

April 16, 2017 – Easter Sunday



“The Gift of New Life”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Good morning, everyone! What a glorious day this is. God has given the gift of new life. Please join me in proclaiming the central truth of this day: Christ is Risen. HE IS RISEN INDEED!

We’ll do that several times throughout this sermon, so be ready. And even you kids—while you’re coloring or whatever....when you hear me say “Christ is Risen!” say back to me: “HE IS RISEN INDEED!”

That’s really the main thing you need to know about the amazing Easter story we hear again this morning. As you parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles all know---when a little child hears a wonderful story, they don’t ask: “what does it mean?” No—they say: “Read it again!”

We all come this morning to hear it again, the old, old story that is the new, new song of God’s great love for us in Christ Jesus. We hear the ancient story again, and again, and again, and as we grow, in years and in faith, the truth of what it means becomes clearer and more precious. God has given the gift of new life.

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

The story begins, as John’s Gospel tells it, with Jesus’ dear friend, Mary Magdalene, at the tomb, very early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark. Oh, was it dark. For Mary Magdalene, she who had witnessed the crucifixion, it was dark within and dark without. The darkness of night obscured even the stars. The dark grief in her heart shrouded her hopes and dreams. It was a scene dark with confusion as Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the other disciple, raced around trying to figure out what had happened.

The stone that Joseph of Arimathea had placed to seal the tomb, the stone had been rolled away. Had they stolen his body and taken it away to another place? Grave robbers, perhaps? But no...the burial cloths were still there. Where was he? What had happened? The other disciples ran off, went home, leaving Mary Magdalene there alone, weeping.

They had all gone to the tomb in the dark, expecting to find death and they could not yet see beyond that to the new reality of what God had done. They were stuck in the old paradigm, we might say. He had been crucified and his body placed in that tomb and a very large stone had been rolled up to seal it shut tight. They could only see what their expectations and assumptions prepared them to see. As the ancient Chinese proverb puts it: “Two-thirds of what we see is behind our eyes.” We see what we think we’ll see. And we humans, unlike owls and snakes and cats, don’t see very well at all in the dark.

But you know, even the dark is full of life. Scientists assert that 95% or more of the cosmos is made up of dark matter and dark energy that even the most powerful telescopes cannot see, let alone our human eyes. They only know it’s there because the galaxies and clusters of galaxies we can see are moving too fast or moving in patterns that don’t make sense unless there’s something that is pulling them, pushing them, determining their orbits. As astrophysicist Adam Becker puts it: “We know that there’s something out there [dark matter, dark energy.]...We’re trying to learn the properties of these things. It’s hard because we can’t see them directly, but we can see the effects they have on the things around them.”

So---loosely translated into matters of faith----something happened in that tomb that no one could see. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: “whatever happened in the cave happened in the dark...It happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air...new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.” Something was happening that could not yet be seen---though soon it would profoundly effect everything and everyone.

Haven’t we all marveled at the Super Bloom of wildflowers in the deserts of California and Arizona this year after the long steady winter rains? Desert sunflowers, dune evening primrose, sand verbena, wild Canterbury bells, poppies, ocotillo and beavertail cactus...One park ranger explained: “some of these seeds have been underground for maybe decades, if not a century or more....some of these places have not seen water in 10, 15, 20 years, and now they are a blanket of flowers.”

Seeds in the ground. In the dark. For decades, maybe a century or more. Now flowering.

Easter begins in the dark. Something we cannot see or ever completely understand produces a life-transforming, earth-shattering, faith-compelling effect on Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter and those other disciples--and every Christian since. The tomb is empty. And Christ, no longer bound by the limitations of earth and mortal life, is ascending to new life, eternal life, in God our Creator.

Christ is Risen. HE IS RISEN INDEED!

The truth of this new life begins to dawn on Mary Magdalene, still standing in the garden, the place of flowering new life. She hears a voice she recognizes, the voice of one she has known, followed, served, and loved. A voice that has heard her grief-filled questions and is now calling her by name. "Mary...."

Remember the old spiritual?

"Hush, hush, somebody's callin' my name...
Oh my Lord, oh my Lord, what shall I do?"

Sounds like Jesus, somebody's callin' my name...
Oh my Lord, oh my Lord, what shall I do?"

And though she does not, cannot, yet, fully understand, Mary begins to see in the dark. "Here's what you should do now, Mary...Go," Jesus says. "Go and tell the others what I have said to you." And she, the first apostle, announces to the other disciples: "I have seen the Lord."

The great German theologian, Karl Barth, wrote that the real reason we all come to church, not only on Easter but every single week, is because there's a question that lingers in our hearts and minds, just as it did for Mary Magdalene. "Is it true?" Is it true that God lives and gives us life? Is it true that something so extraordinary happened that morning while it was still dark that we can trust and stake our lives on it?

Is it true that God knows my doubts and hears my questions? Is it true that God loves me even so, and calls me by name? Is it true that when I find myself in the dark that God is there, so close as to whisper in my ear? Is God still rolling away huge stones of all kinds and emptying out tombs of bitterness and death and despair? Is it true?

Is it true that there's more going on, in our hearts, in our lives, than we can now see? Is it true that even now, God is yearning to bring new life all across the world—here, and in Haiti, in Syria, in Egypt...for the whole of God's people?

"Oh yes," says Mary Magdalene. "Yes--it is true. I have seen the Lord."

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

We will sing our faith in the words of today's closing hymn, based on the text of St. John of Damascus, Syria, in the 7th century:

"Now let the heavens be joyful! Let earth the song begin!
Let the round world keep triumph, and all that is therein!
Let all things seen and unseen their notes in gladness blend,
For Christ the Lord hath risen, our joy that hath no end."

On this glorious Easter morn, may you hear God calling you by name.
May you find God's light in every place of darkness.
May God's joy fill your hearts.
And may you, Great God, call us—each and all-- into that new life that is your resurrection.

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Alleluia! Amen.

Notes:

Nathan Kirkpatrick: "Tell It Again." Faith and Leadership, March 22, 2016.

Chinese proverb quoted in Gianrico Carofiglio's novel, *Involuntary Witness*. London: Bitter Lemon Press, 2010.

BBC Earth. "Why almost all of the Universe is utterly invisible." 15 March 2017.

Barbara Brown Taylor. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. New York: HarperOne, 2015.

"California Deserts in 'Super Bloom' Thanks to a Wet Winter." NPR, March 17, 2017.

"Hush, Hush..." Voices of Zion...

Martin B. Copenhaver and D. Cameron Murchison in *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 2*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

"The Day of Resurrection." UMH #303. Text from John of Damascus; trans. by John Mason Neale, 1862.

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