

Easter Day
 St. Paul's Cleveland Heights
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+In the Name of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, and who sends the Holy Spirit to raise us to new life. Amen.

“[Mary Magdelene] turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” John 20:14b-15

The days are getting longer and a little warmer – even here in Cleveland. The garden centers have been busy for weeks, the students at Case – at least the male students – have traded their long pants for shorts, and people are taking every opportunity to get outside after a long and particular harsh winter in NE Ohio. As one of this church’s favorite Easter hymns says, “Earth her joy confesses, clothing her for spring.”

I wanted to get a jump on Spring this year, so I bought a copy of *The Comfort of Crows*, by the writer and essayist Margaret Renkl. The book is organized in 52 chapters – one for each week of the year – and the narrative follows the creatures and plants she observed in her backyard during that year. Although the book begins in January, I skipped right to spring! The title of the book comes from the first creature Margaret Renkl saw on New Year’s Day. It was a crow, a bird whose resourcefulness and sense of community set the theme for the rest of the year.

Early in the book, Margaret Renkl has a passage that recalls the Bible’s second creation story: “The world lies before you, a lavish garden. However hobbled by waste, however befouled by graft and tainted by deception, it will always take your breath away. We were never cast out of Eden. We merely turned from it and shut our eyes. To return and be welcomed, cleansed and redeemed, we are only obliged to look.” What’s not to like about a book that describes this fragile earth, our island home, so well, or ties it to salvation history?

Several years ago, Ms. Renkl wrote a very fine reflection on the Easter season. I cut it out of the newspaper and saved it in my sermon clippings file. Her essay was entitled, “Easter is Calling Me Back to Church.” It was the story about how she had taken a break from church after the previous year’s Easter, worn out by all the political turmoil going on at the time, saddened by the state of the world, and disappointed by her church’s lack of concern for the poor and the powerless.

In the essay, she made it clear that she had been a faithful churchgoer in the past. She wrote: “In this house, we have never been Christmas-and-Easter-only Christians. My husband and I grew up in the church and raised our children there. Even during the hardest years, when mobilizing three young sons and various configurations of elderly parents felt like running the Iditarod every Sunday morning – even then, we didn’t miss Mass.”

However, she had found herself increasingly distracted and angry when she attended church. So, she stepped away. She wrote, “while my husband and his father were at church on Sunday mornings, I was in the woods, where God has always seemed more palpably present to me anyway. . . . For me, a church can’t summon half the awe and gratitude inspired by a full-throated forest in all its indifferent splendor.”

Given how much she loves nature, it’s no wonder she authored, *The Comfort of Crows*. I suspect that many of us can relate to her experience. The woods and waters have fed my spirit ever since I was young, growing up just south of the Adirondack Mountains of Upstate New York. And some of the prettiest churches I have ever seen were forest cathedrals where the ceilings were embossed with the same stars that shown above our spiritual ancestors thousands of years ago.

Margaret Renkl said there was a lot she did not miss while she was away from church: “I don’t miss the stained glass,” she wrote. “I don’t miss the gleaming chalice or the glowing candles or the sweeping vestments.” But there was a lot she said she had missed during her “sabbatical.” “I miss being part of a congregation,” she wrote. “I miss standing side by side with other people, our eyes gazing in the same direction, our voices murmuring the same prayers in a fallen world. I miss the wiggling babies grinning at me over their parents’ shoulders. I miss reaching for a stranger to offer the handshake of peace. I miss the singing.”

“So,” she wrote as Easter approached that year, “I will be [in church] again on Easter morning. . . . I will wear white and remember the ones I loved who sat beside me in the pew and whose participation in the eternal has found another form, whatever it turns out to be. I will lift my voice in song and give thanks for my life. I will pray for my church and my country, especially the people my church and my country are failing. And then I will walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection.”

“Easter is calling me back to church,” Margaret Renkl wrote about herself during our current president’s first term in office. And after she walked out of church on Easter morning, she was planning to walk into the world and do her best to practice resurrection.

