Good Morning!

This day is a great occasion. It is the celebration of all celebrations, the feast of all feasts, the centerpiece of the Church year. There is much to feel good and joyful about this day. Our Lenten observance has come to an end and we can finally proclaim, “Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!” In the light of this proclamation, I bid to all of you, greetings, and in particular to those who are visiting us today. We, as a parish, are blessed by the presence of guests and seekers, and we are delighted that you are with us this morning. Welcome!

I would be less than candid if I didn’t acknowledge some of the trepidation I feel about being your preacher this day. I think many of us who preach this day feel some pressure to come up with something new and unique to say about Easter, something that has never been said before about this occasion. I remember many years ago when I was working at a community mental health center, and I had a meeting with my clinical supervisor. This was shortly before Easter and during the course of our meeting, I commented to her the dilemma I felt about preaching on Easter and feeling I needed to come up with a completely new insight into the Resurrection. Her response was startling, in part because she was not a churchgoer. She simply said, “Perhaps just telling the story is enough.” I thanked her for her supportive comment all the while thinking to myself, “but telling the story isn’t enough.”

I recently came across a story that left me chortling. According to the story, the Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, England was a Cistercian monastery founded in the 12th century. By the 16th century it was inactive although it continued to be a popular tourist destination. The official guide for the Abbey’s Chapter House reads, “Here the monks gathered every Sunday to hear a sermon from the Abbot, except on Trinity Sunday, owing to the difficulty of the subject.” I understand where the Abbots of that monastery were coming from. While today is not Trinity Sunday, preaching on the resurrection can be equally daunting.
But this day, no matter how challenging it may be to say something about, calls for some reflection, if not proclamation.

As I pondered the lessons for this day, a prayer from the Book of Common Prayer kept coming to mind. It is found in the ordination services and in the Easter Vigil. (Read the prayer, page 291). It is the second half of this prayer, in particular, that stands out. “….let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” This prayer, in so many ways, captures the heart and spirit of Easter. Old things are dying and being transformed into new things. Things that are being cast down, are being resurrected or raised up. Change is in the air when God is involved. Old gives way to new. Death gives way to life. Deadness is transformed into something new and vital and life-giving. Easter is about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and about the triumph of eternal life over death. This is why this day and all that it represents is so important. With the resurrection comes new hope, new possibilities, new life, new promise, and change.

We are all well aware that we live in an era of accelerated change. Institutions that we took for granted are dying or changing dramatically. For example, I wonder how many of us can name someone we know who still belongs to the Elks or Lions Club, or the Shrine, or the VFW, or who is a member of a bowling league? How many of us live in communities that still have a commons – a place where people gather to hear their elected officials, or to debate issues, or to visit with others? How many communities in our country are now voting by mail instead of having people going to the polling place and voting in person which for me represents democracy in action? How many newspapers around the country have gone under in recent years? We live in a world where religious institutions – the mainline churches – are numerically in decline. As Americans, we are increasingly facing the realization that in a matter of a few decades we will probably no longer be the sole super power in the world – that there are other nations in the world that will pass us by economically, and perhaps will be our equal militarily. The changes brought about by globalization, technology and the internet, are an accepted part of our cultural landscape. We see people from all over the world increasingly rubbing elbows and living side by side. The grade school that my kids attended had a huge enrollment in the ESL classes – there were kids from the Ukraine, from S.E. Asia, from Africa who were going to
school and sharing the playground with kids born here. I use to tell my kids that they were going to school with the United Nations. I would be willing to bet that fifty years ago that would have not been the case, unless one lived in a major city. I doubt that people fifty years ago would have been able to see these changes coming. I suspect that we could add to this list as evidence that the world we live in is changing dramatically and quickly. Institutions that we took for granted at one time are being cast down and others are rising in their place. Every where we turn, it seems that change is in the air.

But change is not simply relegated to the structures and institutions of our common life. We can see it in our attitudes, our expectations, and our assumptions. Our gospel lesson this morning is a perfect example of this. When we consider our gospel lesson, we can safely assume that the disciples and the women who followed Jesus were devastated by Jesus’ crucifixion. The loss of a friend and master, the hopes they had placed in him that he was the long awaited Messiah seemingly were crushed. But the discovery of an empty tomb that first Easter Sunday morning took them by surprise. Confusion was the order of the day. Mary Magdalene assumed somebody had removed the body. Peter entered the tomb first followed by the beloved disciple. We are told that the beloved disciple believed but neither he nor Peter understood what had taken place. Mary lingered at the tomb and in the midst of her tears as she peered into the tomb, she was startled to find two strangers sitting where the body was. But when she turned around, she was confronted by a third stranger she believed to be the gardener. We, however, know that this person was Jesus, and Mary realized it too when he called her by name. And after telling her to pass on the message of his coming ascension to his disciples, Mary hurried off to declare to them, “I have seen the Lord.” What was cast down that first Easter morning was the devastation of presumed loss of a friend and Lord, and the conventional wisdom that dead was dead, and what was raised up was a shocking realization that God had acted and that Jesus lived on. For Mary and the disciples, life would never again be the same. Everything was turned upside down.

If the resurrection of Jesus is synonymous with change, with the old being transformed into the new, with things being cast down only to be raised up again, then this has profound implications for Christian people. Paul Tillich, a Protestant theologian of the 20th century, in an essay made the observation that God is the God of the new. He reminds us of the words of God in
Isaiah, “Behold, I am doing a new thing, Even now it is springing to light. Do you not perceive it?” The resurrection of Jesus will forever be a reminder to us that God is in the midst of all change bringing about the new. Old forms, old ideas, old ways of doing things will die and pass away, but God will always be there raising new things up in their place. It means that you and I can face the future with boldness and courage knowing that whatever happens, God is there. God is doing a new thing in the world around us. He is doing a new thing in our communities. He is doing a new thing in us. And as we live in to the change that is all around us, the newness that surrounds us, we too, like Mary Magdalene, can say to the world around us, “I have seen the Lord.”