

**In the Name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

*Saturday, April 30, 2011
Preached at Grace Church, Elmira*

*The Great Vigil of Easter Eve
The Rev. Fr. D.W. Matthews*

The victim of perhaps the cruelest death penalty ever devised, Jesus Christ died repudiated as a traitor, and humiliated as a non-prophet. All the Gospel writers agree on this, even though their accounts of what happened at the last moments of His life may vary a tad, the story is essentially the same. Jesus entered what the theologian Hans Kung calls “*the unsurmountable frontier*” — death itself — which is “*the end of everything.*”



And yet, the horrid course of these ghastly events in the “valley of the shadow of death” with Jesus had done something rather amazing with the disciples — it had brought them to God. *In other words, we only have the Passion story through which we have walked this week because we have an Easter story itself!*

What happened? The Resurrection — unlike the Crucifixion — is never depicted or described in the Gospels. In the midst of the darkness of night, not one soul witnessed this earth-shattering, logic-defying event. Not one soul expected such a thing to happen in their wildest of dreams and, at best, the disciples themselves were very reluctant believers who were worried or doubtful even after they saw the Resurrected Lord as we see particularly in Saint Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels (Mt 28:17; Lk 24:11). It makes me think of Goethe’s famous remark that, “*The highest things cannot be spoken,*” and that would most certainly hold true here, as the brilliant Easter Event most certainly bursts the bounds of all human vocabulary and understanding.

As I have pondered what it is that is most important for us to remember this brilliant evening that begins the Queen of all Feasts which the Church in all her glory celebrates, I believe that we need to remember that an Easter Faith was and remains an unthinkable turnaround of God’s Grace. This is a turnaround so enigmatic in its origins that it could not have been predicted by anyone, nor is this a matter of a mere hallucination or slight-of-hand magic. After all, a world-transforming religion, my friends, hardly emerges from “this magic moment,” nor from a child saying to us, “let’s pretend.”

No, the Easter Faith, in other words, does not exist because Jesus Christ is simply proclaimed — the Easter Faith is proclaimed because Jesus Christ lives! Easter Faith begins with an experience of the Crucified, dead and buried Christ being raised by Almighty God. It begins when early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene meets a radically transformed figure that she does not immediately recognize because of this transformed state of being near the tomb in which her Lord and teacher had been buried — He is unrecognized, that is, until she is addressed with a single word, her name, “*Mary!*” (Jn 20:16).



For us who live and move and have our being in a modern age, how do we experience this Easter Faith? How do we high-tech, Facebook connected, cyberworld, people of the Finger Lakes living in a fast paced, global economy come to know Easter to be true for us? How can it be more than what Woody Allen once said: *“Diane Keaton believes in God. But she also believes that the radio works because there are tiny people inside it.”*

I am reminded of a little experiment used in spiritual direction, which comes from the Anglican priest and poet J.B. Phillips in his marvelous little book, *Your God is Too Small* (1961). The suggestion goes like this: Pray with all your heart, “Oh, William Shakespeare, help me!” and see what happens. Or try praying to Karl Marx, or Eleanor Roosevelt, “Help me!” and see what happens. And then pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, help me!” and see what happens over time. As my grandmother used to say, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating.



The truth of an Easter Faith is that the power of God will overshadow you in this Resurrected Jesus Christ — this One who lives in power and truth and the reality of a radically new creation given only by our one true God. This is not as the Roman Empire lives on in the Colosseum or Monsieur Eiffel lives on through his tower or Washington lives on through his monument — but this is the Living Christ who lives on because He dwells in us and among us as the very Presence of God. Implore Jesus as Christpower that transcends understanding — and the very proofs that you seek will come upon you — and will change you — and will heal you — and will make you new.

From the oldest strata of the ancient Christian communities on, for nearly two thousand years, this has been the testimony on which our Easter Faith stands or falls — Jesus Christ lives. And that is the mystical, mighty truth that we celebrate on this most sacred, glorious, wondrous night and on the morning yet to come.