

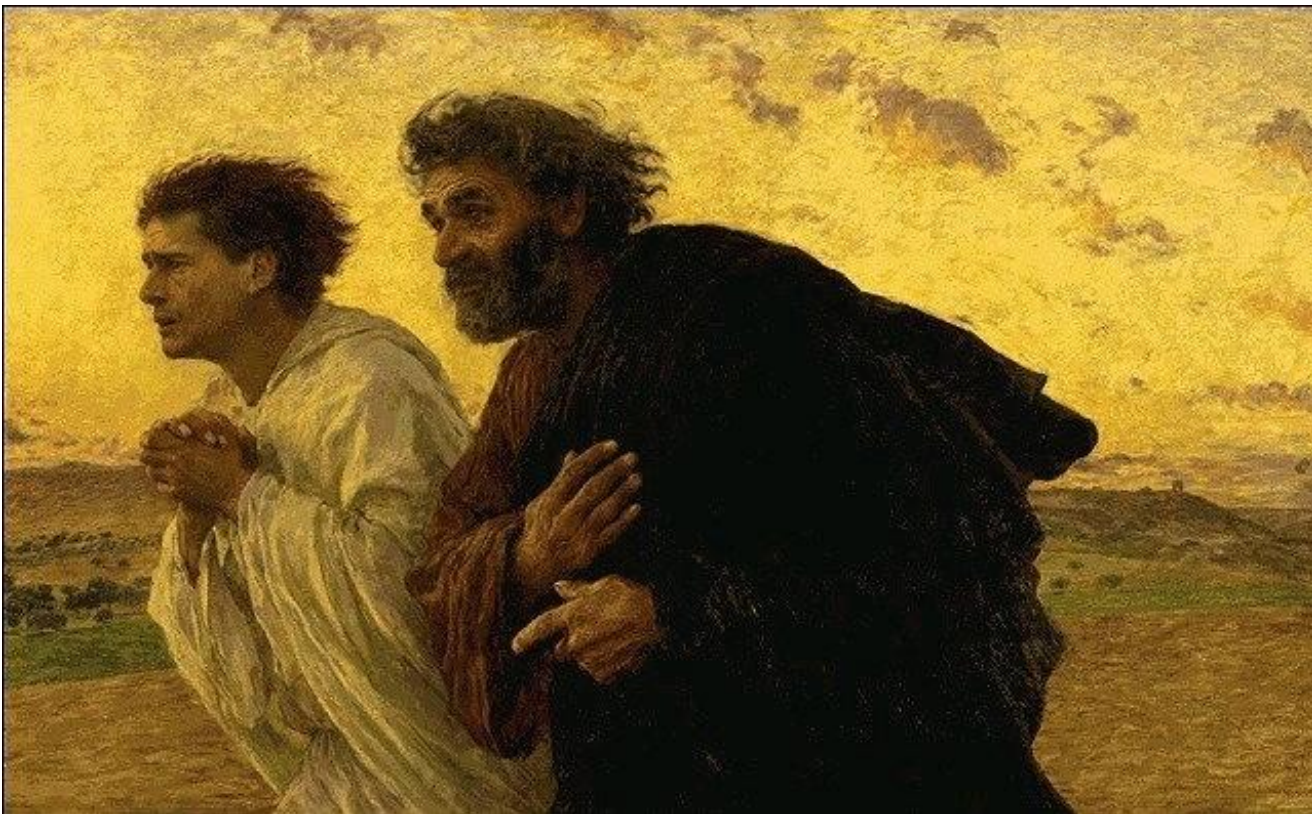
The Four Resurrections. (John 20:1-10)

* Friends, Easter of 2009 is no longer ahead of us, it is here and it is yours. Today we've gathered to celebrate Jesus' resurrection, which is the chief celebration among all others. Significantly Easter is not only a festival about Jesus' victorious resurrection but it is also the celebration in hope of "another resurrection," particularly for those who shared in Christ' Passover from death into life.