I searched in vain for a follow-up report about how her plan went. I have wondered what it was like for her to practice resurrection. I say this because, while I think practicing resurrection is simple, I don’t think it’s easy. I’ve even been tempted to email Margaret Renkl. Like many writers, she publishes her address so her readers can contact her. But she doesn’t know me, so I haven’t tried to contact her. “Dear Margaret,” I fantasize about writing her, “how did practicing resurrection go for you? What does that look like” Seems awkward to write these words to a complete stranger, and yet I wonder. . . .

What about us? What is Easter calling us to do? This is the question faithful people have tried their best to answer ever since Mary Magdalene came to the tomb at early dawn on that first Easter morning. She had expected to attend to the body of Jesus once she could find someone strong enough to roll the stone away. She did not expect any surprises.

Mary had come to embalm her beloved friend and master – to mark the close of a brilliant life with its tragic ending. Now she was faced with something she could not even begin to comprehend. The tomb where Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had laid Jesus was empty. So she did the only thing she could think to do – she hurried back to the men who were in hiding and told them what had happened.

We heard St. John’s Easter morning story today. The other Gospels have different versions. St. Luke’s version tells of the disciples’ disbelief when the women came back from the tomb. Other Gospel writers say that the Risen Christ himself appeared to the women, and that his presence transformed them. St. Paul, in one of his letters, gives a long list of those to whom Jesus appeared. Whenever Jesus did appear, whether it was in the Garden, or the Upper Room, or to Doubting Thomas, or on the Road to Emmaus, it convinced the disciples that death had not been the end of him and that God’s love had won.

This morning, the Risen Christ comes to us again – in joyous music, in the people who surround us in the pews, and in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. What is Easter calling us to do in just such a time as this?

In 2018, Margaret Renkl said she was going to walk out of church and do her best to practice resurrection. What if we were to do that? What if we were to walk out of St. Paul’s and practice resurrection? What would it look like? And where does the idea of practicing resurrection come from?

It turns out the phrase, “practice resurrection” comes from a poem by the poet and novelist Wendell Berry. It’s from his poem, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.” In the poem, he says that practicing resurrection means to,

do something
 that won’t compute. Love the Lord.
 Love the world. Work for nothing.
 Take all that you have and be poor.
 Love someone that does not deserve it...
 Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
 Be joyful
 though you have considered all the facts...
 ...Be like the fox
 who makes more tracks than necessary,
 some in the wrong direction.

For you and for me, practicing resurrection may take a different form. It may mean something different. So, what would practicing resurrection look like as we celebrate Easter Day, 2025?

That's a powerful – and honestly, haunting – reframe of the question. The context in which we are living adds a sharper edge to the idea of "practicing resurrection."

Because in a time marked by fear, division, disinformation, environmental rollback, and attacks on democratic norms and marginalized communities, practicing resurrection becomes every bit as radical an action as God raising Jesus from the dead after the unholy alliance of religion and politics put him to death.

For us, practicing resurrection means refusing to let cynicism or despair win – even when the institutions feel rigged, and democracy feels cracked. It means believing in the possibility of healing and change, even in a scorched political landscape. Practicing resurrection means holding onto moral clarity in a time of gaslighting and confusion, standing between the powerful and the powerless – whether that's immigrants, trans youth, climate activists, journalists, or even the universities we attended – our alma maters.

Practicing resurrection means building and supporting networks of mutual aid, legal defense, underground support systems, if needed. Planting gardens, making music, raising children, telling stories – anything that insists: we are still here!! Rebuilding communities of love and grace from the ground up – because resurrection always starts in the dirt. Laughing, dancing, feasting – Easter joy as resistance.

Here's what another Episcopal priest said about practicing resurrection many, many years ago on another Easter morning: "Live as if the Easter word were true. Refuse to be bound by the closed-in tomb of this world. Stop making excuses and start doing things boldly. Give yourself to causes that matter, simplify your life so that you can really be present to it, work to make a difference in this world in the few short years you are given on this earth. And keep your eyes open for this Risen Lord."

I invite you to find a community of friends that can help you practice resurrection. If St. Paul's can be that community, you would be most welcome. If this is already your community, help others to live into the reality of new life in Christ. I promise you this: Christ won't stop opening doors, calling us, confronting us, healing us, transforming us. Because Christ our Lord is risen, and He is here with us as he promised!

Alleluia. Amen.