

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
Easter Day 2021
Sunday, April 4th

Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 118
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
John 20:1-18

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

A E Houseman's, 'Loveliest of Trees the Cherry now' is a lovely poem that always comes to my mind at this time of year, especially in Georgetown where there are not just cherry trees but Magnolias and so many others, I cannot name, all around us. Of course, there is a wistfulness in Houseman that others have parodied. The idea of a twenty-year-old thinking about his death fifty years hence as he drinks in the cherry blossom is perhaps a little cliched. The journalist Hugh Kingsmill Lunn makes fun of the melancholy youth's preoccupation with death. 'What still alive at 22, A clean upstanding lad like you?', he mimics. It gets a little less than savory after that, but he suggests committing a capital offence to remedy the situation of being alive so long! In any case, those of us with considerably more than 20 years behind us can't help but do the sums can we! How many more springs have we? Not – barring a miracle – 50 – for some of you yes, but not for me anyway!

Last Sunday seems a long time ago now. We had the solemn narration of the passion, but even such solemnities provide their opportunities for a lighter side. Lorraine, for instance, was playing the high priest while I was reading the words of Jesus. And it occurred to me after we had done it, that

it is not that often that a wife has the entirely legitimate opportunity to condemn her husband to death in public! I don't know, but I thought I heard just a little too much relish in her delivery for my comfort! I suppose it is what you get for being married a woman with a Drama degree!

So it is then, that we have walked with Christ this week from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to the upper room and his offering of the bread and wine, making them, before our uncomprehending eyes, the prophetic symbols of the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood. We have followed him to the garden in the dark and watched him as he confronted the agony of what the morning would bring, refusing to turn away and flee from it, though we knew he could. We were scattered with the disciples who found that their loyalty and love that they had such total confidence in, evaporated in a moment in the face of arrest, humiliation and threat. We ran with them, as fast as we could, and mumbled words of denial with Peter, while warming our hands at the enemy's fire. And, later, we returned to watch with the women and St John at the foot of the cross, as our hopes and dreams in life were killed and lost. And we have waited since then, like a child who has not been picked up from school and doesn't

know what else to do except to wait in the empty car park in the dark, alone and abandoned.

And yet, today all that sadness and brokenness and loss is taken away in a single word. In Mary's tearful solitary word of joyful recognition, "Rabbouni!" "Teacher!"

It is no coincidence that Easter and the Passover at which all this happened fall at the time of year they do. It happened around the first full moon after the Vernal Equinox; that is after the day when the sun crosses the equator and the northern hemisphere tilts more towards the sun and Spring is sprung. All around us we see new life bursting from the trees and the ground and, since Easter is all about new life, we have, in this spectacular show, a stunning natural analogy for all that the resurrection means. Life triumphing over death. The stark bare trees suddenly born again in a blaze of color and life.

And yet, perfect though it is, and partaking of the same joy we gather here to celebrate today, there is a difference.

The new life we see in the rebirth of nature each year, is inevitable, irresistible and predictable. The new life we discover in Christ is none of those things. It is not inevitable, irresistible or predictable. After Good Friday actually happens to us in our lives, which it does, be it through the betrayal, or malevolence of others, or through blind sickness or accident or chance; and then, when we find ourselves, like the child in the carpark, waiting in the endless darkness and emptiness of our own Holy Saturdays for someone or something to come, then we see nothing inevitable, irresistible or predictable about the new life we hope for.

And when, through God's good grace, it does come, sooner or maybe much later, the new life we experience is not like a blaze of blossom on a tree. It is more like a body that cannot be held, as Mary discovers. It is more like new born baby, thrust into the light, bloody and bruised and crying, forced into a new life that is stark and harder in so many ways from the darkness we have just come from. If you have ever had to do a physical test that uses the last ounce of yourself to complete, so that every muscle aches and you can barely stand, and you sit down bathed in the gladness and relief and peace of having got through to the other side, then that is sometimes how the resurrection feels to me when I have known it in my life. It has something of the beauty of the Cherry blossoms no doubt, but it

is much more than that. It is a struggle won. A new beginning that is full of hope and gratitude, but also full of the knowledge that it is God's gift of a new mountain to climb.

This Easter, perhaps more than any we have known, we can see the pattern of Christ's saving act all around us. This is Easter Day, but, as is always the case, in terms of our own lives, it is only personally Easter for some. Some of you are facing the loss and tribulation of Good Friday today, and some of you are still waiting in the car park of Holy Saturday, hoping against hope for the new life that is yet to arrive. Yet, today, all of us receive a taste of what is to come. We are given a great injection of hope, God's vaccine, in fact, against the pandemic of evil and darkness in our lives and our world.

We stand before the empty tomb and wonder how this empty hole can be such a sign of hope? It is, because, if it is empty, then the holes we have been trapped in, the holes of broken relationships, of failure, of selfishness of anger and malice and bitterness, all the holes that bury our hearts and lives and minds, they can be empty too. Because of today and the power that is released into the world we know new life will come. He is not here.

He is risen, and he walks in the garden where weary souls like you and I, and Mary may find him. It is not the time of the Cherry blossom, lovely as it surely is, that counts the years for me. It is the times he has rolled away the stone and let me out into the harsh light of Easter Day, that I would keep count of, for this count is not counting down years but counting up degrees of resurrected life.

A truly blessed and Happy Easter to you all!