* This sermon is centered on the text from John's Gospel that is suggested by our lectionary for Easter Sunrise Worship.

* According to the Gospel tradition Jesus was the first and only one to be laid in a new sepulcher. To this tomb on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James and Salome came with fragrances to weep, mourn and purify the body of the Lord. But when they arrived at the tomb, it had been opened. So, being afraid, "Mary Magdalene ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple (John) with the frightening news. This news shook Peter and John's hearts".

* The artist depicts both Peter and John running as fast as they can to see if the news Mary Magdalene had brought to them was accurate. The brilliant dawn of that morning is left behind as they fly forward with eager feet to the empty tomb. Both run swiftly with mixed anticipation of joy and sorrow. Their eyes express a desire to grasp that which is not yet seen. Inner desires are evident in the strong rugged face of Peter and in John's features as well.



"Peter and John Running to the Tomb," by Eugene Burnand.

* We might have the impression that after such swift running, Peter's heart would not be able to bear the next test, -- the bliss of resurrection. Friends, if our sinful nature would be given to experience the future pleasures prepared by the Heavenly Father, we would die of a heart attack caused by overwhelming joy. As it is written, "... no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him," (1Co 2:9).

* As we try to understand in what ways Mary's news was received, let's discuss the two concepts. First, the disciples might accept the woman's message at face value, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have laid him." So we might say that Peter and John had been preoccupied with the idea of stealing. They arrived at the open tomb, went inside, discovered nothing except the burial cloths and, as (v.8) says, they believed. With the first idea in mind, John believed Mary "...for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead," (v.9).

* The second theory, supported by majority scholars, says that observing the empty tomb including the burial cloths, the disciples' faith turned into believing Jesus' resurrection. The Gospel says, "Then Simon Peter came, ... and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself." As far as the burial cloths were laying in such a proper way, Peter and John could assume that the body was not taken away by thieves in a hurry, rather, the Lord himself unwrapped his body, or it was unwrapped with the assistance of angels. It is against the logical way of thinking that wrapped body couldn't be stolen. By the way, until now there are many speculations among theologians. Generally all commentaries teach that John came to faith due to the inspection of the empty tomb. But I've never heard or read that unwrapped cloths from the empty tomb might serve as a bridge to another resurrection for the benefit of the apostle's faith. This is a brilliant, unique theory I believe you've never heard as well.

* Friends, I imagine that after mentioning 'another resurrection' you've not got a hint that the burial cloths were a vehicle between two, Jesus and Lazarus' resurrections. According John's Gospel ch. 11, just a few weeks prior to Jesus' passion on the cross, Lazarus was raised from the dead. That time, accompanied by the disciples, Jesus came up to the tomb; no doubt Lazarus was as dead as the stone that sealed his grave. Martha, the sister of Lazarus mentioned that there would be a bad smell if Jesus decided to remove the stone because her brother had been dead for four days. "Jesus said to her, Did I not say to you that if you had faith you would see the glory of God?" (Joh 11:40).

* Please notice, while Jesus prayed to the Father, Peter and John were there, standing next to him. Soon after, with a loud voice, Jesus said, "Lazarus, come out." Jesus spoke to one who had been dead four days. In spite of this fact the dead heard, and came out. Halleluiah!!! His hands and feet were bound with linen strips and his face wrapped with a cloth. Then Jesus commanded his disciples, "Unbind him, and let him go," (Joh 11:44).

* Quite so Peter, John and their friends rushed to fulfill Jesus' request. Doing this the apostles freed Lazarus from the bondage of the burial cloths. They touched him, they smelled him, they greeted him and the former dead acted adequately. From that moment the apostles' memory was fastened with the burial cloths and with the person who came back to life. Now we arrive at the starting point to bring out one more resurrection.

