

Easter Sunday, 24 April 2011  
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR  
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

This year one particular Easter story has been much on my mind.

This story was told to me many years ago, when I had been a priest for just a few years. It was told by another priest talking about his own experience of resurrection. I have seen other similar stories and do not know whether similar events happened many times, or a single event generated many varied tellings.

In this particular parish there was a group of young people who had known one another all their lives. They had spent many years in Sunday School together, learning and sharing. One of them (named Philip) had been born with a complex of developmental difficulties. He could not move as well as the others, but got around well enough. He could not read very well and often was slower to understand than the others because of what was called his 'limited mental capacity.'

Everyone knew that Philip's body was put together in a way that made his life expectancy quite short, but he had always been there, was so much part of life in this town and school and parish, that few people ever thought about that sad fact. One year the Sunday school class spent all of Lent studying about Jesus' resurrection - what it meant in the lives of the disciples, and what it means in our lives. They read the stories of the resurrection appearances and they studied all of the different symbols that Christians have used to represent the resurrection.

Then on Easter Day, the children were all invited to bring forward plastic eggs with their favorite symbol of the resurrection inside and explain them to the congregation. So the children came forward – and one had made a butterfly which she said showed how Jesus had a whole new kind of life, just like the caterpillar – and another had put in a lily, and another a cross, and another a lamb, and so on.

And finally Philip stumbled up the aisle and opened his egg – which was empty. And the other kids all groaned. "Oh, no. Philip missed the point again." But Philip was very insistent that this was right. Everyone listened as he explained that his egg was empty because the tomb was empty. Jesus wasn't in there, because Jesus wasn't dead any more. So the empty egg represented resurrection to Philip.

No one ever forgot Philip's Easter lesson. When he died, much too young, all his friends came to the funeral and instead of placing flowers on his coffin, each one brought an empty plastic egg. It probably looked odd to people who did not know the history, but it was their proclamation that Philip was not in the coffin, that he too was no longer dead, but risen, risen beyond all the limitations that made

his life short and difficult, risen to a whole new kind of life with Christ.

As the Church we are a community of hope, hope for new life always triumphing over every kind of death and defeat, hope for divine love that binds us all together and helps us to heal the world.

Holy Week has been a time to explore the dark places in human society and in our own hearts, a time to grieve for all of the ways that we hurt one another and reject God.

Easter reminds us that no matter how dark it gets, no matter how much evil human beings concoct, God's love always triumphs. And this love that gave Jesus the will and the courage to accept death rather than choose any sort of violence brought him right through death to a whole new kind of life.

We have discovered this life and love, and we know that no matter how long we live we will be continually learning and experiencing more of its wonders. And so we invite others to experience it with us. That is a very important part of our life of hope, this invitation and inclusion.

Today [at the 10am service] we are embracing four very young people in our community, inviting them to live a life of hope and love with us. We will pray that God "Give them inquiring and discerning hearts, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love [God], and the gift of joy and wonder in all [God's] works."

Curiosity and courage, love, joy, and wonder – those are great gifts for our lives, great things to hope for our children. Today Sophie and Lukas and Oliver and Keegan will all enter into these gifts promised by God. Our experiences of resurrection life, of all its many gifts come to us in community, in company with other people.

We began the year adopting Lukas, Sophie, Oliver, Gaby, and John as new members of our parish. They publicly declared their intention to be part of our life together and we declared our intention to include them in our life and in our prayers. Now the children are taking this further step in baptism where they will be 'marked as Christ's own forever'. It is a very Easter moment, a moment speaking of new life and hope and eternal connection.

Most of us are meeting Keegan for the first time today, but Keegan has deep connections here. Just a year and a half ago we celebrated the funeral of his great-grandmother Virginia Hodges right here, not many months after celebrating her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in our parish hall.

Virginia was for many years a lovely, bright, and generous part of this community, a consistent source of love and support for her own family and the many families she worked with in her career. She was one of the first people I got to know well in Oregon. In her funeral we celebrated the love that bound all of us together, the love that she showered on so very many people. We celebrated with the

Paschal Candle lit – as it is now – that glorious giant candle representing for us the risen life of Christ, that life that triumphs over death. Like Philip’s friends we came knowing that death had not permanently separated Virginia from God or from us, that she had gone on to a newer greater life.

This Easter Candle is lit today to assure us of the glorious risen life of Christ, a life of love stronger than any death or destruction. And as each child is baptized, he or she will receive a candle lit from the Paschal Candle, will receive this promise of eternal connection with God and with us.

‘Receive the light of Christ.’ Those are powerful, evocative words. The light of Christ which burst from the rock-hewn tomb, bringing joy and consternation to his followers, is here for each of us today – and we share it with Keegan and Lukas and Sophie and Oliver. We receive that light in our hearts and minds and carry it forth to share it with the wide world, which Christ loved enough to die for.

Just as each child will be blessed with the water of baptism, I will go through the congregation at the Peace shedding that blessing on each person here.

The sprinkling water is another image of the holiness and hope freely offered to each of us in the Risen Christ. For the last couple of years I have been able to sprinkle the water with branches of forsythia, a wonderful exuberant symbol of Easter joy. This year, with Easter as late as it ever can be, the forsythia has gone to leaf, so I found blooming branches of heather from our Memorial Garden, an appropriate alternative symbol of life beyond death.

May each of you find blessing in today’s worship and carry that blessing with you always.  
Amen.