

## WHAT MAKES US AN EASTER PEOPLE?

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Easter Day

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In the center of the old city of Jerusalem stands the ancient Church of the Resurrection, built originally by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, and later expanded to include the rock of Golgotha. It was built to protect and preserve the site for the disciples of the One who was crucified there, built so that they could come and worship and remember, and go away inspired and refreshed.

In the first century, the great rock of Golgotha stood outside the walls of Jerusalem. It was part of an ancient rock quarry, but Golgotha itself was never quarried. Running through it from bottom to top was a fault line that made it unsuitable. It was literally, to use the psalmist's words: "the stone the builders rejected." But although useless for building, it was quite useful for crucifixions, and eventually, it became the rock known for the crucifixion that changed the world.

Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem inevitably visit the great Church of the Resurrection (or Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as Western Christians call it) and they climb several flights of stairs to a richly decorated and candle-lit chapel that surrounds the top of Golgotha. There, one can kneel and through a small opening in the floor, reach in and touch the top of the great stone, now worn smooth by the loving touch of millions and millions of pilgrims through the centuries.

Typically then, most pilgrims visit the shrine of the Empty Tomb in the great rotunda of the Church, or one of the many lovely chapels. Very few pilgrims make their way down into the bowels of the church to a small, dark, and plain chapel directly under the chapel of Golgotha. This small room, known as "Adam's Chapel," is set up against the base of Golgotha and, through a glass section of its back wall, one can see the great rock, and clearly see the fault line running through it.

Adam's Chapel, like the great church itself, is very old. Its presence is a testimony to the fact that from earliest times, whatever else Christians understood about the Crucifixion and Resurrection, they knew one thing very clearly: the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was not for the sake of Jesus Christ. It was for the sake of Adam—the first human, whose name in Hebrew—*adam*—actually means "human." The Resurrection was for the sake of Adam, and Eve, and their daughters and sons—generation upon generation. Adam's chapel remembers that in the Resurrection of Christ, every one of us—fault lines and all—is lifted up, out of death.

We are resurrected with Christ. However we have experienced death and darkness in our lives, God pulls us by the hand and by the heart out of that darkness into the sunlight. *That* is the wonder of this day and we participate in the wonder not only with this worship service, but with the symbols of spring and new life that we associate with Easter.

And yet, even as we enjoy spring flowers and Easter outfits and colored eggs and chocolate eggs, in the deepest part of our hearts, I believe most of us can identify with Mary Magdalene as she stands before an empty tomb. She had come with certain expectations, prepared to grieve, and now here was evidence of the best possible news—that her beloved rabbi had risen from the dead—and she couldn't quite take it in. Compelled to do *something* but not sure what, she went and called Peter and the others, and they, too, came, and saw, and were confounded.

How different are we? Like Mary we come to Easter with certain expectations: an uplifting service after the gloominess of Lent, an Easter egg hunt, then a family gathering with some good food (and maybe some political arguments over the dinner table). All those things are most welcome, but don't forget the reason for the season: the most amazing story of our Christian faith. Christ has died and **Christ is risen**, and we—faulted children of Adam, one and all—are risen, spiritually resurrected, right beside him. The story has defied human logic for 2,000 years even as it changed the course of human history.

What do we do with that? How do we continue to be an Easter people even after the symbols of Easter have wilted or worn out? And how do we continue to be an Easter people, rejoicing in God's amazing gift to us, when we live with on-going injustice, hostile politics, climate crisis, rising COVID numbers, and the horrifying news coming out of Ukraine every day? How on earth do we reconcile the great news of the Resurrection with the dreadful stuff that goes on unabated all over our world?

The Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, wrote this about the Resurrection: "A new Nature is being not merely made but made out of an old one. We live amid all the anomalies, inconveniences, hopes, and excitements of a house that is being rebuilt." (*Miracles*)

In the Resurrection, God uses the old material in a new way. We bring our history, all that we are, to the Empty Tomb and, if we dare to stand at the doorway, in the sunlight of an Easter day, God will transform us. That is the hope and the promise of the Resurrection. God takes us as we are, touches those parts of us that have died, and brings them to life again. If we allow it—because we always have the choice—but if we allow God to transform us, then we can become what God created us to be. Like a house being rebuilt, we will live with anomalies and inconveniences even while we live with the hope and excitement of God's promise. In a world so badly broken, our hope is still and ever will be, in God's love for us.

When I visited the Church of the Resurrection, I knelt and touched the tip of Golgotha, and I descended down into the stark simplicity of Adam's Chapel, but I could only make sense of them when I knelt in the cramped inner room of the Empty Tomb. In this shrine where the event of Easter morning is commemorated, I knelt on the marble floor, squeezed in with other Christians, and felt there a profound sense of peace that defied reason, and I remember it still today. I had touched Golgotha and I knew that it had no power over me, as it had no power over Christ. But the peace of the Resurrection was the final word, and it was that peace that I took away with me.

I pray for each one of you that you may carry in your heart the peace and hope of The Resurrection, and your resurrection. May you feel yourself being rebuilt and reborn—fault lines and all. I pray for all of us that we may come to see ourselves as God sees us: loved and lovable, open to receive God's peace and able to spread God's peace to a world that badly needs what an Easter people can bring to it. That's important! Through the risen Christ, God empowers each one of us to spread peace and justice from where we stand, praying always that God's will be done.

Those long-ago Christians included Adam's Chapel in the Church of the Resurrection so that all of us who followed would *remember* that we were resurrected with Christ. They knew that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was a one-time event that would go on and on in our lives, transforming us into an Easter people: confounded at times, even terrified, but commissioned and inspired to bring Easter to a waiting world. AMEN.

Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18.