

Easter Sunday 2003
"New Life for YOU"
The Rev. Thomas W. Simmons IV

Have you ever messed up and done things you're ashamed of? Eh? Or maybe I should ask, is there anyone who HASN'T? Well, congratulations. **I remember one moral failure of my own** in the summer after my freshman year of college. It's not the worse thing I've done, but it had a big effect on my life.

My parents took off on some trip for a week and left me and my sister by ourselves at home. This was a first for us and it showed that the parental units really trusted us. She was a rising high school senior and I a college sophomore. They left a couple of hundred dollars there for us to use in case of emergency or other need.

They gave the money *to both of us* to use in an emergency, but went and spent all the money myself. Kind of selfish, huh? My sister just shook her head and rolled her eyes – she was good at that. My mom, though, was upset and very disappointed. She thought I was more trustworthy than that. I remember so clearly standing in our dining room and she asked, "Why would you do that?"

That question stuck hard in my heart. It was humiliating and humbling to me – especially since I didn't have an answer other than, "I don't know." You know, that was my answer to a lot of questions about my moral fiber and character. Why do we do the selfish, petty and evil things we do? It's hard to know sometimes.

This question spurred me to turn to God. For several months before this I had been wrestling with God, avoiding him, yet needing him. For me God always felt distant and hard to know. He was just "out there." But when I turned to God that summer, **I was surprised to find God with a human face.**

It was the face of Jesus Christ, with his kind, compassionate eyes, his firm jaw, the truth and integrity of his countenance where what I needed. When I found him I found God's forgiveness for what I had done wrong, his compassion for my many weaknesses, the absolute integrity of his character actually transforming my character to be more like his own.

For me this was a new side of Jesus. The image I had always associated with him was crucifixion. From my nominal, Christmas and Easter experience of being an Episcopalian, I didn't know much but I did know that Jesus died on the cross with the crown of thorns, the whips, the nails in the wrists and ankles.

But I have a question. If Jesus died like that 2000 years ago, **how had I encountered him so powerfully in my own life?** If he died, how is it that he is so alive to me? I'm glad you asked, because the answer to that question can be found on this of all days. Jesus Christ is alive to us today because he rose from

the dead way back then. **He is risen! That's why you all are here today.**

Think about it. If Jesus' death and burial were the final act of the drama we'd be following Jesus as merely an inspiring leader, a wise teacher, a great man who died a terrible death. **He'd be like Martin Luther King with long hair and sandals.** We'd celebrate Easter as "Jesus Christ Day," just like Martin Luther King Day, with speeches and activities to commemorate him as a great leader.

But today we are doing something much more. Because Jesus rose from the dead we follow not a martyred leader to be commemorated, but a risen Lord to be worshipped. **We can connect with and experience Jesus** in very personal and profound ways because HE IS LIVING. He is risen and his light and love reaches out of that darkened tomb across the centuries to us today.

He reached into my life, into the darkness of my moral failure and confusion, of my selfishness, guilty secrets and pervasive sense of inadequacy. He began changing me and giving me a new peace and joy and understanding and power and zest for life. It's because Jesus rose from the dead THIS MORNING almost 2000 years ago.

Let's take a little imaginative journey. Let's go back to that morning so long ago and join with Jesus' grieving friends as they walk to the grave that sad morning. Their plan is to embalm Jesus' pierced and broken body and lay it to rest.

Their hopes and dreams lay dead in that tomb. They had followed Jesus for three years and he had touched their lives – kind of like he changed my life. They loved Jesus and would follow him anywhere. But when he died, it all came crashing down around them. They were lost.

But the story didn't end there. Though they saw him die and wept bitterly at his passing, they had good news coming. Though his enemies thought they had won, God had another plan. Though Jesus lay dead in the grave for three days, God raised him to new life.

So just put yourself in their shoes and let's approach the tomb with Mary, Mary and Salome. Just picture it. You get there and are surprised to see the stone slab door lying open. Entering, we're startled to see a strange angelic figure in the now-empty tomb saying, "he's no longer here, he is risen."

How would you respond? "He is risen? You mean no longer dead – as in, ALIVE?" You mean that all is not hopelessness and dreariness, wondering why, what it all means? You mean that I have hope - that there's hope for me after all? What a relief! What a joy! Can it be true?

The good news this morning is that IT IS TRUE. It's not a truth you can verify with a scientific experiment, but then again there's A LOT about life we accept

without scientific proof.

And let me just add a little caveat. **WE don't have empirical proof, BUT THE DISCIPLES DID.** The angel points out the obvious fact that Jesus is not where they laid him. Hmm, OK. He tells them to go to Galilee and "there you will see him." And guess what. They did! They met him face to face and could touch and see. It doesn't get any more empirical than that.

Well for us it's different. **We don't have it quite so easy.** We have to trust in the testimony of those who were there. That's what faith is. It's hearing what the eyewitnesses say and trusting it enough to step out onto it and lay hold of Jesus.

And when we do that **we experience him, risen and living and powerful** in our lives. While his presence is not empirically verifiable – because his is a spiritual presence – the effects of it certainly are. They are so life changing it's like a resurrection. I can testify to that, just as Jesus' first disciples did.

If you want to find Jesus in this way stick around, pay attention. **You can meet him this morning in our Easter liturgy** because he is here.

As we stand together and **affirm our faith in the Creed**, this is your chance to give your assent and allegiance to the faith of the Church to express your faith in God. I can assure you he'll hear your heartfelt profession. As we go to the **Prayers of the People**, he'll meet you there on your knees and hear you. He's promised to. He'll meet your deepest needs and heal and transform you and help the people you pray for.

As you join in the **Confession of Sin**, he will listen when you honestly acknowledge your failings and guilt, the bad things that you have thought, said and done. He'll forgive you and have mercy on you. He promised to. As **the plates come around** and you put your offering in there, put yourself in the plate, offer your life to Jesus. Surrender and give yourself to Jesus.

That's what he did for you when he died on the cross. And as you come forward for communion the Risen Lord Jesus gives his living body and blood for us to receive. **He gives us his life and changes our lives.**

Jesus is risen. He is ALIVE! He's waiting for you. You know he is. AMEN.