
Thin Places at Easter Dawn

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Easter Morning at 6:00 a.m. – for the Great Vigil!**

“On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb...And returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and all the rest.” (Luke 24.1, 9)

Oh, thank you! Thank you for getting up so early on this special day of the year and making your procession to the Cathedral (or reading these words, later)! Thank you!

Are you awake yet? Did the fire wake you up? Did the music wake you up? Did your parents wake you up? Did the resurrection wake you up?

Waking up before the dawn, waking up for the dawn, is an exciting experience anywhere; but it is especially beautiful today. Dawn can be what the mystic Christians call a “thin time,” a “thin place,” when we sense how close we are in the earthly world, to the divine world.

Did any of you bring binoculars with you this morning? Bring binoculars to church one day, and you might be better able to make out the details of our stained glass windows. These windows are thin places, too, thin pieces of glass between the world outside from the world inside.

Sometimes people see me in the celebrant’s chair staring intently up into space, and they wonder what I am looking at. I am looking at that massive stained glass window (in the Andrews Drive transept). The places and names on that window are a history of the Church. In fact, they are a history of hope and resurrection. The old town of Marthasville is in that window. Oglethorpe is in that window, though he is rightly obscured by an unnamed native American. Three of the most ornery and obstinate saints of the Anglican tradition are there: William Laud, John Wycliffe, and Samuel Seabury. Because they are there, I am especially glad that St. Columba of Iona also made it into the window.

Yes, I am glad that St. Columba is there, for he represents a Celtic tradition of Christianity in this Atlanta Cathedral. The Celts, those early Christians of Ireland and Scotland, lived close to nature and the earth. They represent for us an earthen spirituality, a spirituality close to fire and rain, a simple way of knowing God in nature and animals. Our American South once knew God that way; now we risk knowing neither green space nor God. (On our worst days, we tend to follow William Laud!)

Some of these early Celtic Christians spoke of “thin places” in the natural world. These thin places were sacred spots where the earthly world and divine world seemed very close to one another. Indeed, at a thin place, the divine and spiritual world might suddenly break into one’s life, revealing grace and glory. The Old Testament hero Jacob had dreams in thin places, where he awoke and exclaimed, “Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it.”

I have known some of these thin places in my life, and you have, too. There was a river of my youth; everyone else called it a creek, but it was a raging river for my soulful imagination. There was an ocean. There was a hideout in the woods. There was a mountain. Tombs are thin places, too.

These are places, typically, on the edge of something else. And so, I call these “thin places” also “edge places.” Edge places are where we know the natural world very clearly because we also know the spiritual world very clearly. We are on the edge.

This morning, Easter morning, is an edge place, a thin place. Our natural and ordinary world comes close to God this morning. Two thousand years ago, in ancient Israel, the tomb for a renegade prophet became an edge place. When Jesus was laid in that tomb, his friends and his family, his followers and lovers and devotees, were distraught. It appeared that hope was lost. The great grace which Jesus had preached seemed to be buried with him. They had watched the man they loved suffer innocently. Was this the way of God? What had happened?

In fact, one of the most ordinary events of the natural world, and the most common event of all life, for every animal and flower, is death. As much as we work to avoid it, we all know—in our heads—that we will die. But we are rarely emotionally prepared for the edge of life and death.

The man Jesus went to death, and went through what we all will go through one day. Indeed, Jesus lived through what many of us go through daily. We are people who find a way to suffer every day. We worry about the future. We place our hope in project after project, event after event. If I could only get this job, then all would be well. If I could only get that person to love me, then all would be well. If I could only make this amount of money, then all would be well. If I could only stop worrying, then all would be well. Sadly, in other parts of the world today, the suffering is far worse.

So many of our weak hopes go unfulfilled. The death of those hopes is one of the most common of human experiences. But there is another hope.

On the morning of the Resurrection, at the edge of night and day, at the edge of despair, in the thin place that we call dawn, God delivers hope. God says, "I have known the suffering and pain of the world, because I have known them in Jesus the Christ. I have buried that suffering and death in the grave, and I have caused a new life to arise."

I believe that every morning is an edge place, a thin place in the divide between divine and earthly. Every morning is a thin place, when we can choose between hope and hopelessness. I know that the early moments of the morning, when we do not know whether we are asleep or awake, I know that, then, our imagination can tempt us towards the terrible! Imagination is a great thing; and if it is focused on fear and anxiety, imagination poisons our soul. But if imagination is focused on hope and good will, if it is focused on service, then imagination feeds our soul with overwhelming joy.

Easter morning, and every morning, presents us with an edge place, a great opportunity to see the kingdom of heaven. One may not need binoculars to see the kingdom of heaven on this day. Sometimes the thin place is with our children, and when we are serving the youngest among us; surely children live in edge places, and time with them can be imaginatively exhilarating.

This past week, I received a note from one of our Cathedral Preschool chapel teachers. Here is what she said:

I was leading chapel for the 2 and 3 year olds today and was telling a massively water-downed story of how Jesus died on the cross and one little girl in my class got very sad and concerned and then very excited when she learned that He came back! I also touched on how we keep Jesus in our hearts.

Fast forward to the playground—she runs over and says "Jesus fell out of my heart, I have to go find him!" and then she proceeded to run around the playground until she determined where He was and then scooped Him up and put Him back in her heart.

What a story! I am so glad that little girl was in a thin place, and I am glad her teacher was in a thin place, too. Thin places are where we can scoop Jesus up and put him back in our hearts!

St. Columba found resurrection by seeking out the edge places. He took the gospel to the world, and is said to have found rivers and springs devoted to various gods. When he found such edge places, he would bless that water. With that, the evil spirits were separated from it. He is said to have blessed and sanctified over three hundred such springs.

We did that this morning, when we blessed water for baptism. This ordinary and natural water became the water that provides, for all of us, the hope of new life and resurrection.

Yes, edge places can be dangerous places, at the break of day, beside a raging river, working with those in prison, serving the hungry or poor or violent. Edge places, the thin places of life, can be scary, like waking up in the dark and walking to the tomb.

But they call us towards them. If you are tired or bored in life, looking for the resurrection, looking for new life, find an edge this day. Find a child. Look for some place and someone whom you can serve. Look for a river that you can bless. Look for a lover whom you can forgive.

Thank you for coming to the Cathedral, this thin place, on the edge this morning. Are you awake yet? Have you noticed resurrection here?

You, you, are the first ones up today. You are the first ones here. You are like those women who were the first at the tomb, on the first day of the week. They got up early, before dawn, to visit the thin place, the tomb, to go to the edge. Thus, they were the first witnesses of resurrection.

And do you know what they did, then? They went out and told people!

It can be the same with us. It is up to us this morning, we who are the witnesses of life and resurrection, to tell people about it. Spread good gossip! Otherwise, the bad gossip will continue to prevail. It is up to us. When we take the initiative to spread good news, we fill people's hearts with Jesus again; we set holy fire to an eager world.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.