



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday April 18, 2021**  
*The Third Sunday of Easter*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector

on  
Luke 24:36b-48

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### **Christ hath burst the gates of hell!**

*"Peace be with you!"* Said Jesus to his disciples after his Resurrection. He says this several times to them. And in today's gospel reading he also says, *"Why are you so troubled?"*

There is no getting away from it – there is something brutal about the crucifixion. Even if you do not believe that Jesus is God Incarnate, you still have the torture and death of a good man who had done nothing wrong – taken in the middle of the night, abandoned by his friends, and with only a few women including his, presumably desperate, mother to hold out any hope for him. Imagine, for a moment, what it would be like to have someone you love taken away from you forcibly in the night.

Why are you so troubled?

Sadly, this has happened through countless generations. Those of you who have family who experienced the Second World War and the Holocaust know that it was used as a means of terror and torture - for people to be forcibly taken in the night from the homes. In the 1970s and 80s, over 8000 children disappeared from El Salvador and Guatemala; many sons taken in the night. It has happened in Rwanda, in Bosnia; it has happened in all kinds of places and it is a fearful thing.

But even more horribly, imagine the person you love simply not coming home to you as in the case of those who were killed by the gunman in the Fed Ex facility a few days ago, or who were simply doing their shopping in Boulder, Colorado, or, even worse, over the last few years, the children who kissed their parents "goodbye" and went to what should have been the safest of places – their school – only never to come home because of a man with a gun.

That kind of tragedy is hard to understand. I have had to deal with much tragedy in my time as a priest – the death of babies and children among the most heart-wrenching, but I remember once visiting a woman with her three young children huddled close by her whose husband had cheerfully

waved goodbye as he left for work in his motorbike, only to never walk back through the door because he had been killed on the highway. It was, quite literally, hell for that family.

Why are you so troubled?

That hell, and the hell of all who have experienced suffering and death, Jesus enters into willingly, feeling the effects of that hell because of his death on a cross.

Listen to some words of Archbishop Rowan Williams: *“There is a place for God now in all suffering, at the heart of suffering and even death, because we have seen the glory of God abiding in the squalor and humiliation of Jesus’ execution...Death and the hells of dereliction and abandonment eat up men and women, exhaust them, scrape them out and bring them to nothing. Jesus is already empty, already poor, already nothing, for God is everything in him: and so the inexhaustible life of God meets death and eats it up and exhausts it.”*<sup>1</sup>

And this, my friends, is the power of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is why we have celebrated Holy Week. It is the power of the Resurrection of Jesus. As St. Paul reminded the people of Philippi, he *“emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”* (Philippians 2:7-8) In so doing, as Rowan Williams puts it so powerfully, *‘the inexhaustible life of God meets death and eats it up and exhausts it.’*

This is depicted most beautifully in the Icon of the Resurrection that has been given to us by our dearly beloved friend Father Jack Smith who died in Holy Week this year. We have placed it near the great Paschal Candle in his memory but also as a sign of hope. The icon is a depiction of what we recite in the Apostles’ Creed about the death of Jesus in the clause, ‘He descended into hell.’ This image, depicted in all kinds of cultures and in many different forms of art describes what we call the *Harrowing of Hell*. The phrase to the 21<sup>st</sup> century ear sounds gruesome, but we need to understand what those words originally meant. Hell, in the Apostles’ Creed, is not the place of torment or Satan’s domain. It is Hades or Sheol – the place of the dead as understood from our Jewish forebears; a place of waiting – the place that Martha and Mary thought that Lazarus would be until the General Resurrection on the last Day. In the contemporary language version of the Apostles’ Creed, it is translated as ‘He descended to the dead.’ But just as Jesus went to the grave of Lazarus and reversed the dying and decomposition process, so he, himself, would enter into death, into the grave, into Hell – into Sheol – but, more importantly, reverse the *consequences* of sin and death. And just as hell is the place of the dead in the Hebrew Scriptures, so the harrowing also means something different to how it is often used today. Harrow is an old English word that means ‘to despoil’ as a conquering king might despoil the city of his enemy, and take away the enemy’s power and wealth. It is also a word for ploughing – preparing a field to become fertile. Now that we understand this, the icon of the Resurrection takes on new meaning. Jesus enters the place of the dead to despoil it – to remove the power of death and to turn it from a place of emptiness into a fertile place of hope. If you look closely at the icon, you will see that Christ stands triumphant on two broken doors – as we sing about them in one of Charles Wesley’s great Easter hymns, *“Vain the stone, the watch, the seal; Christ hath burst the gates of hell!”* And look what Christ is doing; he is reaching into the grave – into hell – the place of the dead – and he is dragging out two people; Adam and Eve. The Second Adam finally overturns the consequences of the sin of the first Adam. But, unlike Lazarus and all those who were waiting in Sheol for the General Resurrection, Christ now leaves Sheol and his body is resurrected, changed (as Wesley puts it) from glory into glory.

