

Easter Day, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Happy Easter to you all.

I remember the first time I saw our new house. I loved the way it was set back on the lot, and I could already think of a few things I might do to the yard to smarten it up, but the overwhelming figure in that first look at our property was a tree. In the middle of my yard is an enormous white oak tree. It is by far the largest tree on the block, and I have seen in its arms a great horned owl, woodpeckers, a raccoon, and countless songbirds. Its branches extend over my house and into the yards of both my neighbors. It drops leaves and acorns by the truck full, and I wouldn't have it any other way. It is massive, old, powerful, and, it seems to me, wise. Before we closed on the house, I looked up how long they're expected to live, and it turns out that white oaks can live 300 but possibly as long as 600 years, so I suspect that this tree will endure long after I am in my grave. I love the house, but I am IN love with the tree.



Cast your mind back to Sunday School. Do you remember learning about the Garden of Eden? That perfect place that lived and breathed outside of time — where the first people walked with God on summer evenings? Remember in that Garden there was a tree. A tree whose fruit granted knowledge of everything. It was the one place in the Garden we were told not to go. And, if your Sunday school teacher was any good, you know how the story ends. We disobeyed God and have been wrestling with the consequences of that betrayal ever since.

You can't be a Christian without noticing trees. They stand watch in the Biblical account from Genesis to Revelation, from the burning bush to the sycamore the short tax collector climbed to see our Lord Jesus.

During Advent, we hear about the shoot that will come out the root of Jesse — a tree that was reborn after the birth of Jesus. Jesus, a righteous branch of David.

Then, on Palm Sunday and on Good Friday, we hear about the cross — that terrible tree on which hung the sins of the world. A device of cruelty and of terror whose sole purpose is to advance the power of the state.

The tree stories don't end there. If your Sunday School teacher was excellent, you'd have learned about the holy tree in the New Jerusalem, the city of God at the end of time — a tree that fills the city with fruit whose purpose is healing of all the nations. This tree sits beside the throne of God and by a sparkling river that runs through the heavenly city like silver. Christians can't get away from trees, particularly on Easter morning.

Easter is about the transformation of the cross — from a tree of death to a tree of life. That's God's entire business, in fact. To take things that are dead and to raise them to new life. God can't help making things live. It is God's joy and God's nature. When the women came to the tomb, they were expecting to see the dead. And instead, they became the first witnesses to the power of God to bring life — the power of God to disrupt the expectation of death.

And those of us who follow God? Who follow the risen savior? We, my friends, are the Easter fruit. Jesus says, I am the vine; you are the branches. Our lives are given to the world for the healing of it. We do, in a small way, what Christ has first done for us — empty ourselves of greed and ego, and give ourselves to the world as a blessing — to our neighbors, our families, the poor, and our enemies.

The good news this morning is that we get to participate in God's great act of grace. God invites us to experience the transformation of dead wood to living branches. Resurrection doesn't stop with our Saviour Jesus two thousand years ago. The power of new life and God's transformation of the cross continues to this Easter morning. We call ourselves Christians because we are little Christs. The Easter transformation from death to life is for us, for our families, for our city, and for our world. Look around and see the new life all around you. Look around and BE the new life all around you.

Christianity isn't a dead religion. It is a movement of love and life and grace. It is a creed whose principal belief is radical love in spite of odds. Whatever is dead inside of you, God is bringing to life this morning.

What would you do with your life if you knew, beyond the shadow of any doubt, that the resurrection of Jesus was a power that lives inside of you, inside of every Christian? Because that is what I am here to tell you on this Easter morning. You have been empowered to mend, to heal, and to reflect God's grace to a world in need. You are living branches of God's healing tree. You are the fruit of healing to the hungry world.

So, shout your Alleluias. Our Lenten fast is over. The tomb is empty. The dead wood lives. And it lives inside each of you — Christians all, filled with the power of the Resurrection to bring this weary world back to life. Go out and respond to what God has done for us on this Easter morning. Amen.