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St. Paul's Church
April 8, 2007
Easter Day

He is not here for he has risen. I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Mrs. James T. Dunn (Gladys) had just moved to town. Recently widowed, children grown, grandchildren scattered throughout the globe, she had decided it was time to downsize, time to simplify her life, time to be freed from the worries of managing a home. It was a big decision. She found it both terrifying and strangely liberating to be on her own after all those many years of being connected to and happily constrained by a full-time family and a full-time job. After much research, and consultation, and prayer, she moved into a retirement community. And blessed with great health and abundant energy she set off to start a new chapter in her life.

Her first task after settling in was to find a new church. So on a bright and beautiful Sunday morning she walked the short distance from her apartment to the nearest Episcopal Church. She was a bit nervous and self-conscious as she entered the church, but she was quickly relieved. The people seemed genuinely friendly and welcoming. The church was inviting and lovely and beautifully maintained. She was impressed with the music and she was impressed with the choir. She was not, however, impressed with the preacher. His sermon was rather long and tedious, not to mention, entirely joyless and uninspiring. As she looked around the church she realized that she wasn't alone. She could see the blank stares and the aimless shifting and fidgeting. In the pew next to her there was a man who was sitting upright and perfectly still, but she was close enough to him to see that he was also perfectly sound asleep.

Once the preacher had finished and it finally came time to exchange the Peace, Gladys stood up and turned toward the man who had fallen asleep. She looked at him and he responded with a friendly smile. Remembering what her mother had always told her about first impressions, she took a deep breath, bolstered her courage, stuck out her hand and said, *I'm Gladys Dunn...*

You and me both, the man replied, *I thought it would never end.*

I'm glad it's done: perhaps a subtitle to the Easter Proclamation, *Alleluia! The Lord is Risen: I'm glad it's done*, perhaps the unspoken sigh at the end of the long Lenten season and the events of Holy Week, *Alleluia! The Lord is Risen indeed: **thought it would never end.*** In John's gospel the last words of Jesus from the cross are, *It is finished!* These words are not a cry of anguish or resignation or despair, but are rather a shout of triumph. The cross is not the end of his mission; the cross is the fulfillment of his mission. Jesus, from the cross exclaims: It is finished. It is completed. It is over. **It is done.** Executed by Rome, vindicated by God, raised from the dead – now the whole creation proclaims, *Alleluia! The Lord is Risen* and we are glad indeed.

Early in the morning, on the first day of the week, the women came to tomb. In coming to the tomb they had acknowledged and accepted the death of their friend, and as their rituals prescribed, they had come to the tomb prepared to anoint his body. Heartbroken and despairing, they were ready for almost anything, except of course, what they found. When they arrived the stone which sealed the tomb, had been rolled away. To their horror, not only was the tomb open, but the tomb was empty. And now their grief was doubled. How could it possibly get any worse? Not only had they crucified Jesus, but now they had also stolen his body.

Confused and perplexed they are then confronted by two men in dazzling robes and they are filled with fear. The men ask an outrageous question. *Why do you seek the living among the dead?* And then comes the overwhelming good news. *He is not here, but has risen. Don't you remember what he told you? Don't you remember that when he told you that he would be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again? Do you not remember?* In their agonizing grief, they had not remembered his words. Traumatized and despondent they had forgotten what Jesus had told them. But now they remember, and filled with joy they go and tell the others. At first they are met with skepticism and unbelief – but then Peter goes to see for himself and is amazed. The tomb is empty and Jesus is alive.

These last details are important ones. For if Luke were simply making up this story he certainly would have done a better and more convincing job. All four gospels agree that the women are the first to witness the empty tomb, and they also agree that the male disciples are slow to believe. If this story were a merely a work of early Christian propaganda, the gospel writers would have never entrusted the message to women, who at that time were perceived to be completely unreliable and untrustworthy sources, and if they really wanted to persuade us to believe they would have never placed any confusion or doubt on the lips of the male disciples – a much more convincing story would have the disciples believing immediately and without question – they would become the ideal - models of the faith. But this is not the story that was written; it is not the story that we have been given. Like us, those women and men who followed Jesus tried to remember all that they had been taught, struggled to comprehend this amazing news, and eventually they came to believe.

For Jesus is no longer on the cross, his suffering has turned to triumph - Jesus is no longer in the tomb, for the power of death could not hold him - Jesus is no longer in Jerusalem, for he is present with us always and everywhere. God's love is the strongest force in the universe, even stronger than death. That is the Truth of Easter. That is the Easter promise.

On this wondrous day the whole creation sings with joy in thanksgiving for Christ's redeeming work on the cross and his redeeming work of victory over the grave. His work is fulfilled, accomplished, completed, and we are glad it's done.

But in case we have been sleeping, or have trouble remembering: His mission – his ongoing work of justice, peace, reconciliation, and compassion - has now been entrusted to us.

I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN.