

EASTER SUNDAY – 2008
“Everything is New!”

This is a story we never tire of hearing. Like the little child at bedtime who says, *“Read it again, daddy,”* We want to hear it again, too. We know all the details, but that doesn’t matter. The words, *“He is not here,”* still carry the element of surprise. With the women, we wonder about the empty tomb. *“Where is he? What happened to his body?”* And then the answer, the oh so familiar answer, still causes tingles to go up and down our spines. *“He has been raised from the dead and now goes ahead of you to Galilee where you will see him!”* And thus begins the dawning of a new age. Jesus promises to go ahead of the disciples to Galilee, not just to reconcile with them, but also to launch them on their mission to the world.

What are familiar details to us in the story of the empty tomb were far more than just simple details to the Jewish people in Jesus’ time. The earthquake and the dazzling angel are powerful signs the Jewish people expected to see when the end of the world came. St. Matthew plays off this expectation. He sees Jesus’ death and resurrection as that moment in history when the curtain fell on the old world. And the stone rolled back from the tomb served as the doorway to usher in a whole new age, the final age of history; everything is new!

Most often when we hear the story of the empty tomb, we think of it’s implications in terms of ourselves. The definition of death is changed forever. When we die, we don’t face annihilation but a transformation into a whole new way of being. Jesus opens for us the doors to everlasting life.

This is all good. This is all true. But such an individualistic, self absorbed view of the implications of the empty tomb would hardly seem to qualify it for the beginning a whole new age. I can’t just think of the

resurrection of Jesus in terms of what it means only for me. I, we, must think in terms of what it means for the whole of humanity. It has serious implications as to how the people of this earth could live day to day in this world, even now. Only a global perspective would be worthy of the claim that a whole new age began with Jesus' resurrection. It gives a whole new world view.

Since Galilee was the crossroads of the trade routes, to have the risen Jesus meet the disciples there was for St. Matthew a way of saying that the disciples would discover Jesus present with them as they themselves took up his mission. Now this is critical. The message the apostles taught was not just the message that Jesus taught. What was different about their teaching was that the Jesus they taught had risen from the dead and continued to be with them. They taught that Jesus lives! That he continues to empower, to guide and to bless them from within their own hearts.

As Kenneth Woodward says in a wonderful article about Jesus in NEWSWEEK several years ago, *“Like a supernova, the initial impact of Christianity on the ancient Greco-Roman world produced shock waves that continued to register long after the Roman Empire disappeared.”* And those shock waves came from the awareness that Jesus overcame death. That he is alive! And those shock waves have shaped our culture, our attitudes and our actions more than we may realize.

Christianity bequeathed to Western culture a God who revealed what God is like in the person of Jesus, and who continues to redeem the world by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Risen Jesus continues to form and shape our world through his followers, through the Church. Woodward gives many examples. During the time of plague, Christians nursed the sick back to health, the sick that the Romans would have thrown out into the street to

die. Why? Because they weren't afraid to die. Suffering for the sake of others became something noble, and forgiveness of enemies showed an option to violence and even war. Caring for the weak and helpless became the virtuous thing to do. In the new age, the risen Jesus continues to touch our world because his Spirit empowers his followers.

The poor have as much dignity as anyone, as shown by the Dorothy Day's and the Mother Teresa's of history. Because of Jesus, an individual person's worth was honored, regardless of social status. Women were no longer seen as inherently inferior to men. In fact, Christianity's appeal to women is why it grew so rapidly. In ancient Rome, infanticide was common. Baby girls were especially vulnerable. The power of the risen Jesus changed that. Even a man who was a peacemaker could be as masculine as a warrior. We are beginning to see the values of non-violence as never before. Civil law was set up to protect the powerless from the powerful. Missionaries brought literacy and modern medicine to those whom the wealthy would consider unworthy.

While the church got off track many times in her history, Jesus always seemed to find a way to bring us back. And there have always been those who denied the resurrection. But, as Woodward says, "*By any secular standard, Jesus is the dominant figure of Western culture.*" While many want to change that today, it is still true. Why? Because his followers lived in his spirit.

And to think all of this got started before the four Gospels or the letters of St. Paul were even written; before the defined dogmas of the Trinity or incarnation; before there was a centralized magisterium in Rome. While the scriptures, defined dogmas and the magisterium are all vitally important to the church, they are not what give it credibility. They are not

what make the message of Jesus believable in our world today. The message of Jesus is believable because it is carried in the hearts of men and women and young people who believe that Jesus lives and who have formed their lives around that truth; men and women who are not afraid to give themselves to others in love so those others can live.

Tonight is the dawning of a whole new day for 14 people to be born to new life in Christ. They will rise from the waters of baptism to join us in our efforts to make the life, the love of Jesus real in our world today, a world still terribly in need of knowing that life is stronger than death, good is stronger than evil and that hope is stronger than despair. And, lest we lose heart, we renew our baptismal promises for the very same reasons. May the Eucharist we then celebrate continue the transformation of our hearts.