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Easter Day – Year C
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Trinity Cathedral, Little Rock

Get ready for your question of the day. Don't worry; it is not a theological litmus test, and I will not ask anyone to stand up and answer. It is as follows: You wake up in a large room with no windows, sort of like all those casinos where they don't want you to know what time of day or night it is. You look around and on the walls hundreds of calendars hang, every one of them highlighting a different month in a different year. Amid the calendars are hundreds of clocks, none of them recording the same time. A voice then asks you for the correct time and date. What is your answer? Which calendar and clock reflect the truth?

As much as the attempt might stump most of us, if you were an astronomer, someone used to looking up at the heavens, the answer is simple: All of them. You would give this answer with confidence because that is exactly the situation that astronomers encounter as they look up at the night sky. As I have learned from reading a lot of books about the universe and the speed of light, there is no timestamped photograph of what the universe looks like. We have an accumulation of viewpoints because it takes varying amounts of time for light from planets and stars to reach us. Minutes for our solar system's planets. For the stars, a few years to perhaps twelve billion. Those latter stars have long since turned into something else, by the way. We fail to see the totality of what is. And should we stand somewhere else in the universe, the light show would be totally different. What we see is contextualized in time and space.

The universe is mystifying and confounding, not always what we initially think we see. Coming to terms with that truth has, believe it or not, helped me make sense of today's gospel and of this feast that we call Easter. No, I am not attempting to reconcile science and religion. The former relies on textbooks, the latter on poetry. But thinking like an astronomer helps me reflect on what I experience on Easter. You see, when we come to church on Easter Day and listen carefully, we might find ourselves walking away hearing and seeing something that is not the same as we had imagined when we walked in the door. There are discoveries to be had in both the gospel we hear proclaimed and the lives that we lead.

A local priest and I were talking a week ago about the Gospel of John's resurrection narrative, and we both confided that it confounds us, perhaps like resurrection itself confounds and mystifies us. The Gospel of John's resurrection narrative is a mash up of events and ideas. People expect one thing, believe one thing, see yet another thing, and experience something else altogether. What happens in this gospel story is what happens in our own lives as we try to make sense of the Christian faith and its central tenet that we call resurrection. In our lives and in our faith and in our doubting, we often see one thing, believe another, and experience something else. What we expect is not what we discover. We cannot get out a sunrise almanac and tidily time-stamp the events of Easter, as perhaps any good astronomer would tell us.

In the story, Mary Magdalene goes out in the dark and expects to see a secure grave, but it appears to have been tampered with. She runs away and brings others to see. They look inside the tomb and see used linens and then leave, believing in grave robbers. Mary then

looks inside the same tomb and sees something different: messengers who tell her things she was not expecting to hear. Then she sees a gardener whom she had apparently not previously seen. Thus, in the gospel you get her focusing on at least three different things: a tomb, messengers, and a gardener. Just as I would ask someone in a room full of various calendars and clocks, on which will she focus? Where will she find truth?

It is at this point that the gospel of John makes its theological leap, stepping out of time. John reminds, twice in fact, that Mary turns around, and then turns around, and in that turning around, experiences Easter. Yes, there is the necessity to focus on the tomb to look death in the face. Yes, there is the necessity to focus on messengers who try to explain something not yet understood. And yes, most importantly, there is the necessity to turn around and look; look, for example, at a gardener, because it is then that Mary begins to understand what resurrection is about: it is to see something true and lovely, Christ-like even, in the next move that we make, even in moments of incalculable fear and pain. It is to set aside some sort of Easter resurrection timestamp focused on a grave at 6 a.m. and instead start to see that resurrection is a current event whenever we turn around and see another human being as Christ's own self. Easter is always the next move, the next turning around. And if that message is not clear enough, John goes on to remind us that Mary herself is not allowed to hang on to that one resurrection experience, but must let go of it because the risen Christ must show up in countless other situations reaching far into the future on so many calendars: at gravesides, in hospitals, at workplaces, in grocery stores, in schools, at birthings, in any place and in any person when people have eyes that will see and ears that will hear

the story of love's power to overcome the evil that separates one human being from another.

On what will we focus? Let's face it. The last few years have been difficult and felt deadly, sort of like Mary Magdalene initially focusing on a disturbed tombstone and wondering what in the hell more could go wrong. But the last few years have also been filled with messengers, often in the form of people on the margins of society, who have tried to tell us that we need to listen to our better angels rather than the demons that are trying to divide and destroy us individually and as a society through politics and war and disregard of creation itself. And most hopefully, the last few years, and I hope, the years ahead as well, have been and will be filled with ordinary people in whom we will see the resurrected Christ if we but turn around and start to live life with some compassion. That is the message of Easter Day that I want you to take home. If we live life with some compassion, we will begin to understand the power of resurrection.

It will bring great joy and, I will admit, some initial fear, when we see others and ourselves differently, when we see the resurrected Christ just like Mary Magdalene did. Ultimately, Easter joy and the message of resurrection is to come to the point of loving others as Christ's own self and to come to love ourselves without condition so that the world and our own personal lives will be no longer filled with anxiety and fear and hatred and evil that lead to death. What an amazing way to turn our lives around so that we live in hope, not despair. It is the way I hope to live out the rest of my life, and I hope that it becomes your Easter joy as well. Amen.