

Sunday, April 9, 2023
John 20:1-18
“Beyond Bunnies and Jellybeans”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

I said this last year – do you remember I was here last Easter because Wayne thought he might have COVID – anyway I said this last year and I say it again - - I don't know about you, but I love everything about this day – the banners, the trumpets, the hymns, the flowers, the music; even the Easter eggs, the bunnies, the jelly beans, the new Easter bonnets and dresses, and the chocolate – okay, maybe especially the chocolate! I love Easter because it's about new life, resurrection, a new creation. And especially on this day, especially during this week, this time in history, this time in this church, this time in each of our lives, we need this story, this message, this new life before us. We need the Risen Christ. And this goes well beyond bunnies and jellybeans and even chocolate. It's about the new, the new life before us.

You know, we spend a lot of our time living with tension between the old and the new – most of us love to cling to the old, the way things used to be, a time when it seemed like life was simpler, easier, freer, happier. We resist the new - from the way businesses are organized, things are purchased, meetings are run, courses are taught, parenting is done – it's all new, fast, on-line, digital – cell phones, text messaging, email, Instagram, blog pages, tweeting, face-book, face-time, Google meet, Zoom – I can go an entire day without speaking to a single person and have been in contact with hundreds of people – is that a good thing? We long for, cling to, the old way of doing things. Clinging to the way things used to be! This church sometimes too? I as your very new Interim Transitional Pastor have already started to change things, just a little. But guess what, Easter, resurrection, this day, tells us, sorry, we can't cling to the old because the world is new, God's creation is always changing, we are transforming into a new creation each and every day, and it's our job to face it and embrace it and strive to see Christ in it. We need this story, this truth, with all its confusion, grief, pain, joy, mystery, telling, and miracle, because it's also the story of our life today.

The story of that blessed Easter Day begins with confusion, anxiety, and grief. It had been a horrible week – one of capture, trial, execution, death, and deep sorrow. On that blessed Easter Morning, there was not a chorus of angelic voices, no photos of a cozy brunch with lifted champagne flutes of mimosas, there was no victory lap, no “he is risen, halleluia!” , there were no Easter baskets of candy. On that first Easter, Christ's followers were in hiding. They were sheltering in place. And they were afraid, really afraid. They feared the forces of darkness had won and will always win. They feared the world was an irredeemably violent and malicious place, devoid of good, and full of tombs that held all that was dear to them. The backdrop of our holiest of days was dire, but this, my friends, this is what makes Easter special. This is why Easter matters.” (1)

Our story begins with a woman in the dark – Mary. Mary had lost someone she loved desperately someone who had recognized her – a woman – as special, strong, and significant. Because her loss was so strong, we know her love was so great. Such loss is what it means to truly love. It is the kind of love that brought Jesus all the way to the cross, an everlasting love for us.

Most of us have been in that dark place; most of us have experienced such grief, anxiety, and confusion – it's quite evident on days like this – there is an empty space at our table, a new flower placed among our Easter Flowers up here, a new illness to face, a new loss to embrace. This is my first Easter without my mother who died late October of last year. All those "firsts" are not easy. Why do we continue to weep for what is gone – who are we looking for? We know. We know.

We are looking for the assurance that we are still loved, still alive. We are looking for the courage to go on each day. We are looking for love and new life. That's why you are here on this day. So, what if we were to think of resurrection as a verb, something we each need to practice. Not something we believe or disbelieve. Maybe resurrection is something we should practice daily, seeking the new, seeking the good, seeking Christ. That's why Mary went to the tomb that morning, when it was early and still very dark. Approaching the tomb that morning, even seeing the stone rolled away wasn't exciting, it was frightening, it was horrifying.

We don't know who she thought took Jesus – maybe grave-robbers, it was a problem in those days, especially in the tombs where some were buried with their most valuable possessions. Maybe soldiers of the Roman officials took the body, fearful that his followers would make him a martyr. Whatever she thought, it was a scene she couldn't face by herself, so she ran to find Peter and John, "the one whom Jesus loved".

When Peter and John hear the news, they take off running. It's a foot race to the grave. It is full light now – and because John is younger, he arrives first. But it is Peter who runs right on past him, right on into the tomb – he's not worried about "ceremonial defilement from contact with the dead". O Peter, the one who sometimes had faith like a rock, other times like sand – the one who had walked on water until he took his eyes off Jesus and sank – the one who loved Jesus so much and yet denied knowing Jesus three times; runs right on in.

The story of that blessed Easter day continues with the recognition that something mysterious had happened. After the confusion and grief, there is mystery and maybe miracle. After the dark of Friday, in the midst of the great darkness that followed inside that tomb, something happened. The spirit who in Jesus had driven demons out of sick, called a little girl back from death, healed the sick, the blind, and the wounded, fed the hungry, welcomed outcasts – something happened in that tomb. By the power of God Jesus became "the resurrection and the life". "Death had been swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your sting?" It is no more. The Lamb of God had taken away the sins of the world and received power and honor and glory and blessing.

