

## **Bishop Skirving's 2023 Easter Sermon Transcript Preached at St. Mary's, Kinston**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. Please be seated.

Good morning and Happy Easter. And, Happy Easter, too, to those who may be joining us online. I'm pretty sure my wife will be one of those. When we first knew we were coming to St. Mary's, she was excited, and then she got the appointment to have her knee replaced. And so, she's less than two weeks post-surgery and not quite ready to navigate Easter Sunday in church.

It's good to be with you, as Tom [Fr. Tom Warren, Rector at St. Mary's] has now heard me say a couple of times, one of the things about being bishop in the Diocese of East Carolina, as compared to some other dioceses, is that we don't have a cathedral. That means perhaps, amongst other things, that there isn't a place I'm expected at times like Christmas and Easter when we like to be in church, so sometimes I'm running around looking for a place to be.

I was really grateful when Tom invited us to come and be here with you this year and to celebrate Easter with you. It's a pleasure. I'm especially grateful for all of the good music, organ and choir, but also the ensemble that is here right before me. And, I promise I will try to enunciate without spitting on you or anything like that. Although, I know that trumpeters are used to dealing with spit valves and things like that. As once upon a time I played my trumpet in Easter before I was ordained.

It's good to be with you to celebrate this day, which comes at the end of the holiest of weeks and what some would say the longest of seasons of Lent to be with you as a whole number of your membership renewed their baptismal vows publicly in our midst, in our presence, and before God and are confirmed.

The Easter message, though, hasn't changed. It's the same. Those of us that preach year by year will sometimes face the challenge of trying to think we can be creative and say something new or different or impress people with all that we've learned or something. I gave that up, I think, a long time ago one Lent, and I want to simply speak the faith as I think it is presented to us in scripture this day.

First at the center, I think the Easter message is simply a message of resurrection and faith. Now, that's not like Lazarus was raised from the dead, as we heard a couple of weeks ago. He died, and, as Jesus got to his grave (Lazarus was his friend), Jesus wept. The stone was rolled back and Jesus called Lazarus to come from the grave, and he did. But Lazarus was simply raised back into the human body that he had, and we don't know for how much more time he lived.

The resurrection of Jesus was not like Lazarus. The resurrection of Jesus is also not about immortality. It's not about somehow Jesus continuing to live on forever in some particular form, never changing, never going forward. Much of our Christian faith has been given language in the context of the Greek and Roman world in which Jesus lived, and so sometimes the language that

is used in our faith can suggest the idea of immortality. And indeed, some of us find the idea of immortality quite attractive, because we'd really rather not ever have to change. We like things the way they are.

We struggle with change, and sometimes we understand the responsibility of the church to be primarily conservator, to hold on to that which we've inherited and ensure that it never changes. Resurrection faith is not either of those things. Not the revivification of a human body, neither some expression of immortality. Resurrection faith affirms that before there is new life, there is death.

Some of the symbols that are popular in our world at seasons like this, things like bunnies and eggs and chicks and butterflies and flowers, are all symbols for us of the kind of new life that we experience in the cycle of creation that is the seasons, less in this climate than in the one from which I have come in Michigan. Spring, when we celebrate Easter, has come as a great rising from the death of winter when nothing grows, at least not outside. So, while those rhythms are different for us in every part of the world, those things still are symbols of that cycle. Death, new life; new life, death, and new life. The resurrection of Jesus is not like that either.

The resurrection of Jesus is an act by God that demonstrates that there is nothing more powerful than God's love for creation, and that no matter how much death might seem to us like failure, or an ending, or a result of great and prolonged suffering in some cases, that even then, God's love triumphs over that kind of death.

The Easter message is of a resurrection faith, which we can find hard to explain in language that can be easily understood and accepted by the masses. In fact, it's a truth that we need to accept by faith and not by the proving with evidence. That said, of those things which are commonly understood and accepted about Jesus historically, and not only from scripture, there are two things: one was that he lived and was executed on the cross, and the other is that it was reported that he was raised from the dead.

Resurrection faith is at the center of our Easter message. It's not only a message for Easter day, it's a message for the whole of our lifetime. Every Sunday is a small celebration of the resurrection. Every Sunday should be a celebration of the good news of God's love for us, a love that overcomes death, a love which, at an earlier part of John's gospel, is described as a light which cannot be conquered or overwhelmed by darkness.

Now, we can live at times in our lives when it seems like the darkness is overwhelming. Pray God that when we face those moments in our own lives, we are surrounded by others for whom the light is triumphing so that they can be witnesses to us, and strength to us, and comfort to us as we live through the valley of the shadow of death. But the Easter Gospel is not only an affirmation of resurrection faith. It's also a statement of God's desire that we be transformed. Now, again, not all of us might be eager about being transformed, because that's just a fancy word for change. And again, I got to say that we don't all like change, even though it's happening in spite of us all around us.