* As it was said, Peter and John were the eye-witnesses and even partakers of Lazarus' resurrection but soon afterward they lose the significance of that moment having been threatened by Jesus' death on the cross. The disciple's faith was drained to the bottom as a vessel; in effect their faith was very much weakened, or frankly, it might have even died. It is what the devil and the sinful flesh desire. These adversaries long for the burial of the apostle's faith and ours as well. The foes want us to forget about Jesus and Lazarus' resurrections; they want to shift our focus from God's love towards non essential things. No doubt our faith also is constantly tyrannized. Moreover we are not free from the power of death. It is only one month ago that we held the two burial ceremonies for Lynn Saul and Albert Kurtz. Next to that the desires of sinful flesh are very real to us. The poisoned false doctrines and world beliefs are very real. Furthermore, we might have the negative experiences due to the fact that we have not yet received what we believe. These and other forces constantly weaken our living faith with one purpose: to kill our hope and faith in Christ Jesus in general and in his resurrection in particular.

* Thinking back to that Easter morning, we were focused on the important detail. When Peter and John saw Jesus' burial cloths, they touched them, they smelled them and instantly they remembered! Now they are no longer foolish believing in the woman's message. Instantly their hearts were amazed with the new but still unspoken message, "He is risen! – He is risen indeed!" Again and again from one generation to the next this overwhelming belief is flashing through the inner essence of the human hearts, "He is risen! – He is risen indeed!" Halleluiah!!!

* Now the burial cloths or other signs are no longer the signs of despair and anguish but, the men's eyes received the vision of the Person who came back to life! Please note, though Peter and John's faith were raised, yet they had not seen Jesus. At that moment they didn't even know that it was necessary for Christ to rise from the dead according to the Scriptures, (v.9). But in spite of this, John began to believe and, I think, Peter did as well. This is nothing less than an act of the living faith embracing God's revelation. Thereby we come to the idea of the resurrection of the apostle's faith! Halleluiah!!!

* However the belief of resurrection at the individual level might be uncertain. Questions like, "Is my faith sufficient?" or "Am I good enough as the well-knowing men of faith to be blessed with eternal life?" Such questions seem to be common when we are tempted or when we fall short to do righteous things, or, when we experience harsh times. Of course we are not strong enough and never good enough. Thanks to the Lord for the given signs of his resurrection. They powerfully sustain our faith and keep it alive.

* I have a print of the renowned painting "After the First Communion" by Smith. Hopefully many of you have seen this painting, if not, you are welcome to the parsonage after service to see this picture. The painting shows people leaving a church after an Easter worship service in which many young girls received their first Holy Communion. All of them look like brides wearing white dresses, crowned with white flowers on their heads, symbolizing the spotless nature of Christ's Church. In the foreground is a girl with a Bible, rosary and candle in her hands. Her wide eyes intimate with an inner vision. She's been dazed by the experience of God's tangible love, having fallen in her identity with the busy world.

* If we take for granted God's love towards that girl, towards many before her and many after her and to us as well, the one important truth is here, Christ's resurrection from the dead! This act demonstrates God's love for us and even for this perishable world. Furthermore the disciples became the recipients of God's tangible love that exclusively belongs to his elect. Later during this service we'll come to the Table, where we find the Lord, in, with, and under the visible signs of his resurrection. Like that girl from Smith's painting we'll be immersed in an inner vision of the risen Lord who renews our weakened faith to the glory of "another resurrection" that is still ahead of times, but it certainly belongs to us. Halleluiah!!!

* After all we'll see the King of kings in his royal Epiphany. We'll never mistake our Lord for Moses, Elijah or any other men of faith. The brands on his palms and feet will identify our Lord! Those powerful signs of God's passionate and tangible love will never be stripped away. In some future day, approaching the risen Christ as Thomas did, we'll bow before the Lamb in the full adoration of our hearts, saying nothing more than this, "My Lord and my God!" Beloved, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Amen.