**We are the Risen Christ!**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

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St. Pauls’ Episcopal Church

Bedford, Massachusetts

Early last month, when the snow was still several feet think on the ground, and it felt like winter would never end, I found myself seeking some solace. Comfort came, in a television program about the only place on earth colder than Massachusetts: the arctic. I learned a lot…about ice. And snow. I also learned about one of God’s most incredible creatures: the arctic woolly bear caterpillar. I know what you’re thinking. Caterpillars and butterflies on Easter. How original. But just you wait.

The arctic woolly bear caterpillar is not your cute, kid-friendly, Eric Carle very hungry caterpillar. It’s ugly, spiny, and covered in spikey barbs because, unlike our fat green caterpillar friend, this guy has a much better chance of being eaten then eating his way through a week of tasty delights.

The woolly bear caterpillar is usually born in the middle of artic summer, and immediately begins to seek food. It has only a very short time to feed before all plant life dies as the weather again becomes too harsh…in, say, late July. There are in fact colder places than Massachusetts.

It’s not enough time to grow as much as he needs to in order to build his cocoon. Not even close. The woolly bear caterpillar isn’t going to make it. And so he does something utterly incredible. He stops moving. He stops breathing. He even allows his heart to stop. He dies. Well, almost. He allows himself to be frozen solid…all his body processes stop. His body actually dissolves much of his mitochondria, to reduce the amount of activity in his cells. And he allows the long, harsh, winter to overtake him.

In the spring, when the frozen tundra melts, in late May, he thaws out. The time-lapsed pictures of this are pretty amazing. The ice recedes leaving him exposed, like a forgotten twig. But then suddenly he springs back to life again -- and he’s off on another hunt for food in the brief arctic summer. And again, it won’t be enough. And again he dies. And then again, 9 months later, he rises. And again. And again. And again.

Thirteen times he repeats this cycle of dying and rising. Thirteen times he sets off on his quest to gather enough food to make a cocoon. And thirteen times he fails. But each time, his body retains just a little more of the energy that he gathered during his brief harvest period. And in the 14th year, as summer is nearly over, he’s done it. He builds his cocoon, and weeks later, emerges, and finally is transformed and takes flight!

As someone who’s always rolled his eyes at the whole caterpillar/butterfly Easter metaphor, the woolly bear artic caterpillar has redeemed it for me. Not because it’s a better reflection of Jesus’ dying and rising…but because it’s a better reflection of our own dying and rising. *Jesus’* dying and rising is a singular, once for all, full-color, Eric Carle, beautiful butterfly-emerging event. The empty tomb on Easter morning affirms God’s promise: that love, compassion, and reconciliation can never be conquered by violence, evil and oppression. Jesus’ rising is the ultimate divine affirmation that nothing humanity can do can end God’s mission of love, forgiveness and redemption.

But, you know, *our* rising isn’t really like that. Our risen life isn’t conferred on us in one grand miracle moment – shaping our life neatly into a before and after period. Being an Easter People doesn’t mean that we’ve found instant perfection. Rather it means that we embrace a pattern of thriving and falling and letting the falling re-shape us, and then thriving again. It’s an ongoing process in which we have the confidence to allow the destructive parts of ourselves that pull us away from the love of God to atrophy and die, because we have faith that as painful as these losses are, their dying creates the space for new life to form. Like the woolly caterpillar, we, too, engage in ongoing cycles of dying and rising, over and over again, which gradually liberate us.

Perhaps at times, you find yourself struggling with how long it is taking for the suffering in your own life or the life of the world to be redeemed. We may still feel frozen by the forces of oppression or trapped by a legacy of victimization in some way. We may feel that the healing we have found is only partial, or that the reconciliation we seek is still not complete. Justice is not always swift. Reparation is not always complete. Even the most complete healing does not erase the scars.

If the woolly caterpillar could think, I’m sure, at some point around the sixth or seventh experience of dying and rising, he too would start to get frustrated. He’d come to believe that he was trapped in a vicious cycle – that this was no way to live. But what we know is that it isn’t a cycle, it’s an upward spiral. Each time he lives and dies he gets closer to taking flight. And, by some miracle, there is always another chapter still to come. This is true for us as well. Even if we can’t perceive it, each of our own experiences of some kind of dying and rising in our lives invites us deeper and deeper into Christ’s Risen Life.

And so for us, the Easter Miracle isn’t just a singular event in ancient history. Rather it is an ongoing and unending miracle, proceeding from the moment of Jesus’ own victory over death, through history and right now into the present day in the lives of all of us who seek to know and love a living God.

Of all the Gospel writers, it is Mark who makes this point most strongly in his Easter story. Far more than Matthew, Luke, or John, Mark insists that the Resurrection isn’t just about Jesus’ body, it is about the Body of Christ, the community of those of us who follow him.

Did you notice anything missing in Mark’s Easter Gospel, which Rachel just proclaimed? I’ll give you a hint – did you notice any*one* missing? All four Easter Gospels start more or less the same: women come to the tomb, find it empty, meet an angel or other visitor who assure them that Jesus has been raised. But then, Mark’s Gospel does something unique that the other three Gospel’s don’t do. It ends. The women run away from the tomb and that’s it -- not just the end of the Easter story, that’s the end of Mark’s whole Gospel. Jesus never re-appears in Mark’s story. The resurrection is promised, and the body is gone. But in Mark’s telling of the Gospel, no one ever sees the Risen Christ. There is little doubt that Mark believed in Jesus’ rising, but for some reason he doesn’t show us what it looks like.

I think it’s because for Mark, the resurrection isn’t just about Jesus’ body, it’s about the entire body of Christ, the community of people who love and follow him. By withholding Jesus’ body from us, Mark is showing us that Jesus’ rising is inextricably linked to our own – that the triumph of God’s love and forgiveness over violence and death is incarnated in every community and generation of God’s people. Just as the cross wasn’t the final statement of human violence against the forces of love, so too Jesus’ rising wasn’t the last affirmation of the power of love to prevail over any darkness. For Mark, the resurrection itself is an ongoing event, occurring throughout history in the lives of God’s people. He doesn’t need to tell a story about Jesus’ body appearing in the world – because the people listening to and telling the story are that body. It’s you, and it’s me, and it is all of humanity. We are that body. We are the Risen Christ.

And of course, because we are human, our risen life is still a work in progress. We are far more the endlessly dying and rising woolly caterpillar than the fully perfected beautiful butterfly. As beautiful as all the trappings today are, the Easter miracle doesn’t make our lives perfect. It makes our lives livable. And that’s ok. In fact, it’s more than ok – it’s a gift from God. It’s a gift of hope that even the worst acts of violence will be redeemed. It’s a gift of confidence that the ongoing cycles of dying and rising in our own lives are not an endless cycle, but the gradual pathway of our own liberation into Risen Life. And it is a gift of knowledge that no matter how imperfect, interrupted, or lengthy our journey is, nothing, not one thing or one person, is beyond the power of God’s redemption and love. Alleluia! Amen.