

## CHRIST, THE MORNING STAR

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*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. (1 Corinthians 15:19-20))*

An old school of pulpit wisdom maintains that every preacher should have the Bible in one hand and the local newspaper in the other. The thought originates with the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Barth, and on this day of all days – this feast of all feasts – I would not want to disappoint either Dr. Barth or you. So let me assure you that I do indeed have with me here in the pulpit a Bible (it's actually the Book of Gospels). Close enough! And I do indeed have with me this copy of the local newspaper (it's actually The New York Times). It was a week ago Thursday, April 11<sup>th</sup> to be exact, when the Times ran a front-page article entitled "Peering Into Light's Graveyard: The First Image of a Black Hole." Of course, on top of the headline was the photograph of the black hole, the first ever to be taken.

A black hole in space results from a dying sun. When a star finally burns up all its fuel it begins collapsing in on itself, and eventually, so much matter compresses into one small place that the force of gravity it exerts becomes overpowering. Like the drain in the bottom of your bathtub, it sucks in everything around it. Not even light can escape. As a black hole draws more and more matter into its maw the gravitational pull becomes even stronger, and its reach – or, event horizon – extends out even further. Thus, the NY Times article referred to black holes as a hungry beasts: "behemoths of nothingness," "disruptors of the cosmic order," and "gravitational tombstones of stars." The particular black hole captured in the photograph is deep in the heart of Messier 87, a galaxy in the constellation Virgo. It is several billion times more massive than our sun, and it's growing. But fear not: at 55 million light years from Earth, we have nothing to fear, at least not anytime soon.

This first image of a black hole is at the same time beautiful and frightening. It is mysterious and menacing. And it's out there. At the news conference revealing the photograph, one astronomer close to the project said, "We have seen what we thought was unseeable."

What an applicable phrase for our day, even Easter Day: "we have seen what we thought was unseeable." Four years ago this summer our choristers sang a concert tour in France, and one of the venues was Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. It was amazing. Our choir did more than hold their own in that ancient and holy place. Their voices soared, and hundreds of tourists stopped their milling about and listened. After the concert I was outside waiting for them in the plaza in front of the cathedral. I looked up at the great west towers, the rose window, and the blue sky. I remember thinking that someone 800 years ago, standing right where I was, would have seen exactly the same glorious sight. The continuity with souls long dead was moving and meaningful. Then on Monday came news of the terrible fire consuming the cathedral's roof and filling the Parisian sky with thick smoke. I watched on my computer screen as the central spire came crashing down onto the nave. When it fell I experienced the same sickening feeling in my gut that I felt eighteen years ago when I saw the TV reports of the World Trade Center towers' collapsing. It was inconceivable then, and it was inconceivable again on Monday. We have seen what we thought was unseeable.

It could be that in the past year, some of you here today have seen other sights that you thought were unseeable – other sights you wish you could un-see. It could be that death, like a giant black hole in space, reached out and captured someone you love in its overpowering gravitational pull. You have stood at the burial site of your beloved. You have peered into light's

graveyard. Such was the case for Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and some other women who came to the tomb of Jesus on the first Easter morning. The Gospel accounts vary, but we can assume that some or all of them had been at the crucifixion the previous Friday, seeing there what they wished they never had to see: the horrible, unjust death of Jesus, their beloved friend, teacher, and Lord. They had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel, but now all the bright potential and possibility that he embodied was gone – swallowed up by death, the behemoth of nothingness, a hungry beast, indeed.

It's right about now when I fear I am beginning to disappoint you – something I said I didn't want to do. You see, I know that you came here today for a big dose of Easter joy, but so far, all I've given you is existential despair. Hang on – we are just about to turn the corner. In fact, the Gospel writer Luke (24:1-12) tells us that the phenomenon of seeing what we thought was unseeable was about to reveal itself in such a new way that *the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind (Isaiah 65:17)*. The women came to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus, a part of the Jewish burial custom that they had left undone the previous Friday because of the Sabbath. Upon arriving they found that the stone sealing the tomb – which in those days would have been more like a small cave – had been rolled away. They went inside the cave and could not find the body of Jesus. The tomb was empty.

Suddenly, two people of light, two men in dazzling apparel greeted them, and announced in so many words that Jesus had risen, as he had said he would. The empty tomb, of which the women were the first witnesses, stands within history defying all rational, scholarly, and skeptical attempts to explain it away. None of the history that immediately ensued makes any sense whatsoever if the tomb still contained the dead body of Jesus. So it can't be written off as just one of those good old Bible stories. But the empty tomb alone wouldn't be enough to turn the known world upside down. It isn't the full story of Easter. By the end of the day, these first witnesses and others began meeting the risen Jesus. They saw him, spoke with him, even touched him. Mary Magdalene, who had been at the tomb and met Jesus proclaimed, "I have seen the Lord!" All of them saw what they thought was unseeable. The result, initially, was confusion, of course. But soon the confusion would turn to rejoicing.

