Easter Morning 2015-16

I am so glad you are here today!
No matter why you are here, or what you are expecting,
I am sure you are right where God wants you to be right now,
   And that God has a gift for you that you aren’t expecting!

Let me begin with the conclusion of our Gospel.
“‘They did not yet understand the scriptures
   that he had to rise from the dead.’”
I can relate to the not understanding.
I didn’t understand the first time I visited the empty tomb either.
Since the site of the empty tomb has been in the news this past month,
   Why not offer a brief firsthand experience?
When I went on sabbatical a few years back,
   We began by traveling in the footsteps of St. Paul, through Asia Minor.
In short order I got accustomed to visiting ancient sites
   in Greece and Turkey,
      often places out in the wide open countryside,
      with little left but a few foundations.
A bit of a wall here, a pillar there, a shell of an ancient building,
   grass growing over much of the site.
So when we got to Israel, Jerusalem, and the place
    where Jesus had been buried … why wouldn’t it be the same?
    Guess I didn’t do enough homework!
The crucifixion and Jesus’ burial had taken place outside the walls
    on an open hilltop, in a quarry, in fact.
But Jerusalem has expanded many times through the centuries,
    with the walls being rebuilt to enclose more and more territory.
The tomb has been inside the walls of the old city for centuries,
    with a Basilica enclosing it.
Even more, to get to the empty tomb,
    you have to navigate a warren of narrow, crowded streets,
        lined with shops, crawling with aggressive shopkeepers.
You weave your way eventually into an incredibly ornate,
    byzantine church, with additions, halls and stairs
        heading off in every possible direction.
After standing in line at the aedicule,
a little chapel built inside the church, you eventually duck down to enter
    a tiny space with a low bench-like block of stone,
on which the body of Jesus had been placed for burial.
A very different picture than a cave in a garden
    with a large stone to seal the entrance!
Initially I must say, I was scandalized by the gold and glitter,
    the chaos, the distractions. Not at all what I expected.
But staying in Jerusalem for some time,
I returned to the church of the Holy Sepulchre many times.
Each time my experience changed.
What were distractions I began to recognize as the holy efforts,
over centuries, of people of diverse cultures, trying their best
to say thank you to God for God’s greatest gift.
Rather than distractions from faith,
I began to see tremendous manifestations of faith.

Well, as our Gospel tells us this morning
Mary Magdalene and the two disciples she fetched,
Peter and the other disciple,
didn’t find what they expected either.
They were expecting to see a sealed tomb,
their beloved rabbi, teacher and close friend lifeless inside,
in short, the all too familiar place
of death, disappointment and heart-rending sorrow.
Instead they found an open and empty tomb,
neatly placed grave wrappings,
evidence that something incredible had happened;
they stood in a place practically pulsating with hope.
The Gospels of the last few weekends have primed us to understand how God operates, How God brings hope into the most unexpected places.

Four weekends ago we heard of the Samaritan woman at the well. She was expecting another dreary day; fetch the water, use it up, trudge back to the well tomorrow. One day just like the next. Did she ever get a surprise, and a gift, in her encounter with Jesus! Rather than plain ole well water, she went home with Living water, the spirit, bubbling up inside.

If you came today out of habit, Not expecting a lot, kind of like that Samaritan woman, I hope and pray Jesus finds a way to start a conversation with you To stir up a thirst for living water!

In the Gospel a week later, we met that man born blind. He was probably hoping that, with any luck, those passing by might give him some alms, so he could buy a bit of food. Instead, he was given his sight, and experienced Jesus as his Savior!
If you have been having any difficulties seeing your way through
   The challenges life has thrown in front of you,
I hope and pray something in our prayer and worship today
   Will open your eyes to new possibilities.
That you will see how a life of faith in a loving community
   changes everything! Like the man born blind,
   Jesus can truly change your life.

Only two weeks ago we heard how Mary and Martha had hoped
that Jesus would come and heal their dear brother Lazarus
   before it was too late.
Once Lazarus died,
   they most likely hoped that when Jesus arrived,
   he might offer them some comfort in their sorrow.
Instead, Jesus gave them their brother back alive.
But the real message was about eternal life,
   Revealed most fully on the first Easter morn.

Each account reveals that when we encounter Jesus,
   amazing things can happen. Unexpected. Life-changing.
Let Jesus engage us in conversation, and we experience living water.
Not the kind one dips up from a well.
The kind that springs up inside of us, quenching our deepest thirst!
Encountering Jesus, we can discover we have been blind
to so many things going on around us.
To all manner of spiritual realities.
Let the Jesus lead us, and he will open our eyes
when we least expect it.
Jesus opens up whole new worlds for us.

In the Gospel of Lazarus, and today,
we discover that not even death is predictable with Jesus!
Let me repeat that.
Not even death is predictable with Jesus.
Rather than a dead end, death becomes a doorway into new life!

So again, if you are here because something drew you,
there is just a bit of spiritual thirst going on,
some hunger for deeper meaning in life,
and you thought you might check us out ….
I hope and pray that the Lord starts speaking to you about living water.
I hope you experience a life changing conversation with Jesus
at the well, or the font, let’s say.
Even if it is just one word, or phrase, or image,
I pray the conversation will begin.
If you are here often, and have celebrated Easter for decades, you may not be expecting any surprises. Perfect.

Neither was that man born blind.

I hope you witness something that you have never noticed before. A prayer you never heard quite that way before. A song. A gesture. Maybe watching one person whose praying inspires you.

Something that strikes a deep chord.

I hope and pray lots of eyes and ears are opened a bit wider this glorious Easter Sunday.

If you faith has been suffering a bit, almost dying, because of heavy burdens you have been carrying, sorrows, deep disappointments, hardships: I hope and pray your surprise is hearing Jesus call you by name. As he called Lazarus. Come out! Return to life!

Jesus does that in very unexpected ways here, and it could well happen this morning.

Or if, like Martha and Mary, you have been grieving, feeling an emptiness, a seemingly untouchable sorrow.

I pray the Risen Lord will reassure you that the one you so miss is now breathing with God’s breath, enjoying the eternal Easter.
Finally, if you are here basically because you do like to go to church on the major feasts, it’s a comfortable habit …

I hope and pray something unlikely happens this Easter, that makes you a bit UN comfortable.

But that in the process,

I hope and pray the discomfort leads you to do some soul searching,

And in the searching,

You discover God is calling you

And needs to be his love reaching out to others.

As I said earlier of Mary Magdalen, Peter and John;

at the surface level, they were expecting the tomb to be a place of sorrow.

But I get the sense that deep down, way deep down, there was a spark of hope, a prayer even.

“Lord, you spoke so powerfully about the future. How could it end this way?

You taught us so much about second chances, about holding on to hope, about the wonders God can do each and every day; you taught us that miracles are real. Please, we need a miracle now.”
The first miracle: the empty tomb was not a sorrow filled dead end.

It had become a doorway to hope.

Throughout the 50 days of Easter, we’ll hear about many more miracles.

Take a look beyond the surface in your life today.

What are some of your deepest hopes?

The Lord wants to take us all far beyond our meager expectations.

He wants us to all discover that a tomb where some part of ourselves may be buried, some hope lost, some dream blocked off isn’t meant to remain sealed!

The Lord can roll back the stone.

He holds the power of release, or resurrection.

He can raise up and release any part of us we thought had died.

I really am glad you are here today.

May God bless you this Easter, and always.

May we all not only find the tomb empty,

May we come to better understand the scriptures.

May we discover that just as Jesus rose from the dead, he can come to life within us, and we in him.

The Lord is truly risen. Alleluia!