

**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church**  
Sermon by The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
Easter Morning  
April 20, 2014

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. All who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

You may wonder why I am beginning an Easter morning sermon reading portions of the prologue of John.

It may be because today we are celebrating a gloriously impossible event, the one of Jesus' resurrection, an event which defies logic, pushes up against all the laws of nature, and remains outside of human expectation.

We may see the resurrection as a matching bookend to the first gloriously impossible event, as described by Madeline L'Engle, "The first of the gloriously impossible thing that Jesus did was to be born – the power that created the universe come to live with us, as one of us." We may see the sense of new life in the resurrection as an echo of or as a compliment to the new life offered to the world, through the in-breaking of God's love in Jesus' birth. The Word made flesh and lived among us set together with the glory of the Word revealed to us through Jesus' resurrection. That could make sense.

However, there is a broader context into which the gospel of John invites us. John's focus in the garden, while it was still dark, on the first day of the week, is not the surprise of the resurrection, but it is of the importance and priority of Jesus' impending ascension to the Father.

So on this Easter morning our thinking needs to be as expansive, radical and life-giving as is the message in John's gospel, for John's account of that morning calls us into a revelation of God which stretches us beyond

the incarnation and resurrection. John's gospel reminds us that although most of what we believe we know about Jesus is based upon his earthly life and death, there is actually a larger story to be told, one that goes back to the logos in the beginning and one which extends into eternity, one which was sealed for us in Jesus' ascension, and one which is essential for our salvation.

By John uniquely linking the three events of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into one end time event, John offers us a truer understanding of humankind's final destiny and enables us to focus on the charge his truth leaves us with.

What John offers which the other gospel writers do not, is that in the garden, on that morning of the first day of the week, when Mary recognizes Jesus by his calling of her name, Jesus says something to her that has forever changed the relationship between God and humanity. Jesus says, "Do not hold onto me, because I have not ascended yet to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, " I am ascending to my Father and your father, to my God and your God."

In those words, John's Jesus completes the promise made in the prologue: All who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

In saying, "I am going to my father and your father, my God and your God", Jesus draws us into the relationship he has with God. We are not just brothers and sisters in Christ; we are brothers and sisters of Christ, for Jesus invites us into his relationship with God. In this action of God through Jesus, we are given the access to be with God as Jesus is. We now share with God intimacy, creativity, a sense of abiding with one another, and a sense of shared mission. This is the good news of Easter morning in John's Gospel. Not the resurrection, but humankind's unity with God offered to us by Jesus' return to his place of unity with God. Jesus draws our humanity with him and sets us within the heart of God.

By Jesus' bringing us into the relationship he shares with God, God through Jesus is declaring that it is now impossible to speak of humanity without God and to speak of God without humanity. Neither humanity nor God can be accurately described from here forward without

reference to the other. God can no longer completely “Other” nor can humanity be completely God-forsaken. God and humanity are fundamentally intertwined. And not surprisingly, through that relationship we are now formed together in a love that extends through all eternity.

This truth can be a lot to absorb. We have suddenly moved beyond the notion of the creator God being distant from us; we have been stretched beyond the notion that we need to merely repeat the good works of Jesus to be a good Christian, and we are invited to understand our faithful response to this new relationship with God offered to us by the ascension of Jesus to be more than looking for new beginnings out of every ending, as one might view the resurrection. Our new life has taken on a new character, one that which defines our humanity is our rootedness and expressiveness of the love of God.

Now this knowledge can leave us with a sense of peace of comfort in knowing that the entirety of our existence, both our life and our death, cannot be separated from God’s love. This is what allows us to draw upon the strength and power of God in our ordinary lives. This is what allows us to say our prayers and to know that God hears them, for how can God not, when we are so intimately connected? This is what turns our hearts to see the face of Christ in the faces of others, for if we believe each person not only reflects the image of God, but also is the image of God, and therefore is of the love of God, then we can see with new eyes those around us.

But here’s the hard work to do as well. Here’s the charge that is given to us in this new relationship offered to us by Jesus’ ascension. If we are entwined with God, if we are united with God, who is love, then we must love as God loves. We now have no other choice.

