

“New Beginnings”
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Easter Homily
April 8, 2012
For Private Distribution Only

I hope you didn't come here this morning expecting me to tell you something new about this familiar story. Although each gospel tells it a little differently, the Easter narrative doesn't change much from year to year. We can anticipate its twists and turns. There is no surprise ending. And so, with each telling, it's just a little more difficult to place ourselves in the bewildered shoes of Mary Magdalene, Peter, the Beloved or any of the other disciples. Yes, we may still debate the particulars of the resurrection, but we already know what's going to happen. There's not a whole lot of room left for us to feel the fear, the suspense, or the shock that those first disciples did.

Yet, even though that story remains the same, we don't. Every Easter morning, we leave this place, have our family dinners, and continue to go about our lives. But in those in-between times, things happen, things that impact us. Life happens: Births, marriages, divorces, retirements, deaths; and all sorts of other losses, challenges, and changes. Things we anticipated, and things we never could've seen coming. Things that give us pause, things that make our hearts sing, things that leave us feeling empty or even abandoned. Each year we bring new experiences to the Easter story. Each year we return to Jesus' resurrection slightly altered, slightly different people. Each year, with the disciples, we peer into Jesus' vacant tomb, and its darkness, its emptiness, echo back at us in a way unlike any time before ...And so each year, what the disciples will eventually celebrate as Jesus' joyous Easter surprise, will hold a slightly different personal significance for each of us.

For me it is my father's passing in January that has most profoundly marked me over this past year, shaping me into someone I was not and could not have been at this time last year. For this church, the deaths of four beloved, longtime members and the reception of 11 new members have molded us into a congregation we couldn't have imagined just 12 months ago. But here we are. We have emerged from the darkness of winter, of Lent, of crucifixion and death. We have not only survived; we are transformed, reborn, Easter people. And we will continue to be so. In just a few minutes we will baptize an infant and a young girl. In a week we will baptize a young woman and receive a few more members into our flock. Every hour, every day, every week we are transformed and reborn. Who knows whom we will be a year from now?! ...Only God, I think it's fair to say.

Many years and pages have been spent debating the exact manner of Jesus' resurrection: Was it physical? Was it spiritual? Even the New Testament's authors cannot agree, with the gospel writers making a pretty clear case for a bodily resurrection and the apostle Paul speaking of Jesus' returning in a new spiritual body. Suffice it to say that something, something profound and life altering, happened that first Easter morning: A resurrection that changed the lives of everyone who was there, everyone it touched in those 40 days the risen Christ walked the earth before ascending into heaven. But not only that, a resurrection that has kept on giving, touching, and transforming for almost two millennia. ...Look around this sanctuary at all your church family and friends. Notice the people pouring out of other churches when we depart from this place in a little while. It is we, the Church, who are living proof of the resurrection: We who are Christ's hands and feet; We who come to the garden seeking Jesus: seeking comfort, healing, and new life; We who care for one another, even as God has cared for us; We who continue to extend Jesus' radically extravagant hospitality and universal love; We who long—and strive--for

the day when peace, love, and justice will reign upon the earth; We who bear witness to the fact that love is infinitely stronger than death, that nothing—no pain or suffering or even death--can separate us from our God who is love... Jesus the Christ, indeed, lives. And we in the here and now are his Easter people.

But it all started with a most intimate encounter—with a disciple come to visit the final resting place of her beloved teacher and friend. A woman so dedicated that she dared to approach that garden alone, just beyond the shadow of the cross and before daylight had even broken; A woman so bold and driven that she didn't hesitate to run and awaken the other disciples in the wee hours of the morning; A woman so confounded...and determined that she lingered by the grave long after the others had departed; A woman so distraught that the appearance of two angels didn't faze her in the least; A woman so blinded by tears, that she couldn't see Jesus even when he stood right in front of her; A woman whose ears and heart were nevertheless tuned to the sound of his voice as he spoke her name; A woman so moved and called by him that she was quick to bear witness to the others, even though, she knew, they were far more likely to doubt than believe her.

Yes, Easter began with that tender moment in the garden, with Jesus calling Mary by name, and it continues in moments and people big and small. It will continue when we name, dedicate, and baptize Tasha and Junior this morning. It will continue when we baptize Ashley next Sunday. It will continue in the Summer of 2013 when we witness the weddings of Ashley and Vince and of Beth and Dan. It continued when our country elected its first African American president, and each time a new state has opted for marriage equality. It continues whenever we allow God's grace and healing to turn our sorrow into joy, our emptiness into abundance and generosity, our

brokenness into healing and wholeness. It continues each time we embrace one another in joy and in sorrow, in emptiness and in wholeness; each time we open our arms and hearts to a new person who brings to us warts, scars, gifts as compelling and unique as our own; each time our loneliness and despair are turned to dancing and rejoicing.

You see, the Easter story is our story. And we are the Easter story. It's an old story, yes. It's a familiar story, yes. But it is a story big enough to hold us all. From a God whose love and grace are expansive enough to reach and transform us all. And, truth be told, we don't actually know exactly how the Easter story ends. If anything, that first Easter was a beginning, a new beginning for Jesus' disciples, now followers of a risen Christ. And we are a chapter in a very thick book that is still being written; a story that will go on until all of creation's tears have been mercifully wiped away, till each and all of us are free and fed, loved, healed, and transformed.

For us, too, each Easter; indeed, each Sunday, is a new beginning. And we *don't* know exactly where it's taking us. But we *do* know that we can trust in God's love and presence. We do know that we can participate in the mysterious unfolding of the bigger Easter story of which we are all a part.

Let us continue our piece of that joyous meta-narrative by baptizing Tasha and Junior and warmly welcoming them into the loving arms of their new church family...