Going into the tomb, the first thing Peter and John notice - it couldn't have been grave robbers or anyone else who took the body, because the clothes were still there, still in their folds, exactly in the place where Jesus had been wearing them. Makes you wonder what he was wearing, right? But that's next week – come back! So, this was not body theft, this was resurrection. And the disciples knew something had happened; they understood something very significant had happened. And yet it says, what is written? They simply returned home! What?! Maybe they went back to their homes because nowhere did Jesus say when I am resurrected, I will come see you and you will see me. He said, "I will ascend from the dead and go to my father", so they just went home.

One disciple, John, it says, sees and believes, and the other, Peter, sees and is not so sure he believes. But to Mary, to Mary belongs the glory of being the first person to see the Risen

Christ. Mary must have followed the disciples back to the tomb but because she was probably walking quite slowly, not running, they were gone by the time she got there. As she reached the tomb, she just starts weeping again, and peering into the tomb, she now sees two angels, but because she was filled with so much grief, she isn't even fazed by their appearance. She just numbly answers their ridiculous question – "Why are you weeping?" Seriously? And she states, "they've taken away my Lord". Then she senses a figure behind her and turns as he too asks why she is weeping. She probably turned around and with the sun now shining in her tear-filled eyes, thinks he is the gardener and asks, "where is he?" But the moment she hears her name – Mary! – the darkness is split in two and she sees in complete light, death has been taken away from her – somehow, somehow, life had been returned, her savior has risen, her teacher and Lord was here!

When Mary heard her name, she shouts, "teacher!" and starts to throw her arms around his feet. It sounds a bit strange, but Jesus tells her "Don't hold on to me – don't cling to me" – but he doesn't prohibit her from touching him, just from holding on. Because that same Jesus who had brought light into her darkness, had changed. He was now bringing something new and nothing would be the same again. In order for the resurrection to be complete, she needed to stop clutching him and go tell others. The tomb was not where the miracle was. The tomb was way too small for the resurrection. Christ was on the outside of the tomb, calling Mary by name.

Are we not sometimes like each of these witnesses? Sometimes we just believe, sometimes we need to see to believe, sometimes we see but are not so sure we believe, and sometimes we are called by name and know who we are, whose we are.

Many of us are still weeping, crying for those we have lost, things we have lost, the past, those we still want to cling to, hold on to. But the one who stands by the open tomb, calls us all by name, and reassures us that as he will always be with us, those we have lost, will always be with us, for he is the one who comforts us, who guides us, who is our light in the darkness. We may not always feel it or know it or even feel we want it, but the love of Christ will always be there.

We too must learn we cannot cling to the past, hold it – hoard it – it's not our hold on Christ that is important but his hold on us – it's not our hold onto a past life that's important but how that love continues to have a hold on us, transforming us in the present and guiding us into the future. And if we live as Christ's disciples, we will watch our grief be moved into gratefulness, our sorrow into peace, our fear into trust, and we will witness the love of Christ, the love of those lost, still very much alive in ourselves and in others.

The story of that Blessed Easter Day continues with Jesus telling Mary to go; go and tell what you have seen. Like Mary, each of us is called to walk with God into the future – into this new and foolish uncharted world out there. Into our world with the barrage of hyperbole from all sides of the political spectrum, our world, with its pain and anguish of opioid addiction and mental illness, our world, with its volatile stock market and weak banking system, our world, with all of its violence against innocent little children and racism on all fronts, our world, with families scattered, broken and so very distant, and try, try to see resurrection every day, try to live as Christ's disciples in this new world. It's why we are here this morning, we need a power to hold us up and hold us together, hope that springs eternal, when the entire world seems to be pushing us apart.

On that blessed Easter Day, Jesus' disciples, including Mary, discovered a new world suddenly full of hope and possibility. Frightened, discouraged, grieving men and women somehow were transformed into brave, hopeful, loving bearers of the good news. We need to be the same.

We'd like to cling to this day – its hallelujahs and banners and trumpets and joy – its chocolate bunnies, fancy brunches, and Easter egg hunts – but there is a real and ever-changing world outside these doors waiting for us. So let us leave behind the empty tombs of our lives, not clinging to that which has been or was – but believing in the rest of the story – the Easter story that continues this day, accepting all that is new and seems crazy and sometimes horrible, and embrace it, use it, and somehow, somehow, seek Christ in it. Let us commit here and now that we are not going to imagine that Easter is just a symbol, just another day, but seek the resurrection and the life every day.

For every Easter reminds us of the most important promise ever given – that there is no force on earth, no force on earth, especially the powerful forces of our own doubts and unfaithfulness and confusion and grief, no force that can keep the Risen Christ from us. And this promise is not an idea, a principle, a concept, but a person, a real person risen before us, a person that shows us more love than we've ever known, more hope than we've ever imagined. Nothing will ever be the same again.

For Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

(1) Johnston, The Rev. Scott Black. "Empty" 4/9/23.