This can seem like a tall order. It certainly was a struggle for the disciples as we heard their stories through holy week. Within 6 hours of being bound together in Christ, through the foot washing and the breaking of bread, the disciples deserted Jesus and scattered. It shows us that by our humanly efforts alone, it is not possible to love as God loves. But because of Jesus’ ascension and his gift of the Holy Spirit, we are now able to offer God’s love to others.

But to do this, it is assumed we know God's love. And some of us may know that to love as God loves is to love unconditionally, mercifully, endlessly, vulnerably, and generously. We know this because we have experienced this kind of love from God.

Yet some of us may not know how to do this for we may not know what God's love feels like or what it feels like to love God. It's a more common occurrence that we may think. For we all expect to love God and our neighbor from the day we become Christian. Unfortunately, our expectations usually have almost nothing to do with what happens. Many of us have no sense of God at all, or if we do, it is more like a sense of duty or even fear toward God. Then, because we believe we should love God, we judge ourselves to be religious failures.

Our ancestors made no such assumptions about Christian love. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, characterized the life of a monastic in three stages. At the beginning, he or she serves God out of fear; next, the service of God stems from the desire for a reward; only in the final stage does this person serve God out of friendship with God, or out of the pure love of God, as a child of God's household. The significant point here is that loving God and knowing God's love is something to be learned over a very long time.

You may want to ponder today, when did you first recognize that you loved God? Not when did you believe in the existence of God, or feel the presence of God in your lives, but when did you first know you loved God? If and when you did, was it from a sense of awe, or fear, or an instinct to fall upon your knees in praise and thanksgiving? If so, that's a good start.

Or did you notice you loved God when you suddenly felt compelled to help someone, and you knew it was a response to something, and you assumed it must be God who initiated this turn in your heart? That's another fruitful step when you realize your actions are a response to something other than you and something you were deeply attached to. You are now in a give and take relationship with God.

Or was it the moment you knew there was no other choice but to surrender your life joyfully, gratefully, and in obedience to God?

It's important that we do this work of knowing how we love God and how God loves us, for I deeply believe Jesus didn't bring us into this intimate and loving relationship with God for our benefit only, but so that we may continue Christ's mission in the world, of restoring all people to unity with God. As we are in union with God and Christ, our Episcopal Church has adopted this as the mission of our Church and our BCP tells us we do this by praying, worshiping, proclaiming the gospel, and promoting justice, peace, and love.

So this Easter morning, our charge is to love others as God loves and allow this love to seep into all our relationships, for it is in that love which we experience the fullness of our relationship with God.

Laurence Freeman states in his book, "On Friendship" that because of the eternal nature of God's love, within which we are all intimately connected, we experience every other relationship in **each** relationship we experience. What we think of as being a separate part of our life – our relationship with God – is never separate. Relationship with God cannot be separated from all other relationships any more than this little piece of ground, that I am sitting on now, is separated from the little piece of ground that you are sitting on. It's the same ground. The same ground of being.

Of course the hard work is walking into the reciprocity of this love. For if our love for others is brittle or judgmental or hardened or careless, then this means our love of God are those things also. For as we love others, we love God. And as we love God, we love others.

I've always felt so sorry for Mary in the gospel account we heard this morning. When she recognized Jesus by the sound of his voice, all she wanted to do is to hold him again, to feel the touch of his skin, to see him in a form that has been changed, yes, but was still recognizable. But Jesus didn't allow it. He was calling her into a new relationship, not one based upon what she knew of Jesus in that moment, or of the talks that

they had had, or of the meals they had shared, or of the healing acts she had witnessed. By releasing Mary from holding onto what was, Jesus was able to complete his purpose of bringing humankind into a union with God, as he was, and to allow Mary to have a relationship not just with Jesus the person, but with the love which Jesus bore into the world, from the beginning and into eternity. He bound her to the eternal love of God. That was grace. It is grace that binds us to one another and to God. This is what Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension did for us. In the bread that we break together, in the real presence of Christ found in the meal we share and in the community we build, we are bound together in a greater promise offered us this Easter morning, and all mornings, a promise of love eternal.

Amen.