

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Sermon 769

Third Sunday of Easter

April 14, 2013

891st Week as Priest

717th Week at St Dunstan's

Supply at Epiphany in Tallassee

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We have had a beautiful spring. Even though Lent was a few weeks earlier than usual this year, and we have had cooler temperatures, the yellow forsythia bloomed just after the pale white and yellow jonquils sprouted from the wet ground. One week in Lent, we had over eight inches of rain. That was when I began to see the red bud trees bursting into their Lenten blooms. It always seems to happen each year in our part of the South. Those purple flowering trees appear against a gray wet background of hardwood trees that bear no buds, and won't leaf out for weeks to come.



I never remember red buds during the rest of the year; only when they bloom do I think of planting them along the driveway to The Elms, the little farm where Leigh and I live out on Shelton Mill Road. I should write myself a note to plant red bud trees in January, but I

always forget them when they have leafed out and become completely nondescript. **B**ut in mid-March, their flowering buds are the very sign of Lent—penitential, small, delicate, the only color that will do—a purple that is the color of vestments and altar hangings—a purple that reminds me of ashes and incense. **A** legend says that the red bud tree was once common in the Judean hills. **A**nother claims that the red bud was the tree on which Judas Iscariot hanged himself after betraying Jesus.

Next come the azaleas in all their glorious Lenten and **E**aster colors—purple, pink, red, and white. I like an untrimmed azalea bush the best. No sculptured balls of Lent and **E**aster colors for me. No, I think that azaleas should be allowed to grow and stretch into their own shapes, filling the spaces under pine trees, and bursting into brilliant colors all in the space of a couple of weeks. Yes, I agree, dead branches and spindly old bushes need to be pruned—but as a general rule, I like my azaleas free-ranging.

Perhaps I just have a bad memory and can't seem to recall exactly what spring is going to be like before it arrives—but that can be a gift, you know, because I am always surprised by “the grandeur of **G**od” shining forth in color and shape. It's like spring is happening again for me, like the very first time.

The **E**nglish poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote about **G**od's Grandeur, and he said that, “for all this, nature is never spent; there lives the dearest freshness deep down things.” I want my world, our world, to experience this annual resurrection from the dead of winter, if for no other reason than to remind us all that resurrection is possible—and that its potentiality is present in all death and all life.



The last, and most favorite, of flowering plants and trees for me is the dogwood. Not that pink variety, the one that reminds me of cheap champagne and poodles.

No, I'm talking about the beautiful little tree that grows well in shade, and puts forth white flowers that are said to remind us of a cross, or the **B**ody of **C**hrist, with a crown of thorns in the middle, and blood stains at the tips. If the red bud is the sign of Lent, then the dogwood is surely the sign of **E**aster. Dogwoods have been appearing in bloom just in the last week or two, given our early **E**aster, but they are here nonetheless.

Another of those **C**hristian legends says that the dogwood was a straight, strong tree that was used by the Romans to make the **C**ross of **C**hrist; but afterwards, the dogwood grew crooked and gnarly so it could never be used that way again. It's true that the dogwood tree's branches look as if they were suffering under the weight of those white blossoms with their crowns and bloodstains.

By now, I hope you agree that the natural world around us seems to have mirrored the seasons of Lent and **E**aster. These flowers and trees, blossoms and branches, will not let us forget the way that new life springs forth from death. The tomb of a seed is quiet and still, but from it comes new creation, new life. It is a resurrection each spring.

And now, I want to show you that *our own lives* mirror this event of death and resurrection.

In **E**ducation for Ministry, I've been teaching and talking about an ongoing process that occurs in every sacred story of the **B**ible, and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—and in the sacred stories of our own lives. That process repeats itself, from the **B**ook of **G**enesis to the **R**evelation to John. It is the cycle of **C**reation, **S**in, **J**udgment, **R**edemption, and **N**ew **C**reation.

Take the **G**arden of **E**den as a good beginning, and it matters not if you're a **B**iblical **L**iteralist or a **U**nitarian **U**niversalist. The story teaches us very important lessons about ourselves, no matter what.

God creates the garden with all its infinite variety and color. **A**dam and **E**ve rebel against **G**od and eat of the **F**ruit of the **T**ree of the **K**nowledge of **G**ood and **E**vil. **G**od judges them and casts them out of the **G**arden. **B**ut they are not killed, though you might say they deserve death. **N**o they find a new way to live. It is harder, and requires more of them—more work, more suffering, more responsibility, and a lot more critical thinking on their part. **B**ut they do become a new creation—and we might even say that they become better people for it! **C**reation, **S**in, **J**udgment, **R**edemption, and a **N**ew **C**reation. **A**dam and **E**ve experience something like death, and they know that **G**od transforms that into something akin to resurrection.

We should really not be that surprised by the altogether brilliant and completely unique story of the death and resurrection of our Lord **J**esus **C**hrist. **A**nd we shouldn't be that surprised that his death and resurrection are mirrored in our natural world, and in the other sacred stories of the **B**ible, and in the sacred stories of our own lives.

That is, unless we forget Lent and Easter each year, just like I tend to forget the blooming and blossoming that takes place each spring. But don't worry, because that, too, can be a good thing for us—to experience the death and resurrection of Jesus each Holy Week of each year, as if it was happening once again for the first time.

You may think, at this point, that my suggestion of death and resurrection in your own life is exaggerated, or just plain wrong, but consider this: If you have known serious illness, and then recovered to become perfectly healthy again, then you know something of death and resurrection.

Or perhaps you have been through a catastrophic event—like a car crash or a tornado or hurricane—and you have survived, then you know something of death and resurrection. You are alive, and you did not expect to be! Everything around you—colors, feelings, trees, the blue sky, your own breathing—everything is suddenly more vivid, more alive, and more precious.

Or you may have experienced a terrible loss—a divorce, the death of a parent or loved one, a job or career that you loved and is suddenly no longer yours—then you know something of death. Not immediately, not right away, but slowly, over time, with the help of friends and family, with prayer and painful growth, you may come to know new life, new creation, and the transformative power of Jesus Christ to raise you up out of the ashes of your old life and to give you a new heart and a new mind. And to give you a sure and certain hope that you will be raised from death by him who died and was raised again.

We are never promised that we will avoid suffering and death. These things surely await us all, and they have been a part of life from the very beginning. **B**ut just as true is the promise that Jesus **C**hrist makes to us all: That he has conquered sin and death. That in him we will have abundant life. **A**nd that he will raise us up on our last day.

Here is a perfect truth that I want you to believe:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

Believe this perfect truth with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. **A**nd since you have accepted Jesus **C**hrist as Lord, build your lives on him. **D**ig your roots deep in him. **A**nd be filled with thanksgiving. *Amen.*

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