

Catching Easter

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, April 4, 2010: Easter Day.
Based on Luke 24:1-12*

Welcome. Whatever brings you today, welcome. It's a beautiful thing that we're here.

You have every right to know why I'm here. I'm here because of solemn duty, but also out of joy. Joy that something as unlikely as the resurrection of Jesus Christ my Lord has taken hold of me and won't let me go.

I hope you wouldn't expect any less.

"When do you write your Easter sermon?" someone asked me a few years ago in Holy Week.

I write it all year, is the best I could answer.

Every Sunday is a little Easter, the tradition tells us. And every day there is some challenge, some utterly human triumph or tragedy that seems to put my faith on the line. And the bottom line for Christianity is the resurrection. I don't think we'd be here doing what we're doing if something singular and extraordinary had not happened at the end of Jesus' life, something that transformed his life and death into a force that would be alive still. And it is. Christ is risen indeed.

Still, facing the central claim and joy of Christians, the resurrection of Christ, we are likely to hold doubts. Even believers—maybe especially believers—have doubts.

We are not alone. Luke's gospel tells us that when the brave women—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James—reported the empty tomb of Jesus to the apostles, their words "seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

One of the strongest ligaments holding the various New Testament accounts together is the doubts honestly held in the inner circle—Peter, before and after the Third Day; the disciples who encountered the risen Lord on the Emmaus Road; Thomas who had missed the earlier meeting and needed physical verification before he would believe.

In more contemporary disciples, including

radically committed and saint like Christians, the more we read their journals or hear their most private confessions, the more we realize that all have doubts. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

That would be us all.

But this isn't about believing an official line, or being literally free of doubt about any one story—even the story of the empty tomb on the first Easter.

Jesus did not come to start a religion, or to win points in a religious debate. He came, to use the timeless words of John the Evangelist, "that we may have life and have it more abundantly."

So our story and celebration connect with the facts of life.

Albert Schweitzer put it this way: "The fundamental fact of human awareness is this: 'I am life that wants to live in the midst of other life that wants to live.'"¹

Whether you know or subscribe to the gospel, there is something fundamental, something in our physical and, I believe, spiritual DNA, that binds us to life.

Death: something about the fact, and fear, and even the denial of death, that unites us all at the deepest possible level.

Jesus came to deal with the shadow of death that can so distort life. He taught things that brought light on that shadow. He saw the divine spark in other people, and he modeled a love that broke down boundaries and gave dignity to every human being. He humored the religious, and if there's one thing terminally serious people like the religious can't stand up to it's good-spirited, non-anxious humor.

But it was our doubts about life and our fears of death he most supremely lived for, died for, and then somehow rose up for.

When the novelist J.D. Salinger died in January, the big brains brought their big analytical guns

into print before the man was in the ground. They were all over *The Catcher in the Rye*, his most widely read book. Much tongue wagging about the central character, Holden Caulfield, his excessive adolescent whining—and by extension—the whining of my generation that read it in high school or college.

But only one critic I've read noticed² something about Holden that taps into that common DNA about death and life. And it may be the core of the book.

Barely two pages into the book Holden's younger brother Allie dies:

"He's dead now. He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946. You'd have liked him. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent."

Salinger shows Holden going on a violent rage, breaking windows, hurting things and himself: "It was a very stupid thing to do, I'll admit, but I hardly didn't even know I was doing it, and you didn't know Allie."

People, particularly adolescents, fall in love with the Holden who criticizes adults as phonies, who distances himself from and skewers his peers, who suffers all the indignities of out of control hormones, including sexual ones.

But a great storyteller, with barely a few mentions and no overt clues, has pointed to the real roots of his rage and alienation.

Death. The injustice of death. The deep sorrow of death. The outright pain of losing someone you admire and love.

Late in the novel, Holden, still as emotionally gangly, and scared and sad, too, tells his sister that what he'd like to do is stand in a field of rye where thousands of kids are playing. He'd stand at the edge of the field, where there is an abrupt cliff. He'd stand there as the only big person for miles.

"What I have to do," he tells her, "I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean, if they're running, and they don't look where they're going. I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be."

I don't think that's crazy. I think you're here because you hope it's not crazy.

I know lots of people—some of you are right here now—who face the power and riddle of death. You know you could not save a certain loved one, but maybe there is something you can do to save others, maybe, in a sense, save yourself from fear and denial and unneeded pain.

You stand at the edge. With people who hurt or fear, people with questions, people determined to live beyond their fears. You want to catch the seekers and the lost. And catch the children—has there ever been a time when we needed more to watch out for the children of this world? You want to help them and yourself in the search for God, the creator and lover of us all.

If the very best we can be—like Jesus full of life and love and laughter and long, deep wisdom—can face death and rise, then there is hope.

It's not crazy. If you can see yourself in that field, I promise you won't be alone. There are Easter people everywhere. We can all help catch them. Thank God. We have a word to greet them, Alleluia.

¹ From "Albert Schweitzer Speaks Out," *World Book Yearbook*, 1964, p. 142.

² Review article by Hilary Cosell, *The Providence Journal*, Feb. 4, 2010