

The Rev. Dr. William Carl Thomas
Easter Sermon
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Christ Episcopal Church, New Bern NC

I don't know how many of you have ever been asked to be a Sunday school teacher, or have taught somewhere where you had younger children, or even slightly older than younger children, running around. You probably know what it's like in a classroom environment with all the different energies in the room, and how the kids kind of create their own little society, and you know what your goal is in trying to get across a message. This is a story.

A story about, if you will, a Sunday school teacher and her class. She's a very good and dedicated Sunday school teacher. She really got across much of the Christian message, and we're talking kids maybe the same age, a little older than the ones that just came up and put the flowers on the cross.

And she wanted to give this class a project that would challenge them. Now this class was filled with just wonderful children, and he was wonderful too, but Philip was just a little bit different. Philip kind of marched to his own drummer and saw the world a certain way at times that was just a little unsettling for the others in the class, and being children they did not know how to handle this little bit of difference, and consequently there would be whispers behind Philip's back, and little bits of laughter, and Philip would try to learn how to handle that, and the teacher would watch all of this in the room and try to keep bringing them together.

She came up with this incredibly good idea for a project to lead them to a deeper understanding of Eastwood. How many of you are old enough and willing to admit to being old enough? I am. To remember seeing how pantyhose was once sold in the supermarket in something called L'Eggs.

You know those big plastic things? And there was a time you could only get eggs like that if you bought pantyhose. Well nowadays you can get plastic eggs in various sizes. We used them in our Easter egg hunt this morning.

So this is a story about a teacher who said, I've got a bunch of these eggs, and they're good size, not super small, but good size. And here's what I want you children to do. I want you to think about what you've learned about your life as a Christian, following Jesus, and put something in the egg, and bring it to our next class, and as we get closer to Easter, and show it to us and explain why you chose that.

Well the children around are excited at this idea, and they took their eggs and they were diligent, and they all came back with something. One little girl had put, frankly, a flower in hers to talk about new life. That was beautiful.

A little boy, one of those little boys who likes to jump in the mud puddles, well this little boy, he found in a pool of water that some oil had dripped in. And he scooped some of it up, because when he opened his egg up and he swirled it and looked at it, the oil broke into the colors of the rainbow. And he talked about Noah and God's steadfastness.

Although he didn't use that big word, he was talking. So he had that. And then others were thinking more along the lines of Holy Week.

One had put some nails in his egg to talk about Jesus being nailed on the cross. Another one found some thorns from the neighborhood and said this is like the crown of thorns that Jesus wore. And another one, they must have been into violence or something, I don't know.

One of them had some rawhide that he put in his for whipping Jesus. But they really began to tell the story of what it was like for Jesus, for what we've remembered during Holy Week. The class could feel the tension of the moment.

Everybody's egg had been opened, but Philip's. They were really concerned in their brains. What is he going to do now to make us all crazy today? Philip had a little confidence in what he had in his egg.

And he stood there and he turned it slowly and he held it out open. And there was nothing in the egg. The children started to jeer.

Oh, Philip didn't get it. Philip didn't understand the lesson. He didn't put anything in his egg.

And Philip looked at them with tears in his eyes and cried out. Yes, I did do it. I did understand.

The tomb was empty. The tomb was empty.

Now, the teacher was incredibly gifted.

Inspired, if you will, by the Holy Spirit. Because she could see everything and all the work that all the children had done. That they could push apart or they could come together.

And she posed a question to them. One to Philip and all of them. Yes, Philip.

Yes, all of you. That tomb indeed, Jesus was not there. It was, as they found it, empty.

But is it possible that there was something in the tomb? And it's amazing how children's intellect jumps forward when prompted with a great question. And they're not afraid to be the best of all theologians. And somehow, and I don't know whose voice it was, somebody said the word love.

And the teacher then said, yes, I think that's right. I think the love that overcame death was there. Remember that light that we light, that Paschal Candle? That's the light that reminds us of the victory of Jesus Christ over death.

He descended to that place where there is the absence of love. We call that hell. And it could not overwhelm him.

His light still burned. It was filled with love. And then she challenged them on how to make that love known.

As Jesus makes that love known for each and every one of us. And why we come this day for a taste and a reminder of that love. Bishop Charles Henry Brent, over a hundred years ago, wrote a Collect for Mission.

How we ought to live our lives. That sums up as well as anything I've ever read, heard, or taken into my own heart, what this teacher was trying to bring to Philip and his class. Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us with your spirit, that we reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you, with the honor of your name.

On this day, this sacred and wonderful and celebratory day, we remember how that love was played out for us, we who didn't deserve it, and are blessed to have it. And we cry out these words to hold on to it.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! All these words I offer in the name of God, of his Son and Holy Spirit.