,” among other things. Throughout the fall and winter, we discussed, we shared our thoughts, and sometimes we were corrected, sometimes we corrected each other. I also learned that there was such a thing as a stupid question. There were other aspects of Christianity, where we were asked to engage, to talk. But the oddest question asked... “How do you *feel* about what we're discussing?”

I had thought... I had been taught... the study theology is an intellectual exercise. St. Thomas Aquinas called “theology” the “Queen of Science.”

But that only resulted in putting God into a box, along with Philosophy and Mathematics.

A true faith is one that is experienced not only with the mind, but with the body and the spirit, the totality of how God made us. To know God, you could build a picture; ceremony, sounds and music, with smells (incense) and bells, the touch of holding a Prayer Book or kneeling, standing and sitting.

That Easter, fifty-some years ago, as I got to church, someone called out to me, “He is Risen” – and, instead of a perfunctory reply, I shouted, “He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!” --- and I *meant* it. I got the message.

I still feel the joy and excitement I had that particular Sunday. What had started out as mental gymnastics had turned into a race to see “The Empty Tomb.”

The “Race to the Tomb” can change your world, now, if it hasn't already.

Your hearing of the words and the actions of the Easter Gospel doesn't mean “Hearing” as a series of words. It means “*Getting*” the Message.

Perhaps this is not the time for you to get caught up with the joy of Victory over Death.

Or perhaps it may be, years later, *you* will describe to others, Easter 2022 -- when the Bishop told the story that he, along with a group of know-it-all teenagers, were led to understand the “Foot Race that changed the world.”

So, Come, in your imagination, to the empty tomb. Run, race with me to the sepulcher.

Look! The linen winding sheet where the Body lay.

Look! The napkin which covered Christ's face, where his head lay.

He is Risen! Your breath is short. Your heart is pounding. You have just shared in “The Foot Race that changed the world!”

You can stand outside, like John, and marvel. But you can also come in. Jesus’ Church welcomes, but you must stoop down to get inside. It’s called kneeling or genuflecting, or bowing down, and some people hate to bow down to anyone, it seems so humiliating.

But isn’t that the point. Humiliation “causes a painful loss of pride, self-respect, or dignity.” Do we feel humility or humiliation when we approach the Divine?

There is a Church in Estes Park, Colorado... St. Francis Anglican Church. Several years ago, at a meeting of Anglican Bishops, before a special service, all the bishops dressed in their copes and miters. One glitch -- to get from the vesting area to the front doors of the Church, you had to go outside, along a path which went under a low hanging pine bough.

With all these Bishops having to bow so low, the tree was aptly named the “The Humility Tree.”

The central act in our Sunday service is to receive Christ’s Body and Blood. It is an act of great humility that we kneel, if we can, to be spiritually fed for our great benefit, to be strengthened, body and soul to do God’s work in the world.

It is a shame that some churches have mandated that kneelers be removed, or never installed, their flock must line up and receive Holy Communion, standing. Others might have you sit in your theater seat and wait for the signal to pop the top of your “Kingdom Pre-filled Communion Cups®... your grape juice and wafer sealed into a convenient, single-serving container.”

Easter isn’t fully grasped until you stoop down and humble yourself even as Jesus humbled Himself. Holy Communion is not received, unless we humbly present ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, Holy and living Sacrifice unto God.

We kneel in submission to God’s will, in order to serve and please him.

As a closing analogy – Try to see yourself as runners at the starting block, kneeling in submission, but ready for the signal to begin the Race. Once begun it must be run, body mind and spirit. The Race, however is not the type of running around a track. More accurately it is steeple chase, not going from one Church to another but with our eyes on Christ, and the finish line is Heaven.

A Blessed Eastertide,



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Owen R. Williams". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "O".

The Right Reverend Owen R. Williams
The Diocese of the West
Anglican Church in America