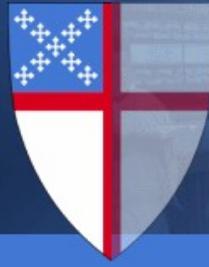


# St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



## Holy Week and Easter 2011

### A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, Spring birds were singing under a bright blue sky, even though there was a distinctly cold nip in the air. Buds were swelling on the trees, but there was not a hint of green leaf to be seen anywhere. It was a mid-March weekday, and I was walking through the Rutgers University campus, when the thought came to me that this might just be my favorite time of the year. The Spring has not yet arrived, but you know it's coming. Even the knowledge that there is still time for another snow storm cannot dampen the general good feeling. Spring will come. Winter debris will have to be cleared from the garden, new plants set out in the hope of a colorfully beautiful late Spring and Summer display. The knowledge that anything that I plant almost never grows in exactly the way I imagine does not deter the sense of hopeful excitement. Yes, I revel in this moment because of its unbridled optimism.

Earlier in the year there had been those wonderfully hopeful scenes of masses of people in Tunisia and Egypt filling the streets and public squares of their cities telling their long-time masters that they had had enough. The "Arab Spring" is what the media is calling it. It is probably a reasonable name. A frightening chill was still in the air. There was always the possibility of another storm of violence. But nothing - not camel charges, tanks, or army trucks filed with soldiers and bristling with rifles - could stop the feeling of hope that swept the crowds. This was the moment! Commentators and pundits pointed out the obvious. Nobody knows exactly what kind of governments will emerge from these popular uprisings. Perhaps there will be no democracy at all, but another dictator. Perhaps many now leading the protests will be bought off and disappoint those who supported them. Perhaps, say many American and western European commentators, "elements" will rise to power which may not be to our liking. (Our western governments have all too frequently shown that we support democracy as long as other people chose what we want!) Any realistic person knows that we cannot really know exactly how a thing will turn out. The future is not ours to see, but because it involves human beings we know that it may very well fall short of expectations. That knowledge does not, however, spoil the moment. Something good is churning in the hearts and lives of people who have been unheard for too long. They have stood up to those responsible for their silence. They have the opportunity to build something better, which may fall short of their own ideals - but the savoring of this moment cannot be taken away. As with all hope inspiring moments in history, if it can happen once, it can happen again.

In early March north Camden residents and Rutgers University students and staff gathered to dream about how they would like to see development go forward in this neighborhood. Specifically, this meeting sought to imagine how streets and walkways might better link the university (south of the Ben Franklin Bridge) to the neighborhood to the north. It was a moment of playful hopefulness. Maps were spread out. Residents - both adults and children - and college students marked them with trees, shrubs, lighting, crosswalks, and what ever else might work to create a livable environment. A consensus was forged. Our ideas were sent back to urban designers at the university who will pull a plan together to be discussed at a future community meeting. Since the prison has gone down there is a springtime of hope in north Camden. On March 22nd Senator Menendez and Congressman Rob Andrews came from Washington, DC to formally open a new clinic in the Northgate II senior high rise. Our church community organization Camden Churches Organized for People (CCOP) had worked behind the scenes for a long time to bring this together. Residents will now have easy access to primary medical care, enabling them to stay healthier and not have to resort to the (expensive) emergency rooms of our hospitals. It is the first tangible bit of the president's health reform to come home to us in Camden. Believe me, the swelling buds on the trees are still very tight and there is a sharp chill in the air in north Camden, but it cannot be missed that springtime is on the way. Our worrying natures and fears tell us that it may not go as planned. We have developers and money to deal with, many who might have other plans. There is the chronic presence of incompetence in our Camden history. But, undeniably, something wonderful is happening. Optimism is in the air.

There is a moment in our Scripture story which the Church brings to our attention at this time of the year. It is that moment in the early dawn of the first day of the week when three women - followers of Jesus - are on their way to the tomb. The burial before sundown on Friday had to be quick. Sabbath was approaching with the eve of the day. They could not do for Jesus' body what family and friends were expected to do. So now that the Sabbath was over they were coming belatedly to anoint his body properly and respectfully for burial.

***“Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’”***  
**(Mark15:47 – 16:3)**

From the perspective of the women - the actual participants in the event - one can only speculate that hopefulness was pretty far from their thoughts. Jesus - their friend, their relative, their teacher, a prophet, perhaps the Messiah(?) - had been brutally murdered by the Roman authorities. The Jewish leadership was pleased that they had disposed of another potential threat to peace and order. His followers were in hiding and were totally despondent. They could not even see tight buds. The cold in the air must have been biting. There was no birdsong or blue sky - nothing to hint of a springtime! All they had was sorrow and duty - perhaps tempered with fear - but they had to do for Jesus what custom and respect and love required. So in the morning chill they took up their spices and ointments and walked to the place where he lay, wondering how on earth they would overcome the next obstacle, how would they move the stone.

For Christian believers this moment is not as it might have seemed to the women. For us it is precisely that moment when the hint of new Life is in the air. It is a moment which we

cannot help but feel is going to change all other moments. It is our pre-Spring! We know what they found!

***“When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.’”***

**(Mark 16:4-6)**

Even at that point they did not fully grasp what had happened. How could they? Who would have? It took all the followers of Jesus many days and the sharing of many experiences to begin to grasp what his being raised meant. Even now we do not fully take it all in! We are often amazed to find \Jesus leading, or embracing, or strengthening us. What we have come to know is that nothing will ever be the same since he has been raised from the dead. While all our human efforts may fall short of expectation, the kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim - the kingdom of God - will not. We believe this, not because we have seen the kingdom in its glory, but because we see Jesus. In him we have the image of God himself - the loving Father who made and upholds all of creation. We know that nothing can stop the love of God from flowing - not high priests, not governors and great powers, not bullying soldiers, not setbacks, not disappointments, not fear, not suffering not crosses, not even death itself. Justice will roll down like waters! Peace will be a pathway for his feet!

***“We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler; \* the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the Name of the LORD, \* the maker of heaven and earth.”***

**(Psalm 124:7,8)**

The Resurrection of Jesus is better than any springtime that nature or history can afford. It cannot be undone. We will never be disappointed. That is not to say that stuff will not happen along the way. But come what may, his kingdom will come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. When he who is King of kings, and Lord of lords is fully revealed and faith turns to sight, all will be well! Incredibly well! Easter blessings to all!

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