It's been nearly two-thousand years now since the first Easter Day, so we have had a long time to think about the implications of these things that came to pass. The Resurrection of Jesus provides the basis for a world view, and even redefines our place in the universe. What we find in Easter is the promise that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God: no wasting disease, no threat of evil, no behemoth of nothingness, neither life, nor death is stronger than God's love for us. But the world, as you know, doesn't always understand our Easter joy. The world wonders: how can we say that God's love is stronger than death when the fact remains, we all die. Apparently, one of the big debates in physics these days is called "the firewall paradox." The question is, how would you die if you strayed too close to a black hole? Note well: the debate is not *if* you die, but simply *how* you die. Nothing returns from a black hole, and nobody comes back from the dead. Any words to the contrary are merely an idle tale. Anyone basing a world view on Easter is to be pitied. So goes what is often an unproductive shouting match between science and theology.

Once upon a time a school girl asked her science teacher how the Biblical prophet Jonah managed to survive in the whale's belly for three days before being spit up on the beach. The teacher told the girl that it never happened. It's just one of those Bible stories. The girl replied, "Someday when I go to heaven I'm going to ask Jonah how he did it." The teacher, in frustration, retorted, "How do you know Jonah even went to heaven? Suppose he went to hell." The girl responded as politely as she could, "Well sir," she said, "I don't even like to say the word. But if that's where you think he went ... then you ask him."

With all due respect to the little girl and her quick wit, the story of Jonah can't be counted as a pattern for the resurrection of Jesus. Likewise, the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44) is not

the same unseeable thing that the friends and disciples of Jesus witnessed on the first Easter Day. Think about it: in raising Lazarus to life again, Jesus pulled his friend back from death, back from the black hole of the grave, back to his same life in his same body. Thus, to hope according to Lazarus is to hope for this life only. But something altogether different happened to Jesus. In describing the resurrection appearances, it's evident that the Gospel writers were struggling mightily to make sense of it. They had seen what was unseeable, and they were fumbling for the right language to describe the experience of meeting the risen Jesus. It was clearly Jesus, but sometimes they had trouble recognizing him. He had a body they could see and touch, but he appeared at will and vanished from their sight. What was happening? Were they losing their minds? They couldn't *all* have been losing their minds.

What the Gospels and St. Paul seem to be saying is not that God pulled Jesus back from death. Rather, the love of God went with Jesus into death, and through death, and out the other side of death. Then for a time, for us and for our salvation Jesus appeared to various witnesses. They beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. St. Paul wrote, *He is the first fruits of those who have died*, and now the gates of everlasting life are open to us. The Christian hope of eternal life has never been that Jesus pulls back from death. Instead, the Easter faith is that Jesus goes with us through death and out the other side. It is why at funerals we say, *All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grace we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*

When I was growing up my father was the rector of an Episcopal Church in New Jersey, and I will always remember an elderly parishioner named Edward. Ed had a remarkable story to tell, and one day he told it to my father, who later told it to me. Many years earlier Ed and his wife had had one son, an only child who was the light of their life. Every summer they would manage to scrape together enough money to vacation on the Jersey shore. Ed and his son enjoyed getting up early in the mornings and going to the beach to watch the sun rise over the ocean. The sight of the brilliant orange sun perfectly balanced between the sky and the sea, extending its glow toward heaven and earth was indescribably beautiful. Ed and his son frequently commented as such. These mornings were their special time together.

The years went on and just as the boy grew to be a young man the clouds of war darkened the sky over Europe. Soon Ed's son found himself in uniform, as did many of his generation, and at length he was overseas fighting to reclaim France from the Nazi tyranny. Then came the dreaded day when the Western Union telegram arrived at Ed's house: "*The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your son was killed in action over France ...*" Ed's grief was deep and dark and prolonged. It was years before he could bring himself to return to the Jersey shore, but eventually he did. One early morning he arose and went to the beach to watch the sun rise. There he saw the same glorious spectacle, and he ached to share it with his son. He even thought to himself, "If only you were here to see this with me again."

Then it happened. Then he heard it. He heard what he thought was un-hearable. He heard the voice of his son. And his son said, "Dad, you haven't seen anything yet." The voice was clear as a bell, and unmistakably his son's. It was so audible that Ed thought a tape recorder could have captured it. The experience was fleeting. It didn't last, and Ed was perplexed. What was happening? For days Ed wondered: had he not had enough sleep? Had he drank too much coffee? Was he losing his mind? Eventually Ed decided that all he could do was receive the voice as an Easter gift, and it called him back to life. It was a gift from God, whose only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, blazed a trail through death, came out the other side, and opened unto us the gates of everlasting life. Christ is the first fruits of those who have died, but not the last.

On Easter we have peered into light's graveyard, and we have seen what we thought was unseeable: Christ, the morning star who knows no setting. Death has been swallowed up in victory. Our song of triumph has begun. Alleluia.