Sometimes we would be far more comfortable to hold on to that which is not so great than encounter something which is unknown. The fear of the unknown, the fear that we might lose control over our circumstances: other fears like that can keep us from being willing to experience transformation. I remember as a much younger adult encountering Christians who really argued with me that I needed to be born again, and I came to understand that they meant that language in very particular and specific ways, and while I respected them and cared for them as friends, I was really reluctant (fearful) that I might say yes to God in such a way as I would have to set my brain to the side. I was a young college student, and I was still pretty impressed with all the cool things I was learning. I wasn't quite prepared to give away that brain, however limited it has proven itself to be.

But of course, when God seeks for us to be transformed, God doesn't want us to become lesser versions of ourselves, but greater versions, to grow more and more fully into the image of God, the image in which we were created.

Mary Magdalene was transformed, and we hear that story today. Initially, as a friend of Jesus, perhaps even as a benefactor who helped finance the missions of Jesus, and Mary went to the grave early. In this version of the story, it doesn't say that she's accompanied by others, but there is some plural language that suggests maybe she might have been. At any rate, she found that the stone had been removed from the tomb where they had laid Jesus and that he was not there, and she was immediately filled with fear.

She ran back to the place where her friends were staying, and Simon Peter and another came with her, and they quickly were in and out again. And Mary is left at the grave weeping. We can only guess the range of emotions that she must have been feeling, the causes for her tears, the loss of a good friend, certainly, the loss of one whom she had followed and around whom she had built her life, perhaps the fear of having to go back to people from whom she had stepped away, a fear of uncertainty about what lay ahead. Whatever, she stood there weeping, and as a demonstration that for Jesus resurrection was not just a return in the same body like Lazarus, she sees someone that she doesn't even recognize as her beloved friend, doesn't recognize him.

Now, we don't know if that's because she was unable to see, her eyes were clouded with tears, or she had other questions that kept her from seeing him, or if it's because somehow his appearance was different in ways that aren't really explained to us here. But, it's only when he calls her by name and she recognizes the familiarity of their relationship that she is able to know him for who he really is: the resurrected Jesus. Her tears were turned from sorrow to joy. After her encounter with the risen Jesus, she rushes back again to that place where her companions could be found, and instead of expressing her fears, her sadness, her sorrow, or confusion, she says simply, "I have seen the Lord." Mary has been transformed. Mary has been changed in ways that I'm sure go beyond what we can read in scripture.

How is it that we need to be transformed? How is it that we need to be able to let go of the fears which keep us back? Habits which hurt us rather than strengthening us?

It doesn't stop there. What I'm suggesting is the third part of this Easter message is that we are then called to be agents of transformation. I didn't take time to go through the whole Marvel Universe to see if maybe there was a particular character that plays well with Iron Man and others, who is known for having powers of transformation. When I used the word agents, I wasn't really trying to go that way. Mary Magdalene is a witness to what she said. She just didn't live with the Good News. She just didn't live with the change she felt within herself. But Mary went and told others, and I imagine she probably felt she was risking their ridicule.

What do you mean, he's alive? What do you mean you've seen him? That's not possible. Or whatever risk she was facing, that's what she did, and as we will hear in the Sundays ahead, the other disciples, even including Thomas, find themselves transformed through their experience of the risen Lord. And two Sundays from now, we hear about Cleopas and his friend who were on their way home from Jerusalem, talking about everything they had seen, when a stranger comes to them, not recognizable for them, who speaks to them and teaches them and opens their hearts? Their hearts were burning, as with fire. And, when they stopped for the meal, he is recognized by them as the risen Jesus when he prays and breaks the bread of their meal. The disciples were transformed, and the disciples themselves became busy as agents of transformation.

In the readings that we have during the season of Easter from the Acts of the Apostles, there are moments when the disciples become the preachers in the crowd, and it is their testimony that causes others to be transformed, to change their lives. If you're looking for examples of that, just look at the last verses of the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. We'll get there eventually, not today, when a whole community, thousands of people, are changed in the moment by the power of God's Spirit and through the witness of Peter in preaching.

Similarly, as we have heard in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter, who was transformed himself, became willing to step forward publicly with a message of transformation for others. He was an agent of transformation when he affirmed to Cornelius and the other Gentiles in the household that God shows no partiality. Now, there were some of his companions who were horrified by that statement, because it meant that Peter was stepping away from the long-held traditions about how some groups of people ought to stay separate from other groups of people. Again, a sermon for you in the weeks to come, Tom, if you go that way.

