

**Easter Sunday  
March 23, 2008**

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**Whatever actually happened at dawn on that first Easter morning we may never know. What is clear is that the initial reaction of those who were close to the real event is pretty uniform. In John's gospel proclaimed today, Mary Magdalene is perplexed—to say the least—and a bit frightened as she runs as fast as she can to tell Peter and the other disciple. In Matthew's version proclaimed last evening at the Vigil, the two Marys seem terrified. The angel has to tell them: “Do not be afraid.” But they flee the tomb, overjoyed, the gospel tells us, but fearful as well.**

**Whatever else these first witnesses might have felt, the gospels tell us explicitly they felt alarm; they felt terror and amazement, and they were very frightened by the experience—at least initially. It seems when resurrection dawns it can be more than a little scary.**

**Why should we expect our experiences of resurrection to be much different? I don't know. But we do. Many of us want our experience of resurrection to be all light and happiness and calm. We celebrate the Easter Bunny or the Easter Beagle (if you are a Charles Shultz *Peanuts* fan). We want to remember only that Jesus in all the gospels keeps saying over and**

over again in his post-resurrection appearances: Peace! We *don't* want to ask why he had to keep saying it over and over to them. It's because they were terrified. And they could not really comprehend it all.

The resurrection event really is too big for us to comprehend. So throughout the centuries theologians and people just like you and me have “adjusted” it to a smaller scale. And we have made lots of mistakes in thinking we know what Easter means. There are lots of things Easter is not.

Easter is not just about immortality. That's a Greek idea held long before the time of Jesus. Immortality just means that a human *soul* somehow stays alive forever. Easter means that a whole living *bodily person* with a complete web of human relationships and connections still somehow pulses with life.

Easter is not simply the restoration or reanimation of a corpse, as in the cases of Lazarus, or the daughter of Jairus, or the widow of Naim's son. All these were wonderful, marvelous signs, but none of them answered the real question: was their final, eventual death truly the last word? Were they, in death, simply extinguished finally? Will you and I be just extinguished?

But Easter is also not just a return to the life Jesus had before, as if his death had never really happened—what theologian Leo O'Donovan calls a

kind of “Rip van Winkle Easter experience.” Jesus didn’t just sleep for three days in a tomb and then break out with the festive white and gold banner in his hand on Easter morning. This, too, is not what resurrection means.

Nor is resurrection a denial of death, as some Gnostic frames of thought would have it (and they are still popular today). Jesus just *seemed* to have died. No, he died! Death is simply too real to be denied—for all of us. Jesus really died, was buried, lay in a tomb, and then...was raised to a fullness of life we may never fully comprehend.

So even if we remind ourselves what Easter is not, what remains? Let me quote at length one theologian’s somewhat poetic attempt to frame it.

“Holy Saturday is the day of the ‘death of God,’ the day which expresses the unparalleled experience of our age, anticipating the fact that God is simply absent, that the grave hides him, that he no longer awakes, no longer speaks, so that one no longer needs to gainsay him, but can simply overlook him...” *It is the death of God!*

But “Christ strode through the gate of our final loneliness; in his Passion he went down into the abyss of our abandonment. Where no voice can reach us any longer, there he is. Hell is thereby overcome, or, to be more accurate, death, which previously was hell, is hell no longer.

**Neither is the same any longer [neither hell nor death] because there is life in the midst of death, because love dwells in it.”**

**The theologian who penned these lines is none other than Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.**

**Brothers and sisters, none of us ever *sees* the resurrection; no one did on that first morning either. But we can choose to see its effects. Love continues to dwell in our friendship and companionship, in our “com-unity” with each other. Love continues to dwell in the midst of even death. That can be terrifying and unsettling to say the least. But that is God’s gift to all creation this day. This is God’s day! In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins our challenge this day is to “Let God easter in us.” Peace!**