Why are you so troubled?

As Professor Grieb reminded us in her Easter sermon, we should not be surprised by the incredulity and disbelief of the disciples when they met the Resurrected Jesus; it wasn't something that happened in everyday life! It was simply unheard of for someone to come back from the dead and particularly when that person had died a horrific and torturous death and had been buried for two whole days! As our former Theologian in Residence, Father Victor Austin, so memorably put it – *"The heart of that unchangeable truth is that Jesus was dead as a doornail on Friday and alive on Sunday."*<sup>2</sup> But we must also remember that the experience that the disciples had was very different from the miracles that they had witnessed when Jesus had raised the dead. They knew that something was profoundly different about Jesus' Resurrection body; he could appear and disappear at will; he could even walk through locked doors. This resurrection was not the same as the raising of Lazarus, or the widow of Nain's son, or the daughter of Jairus. Those were extraordinary but quite believable – they were part of the disciples' formation in the faith, found in the Hebrew scriptures in the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha who had also raised the dead. But in all these cases, it was the resuscitation of a corpse. That person still had their mortal body and what did that mean? They were going to die again. But in the case of Jesus, his Resurrected body was a glorified body never before experienced by anyone and bearing witness to that resurrection body means that all Christians live in the hope that they, too, will receive a resurrection body like Jesus.

Think of that hope when you have to experience you own 'hell on earth.'

Writing to the Corinthians Church St. Pauls says,

*"Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:*

*"Death has been swallowed up in victory."*

*"Where, O death, is your victory?*

*Where, O death, is your sting?*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."* (1 Corinthians 15:51-57)

Why are you so troubled? Peace be with you.

For the person who claims to have no faith, all this must seem like a sham, mere words and perhaps even ridiculous, but for one who has been transfigured by a relationship with Jesus Christ it becomes the hope of glory even in the midst of grief or sadness. As Bishop O'Hara so powerfully reminded us on Good Friday when we spoke of the death of St. Thérèse of Lisieux – who died so young and horribly with Tuberculosis – and many saw it as tragic, awful, and the waste of a young life. In sharp contrast, St. Thérèse said, *"I am not dying – I am coming to life!"*

The resurrection of Jesus affects our understanding of death, of Sheol, of our own mortality precisely *because Jesus really died*. And since his death was real, bloody, agonizing and torturous he gives us hope when we experience those things ourselves. His resurrection is, therefore, equally real, transforming, hopeful, and all-embracing. We heard about it today in our Gospel reading, for

the disciples do not meet a ghost - the resurrected Jesus eats a fish – he eats some honey and he can be handled; he has flesh and bones; he lights a fire and cooks breakfast; he breaks the bread. In all the wonder of the Resurrected Jesus appearing and disappearing at will, entering through closed doors, or breathing the Holy Spirit into the lives of mortals, we must not forget that the disciples experienced life with the *real Jesus* in his resurrection body - the wounds of love still fresh enough for Thomas to place his fingers and hands in them. Jesus restored the relationship that was broken through the sin of Adam and, not in spite of, but *because* of his death, the disciples were transformed, given new hope, and commissioned by him to bear witness.

That is the hope by which we live, my friends, the hope that we will become like him for we will see him as he really is. As St. John said in our Epistle reading:

*“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”*

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

<sup>1</sup>. ‘A Ray of darkness’ Page 59

<sup>2</sup>. Sermon preached February 21, 2016.