What Peter is saying is okay, yes, that's how I was raised. That's how I have known my faith, but now I hear God saying something different and leading in a different direction, and I'm going to have the courage of that conviction and I'm going to say that God shows no partiality.

And so Mary, who was transformed by her encounter with the risen Lord, spoke to Peter and the others who were then also transformed by their experience of the risen Lord. And they told two friends, and they told two friends, and some of you will be old enough to remember that shampoo commercial from years ago when the one person on the screen became a few, and it just kept multiplying.

That's the story of the power of the Easter message, the transformation of human life and the call for us to be agents of transformation. Friends, I know that you're at St. Mary's. There are

many ways in which you have experienced change, while you might not want to call it transformation, but certainly change, over these last years. You may or may not know that in the earliest days of COVID I would hold you up as an example to others in the diocese for careful practices that were established so that your worship could continue. It's been hard to watch, as COVID has (Well, it's been great to watch COVID fade a little bit) ... but it's been hard to watch as congregations still struggle with what current practice should be, but I trust you and your leaders to continue doing the good job that you have done all along.

I know that while I can recognize many of you from other visits or from crossing paths in this community where we all live, I know that you are also welcoming lots of newcomers, people for whom St. Mary's has not been a home for a long time, people who have come here for one reason or another, perhaps because one of you has borne witness to your experience of the Good News as lived in this community. You have been agents of transformation, perhaps. Perhaps because God's Holy Spirit has brought you here and you've stayed because of the presence of that Spirit in this community.

Today we celebrate a large group of people who are being confirmed, and that's very much a sign of the ways that God's Holy Spirit is at work, bringing transformation and change. As you witness to the wider community, you look for ways that you can more fully be of service, and I know that that's a part of what is motivating you to consider changes to the facilities themselves, beautiful facilities, but changes that would more fully support your ability to minister to the needs of the people of this wider community.

And I know that you are, at least timidly, perhaps, if not with full-throated enthusiasm, approaching a sabbatical period that will not just be a sabbatical for your priest, as he steps away, but a sabbatical for all of you as well, while you explore some new and different forms of leadership as a community, while you look to one another for leadership, perhaps differently than you have always looked. And, as you invite into this community visiting clergy, you will take a turn as preachers and celebrants. It strikes me that this is a place where you are willing to bear witness to the Good News of the Easter message and to participate in being transformed and in being agents of transformation.

We can point to some of that in the life of the diocese as well, and this is Easter and its confirmation and all, but it's also my pastoral visit as Bishop to the parish, so let me just offer a little bit about the life of the diocese. Some of you will be fully aware that in the past few years, as we've lived through COVID together, we embraced a time of discernment in which we invited God's wisdom in understanding new priorities for the life and mission of our diocese, and we established those through prayerful conversation, collaboration, and we adopted those this past June at our Convention. Those can be found on our website, and I'm not going to get into detail about them, but some of them, particularly, are about our work as agents of transformation in the world where we live.

And, we are looking forward to an event in the life of our diocese, which will be on Saturday, October the 21st, this year, just after that big marathon that folks come to Kinston to run. Later that day, our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, will come to the diocese at a location yet to be announced, and he will bear witness to the resurrection faith that we share, invite God

to transform us and us to become agents of transformation in our own time and in the places where we live.

Now friends, I resisted the temptation to step into some of those ways in which I can see the need for transformation in the world where we live. But, you know, I could risk a little bit of the goodwill of Easter Day, and I think I'll leave that for another time. But, I don't know how many more times we're going to have to wake up and hear the news and learn about what's happened in yet another part of the world or in our own community and prayed, "How long, O Lord? How Long?"

Ours is a world that includes brokenness on almost every side, almost everywhere we can look, and I would say that a part of the Easter message is that we believe in new life after death and that we are called to bear witness to that message, even when the world seems to hold up evidence to the contrary, and that we are called to be open to God's transformation of our lives so that we can become agents of transformation in God's world.

Confirmands, those of you being confirmed (That's the fancy word), I give thanks for your witness this day that you are willing to stand and in our presence, confirm your baptismal covenant and say "Yes" to this new step in your life with God and in the midst of this Christian community. For each of you, that's a unique and wonderful journey, and you learned more about me during our time together, I think, than I got a chance to learn about you. Your questions were pretty deep, and I enjoyed them. I will just have to trust that had I gotten to that point where I got to ask you the questions, I would have learned a lot more.

Thank you for being willing to be here on this exciting Easter morning to bear witness in your own lives in simple ways to the Easter faith, which we proclaim together this day. Amen.