

*Beginning Again...Again*

John 20:1-18

Last Sunday we hosted a Family Easter Celebration in the church's parking lot. It was the first invitation we've made in a year to the whole community, to come and gather in person at the church. And it was great: there were hundreds of people there, distanced and masked, having fun. Children and adults; all enjoying spring weather, eating grilled cheese sandwiches from a food truck, doing crafts and games with plastic Easter eggs and marshmallow peeps, those edible little bunnies made out of inedible ingredients. There was an adult-sized Easter bunny (who oddly seemed to direct a lot of air kisses toward Michelle Noke), who climbed up on a ladder every fifteen minutes to drop little homemade baskets to the ground to see if the raw eggs inside of them would break.

I note without cynicism, just as a matter of fact, that many of the families that came to that Easter celebration last week are likely to never even think about going to church today, on Easter. Easter has become, in our culture, a ritual of spring, notable mostly for its happy color scheme and focus on chocolate. And for many people it's really not much more than that. If you are of a certain age, you might remember dressing up in all new clothes, putting on gloves, new shoes, maybe even a hat. Making sure you got to church early, because you knew the place would be packed. Rushing home for a special Easter meal.

Until last year, when everything changed, we'd held on to some of those traditions: extra church services, brunch reservations. But life has changed. We no longer expect that everyone who lives in the United States celebrates, or even knows, the meaning of a Christian holiday. Truth be told, I think even we who make it a point to be in church on Easter Sunday often do so out of respect for our old family traditions, sentiment for a holiday *that used to really mean something*. Standing around looking for signs of life in an empty tomb can seem a little like huddling around a hole in the ground in Pennsylvania at the beginning of February, waiting for a small rodent called a groundhog to tell us how long winter is going to last. A quaint tradition, meant for a time when we knew less about how life really works.

This day is not about nostalgia. I also don't think Easter is about whether Jesus' body literally disappeared from the tomb on that first Easter morning. And it's not just about what will happen to us after we die—although there's good news there too. The meaning of Easter, the reason to risk stepping over the borderline of all your scientific skepticism this morning, is about life *before* you die. It's about *our* lives, yours and mine. It's about what tomorrow might look like, and the day after that and the day after that—when the project of the day isn't making your grandmother happy; it's living with yourself. Finding a reason to keep going; seeing light even on the darkest days.

Maybe this year we need Easter more than ever. Not the Easter that's melted down into all those symbols we can mold into chocolate—daffodils, bunnies, eggs. The Easter that's less straightforward, more complicated. More like real life. The Easter that says something about the life we've witnessed and lived this last year.

Here's what happened.

Jesus died. It happened so fast. They'd known he was living dangerously, stirring things up instead of just getting along. But enough that they'd actually arrest him? And then execute him? He was a good man. He healed people. He talked about love, non-violence, forgiveness. People like Jesus aren't supposed to die in the hands of police.

His friends, his co-workers, and his family were left with their grief. I know grief; you probably do too. Grief is a non-discretionary experience. No one teaches you how to feel it, or what to do with it. You put one foot in front of the other, and you keep moving—or you don't.

Even in grief, women tend to be do-ers; and so Jesus' close friend Mary Magdalene went back to the tomb on this morning two days after Jesus had been buried. No matter how sad you are, there's always something, some tending, that needs doing. She hadn't been able to sleep much, so it was early, still dark, when she got there. And the first thing she noticed was that the stone that was supposed to be there to keep the tomb closed had been moved. She could see that things were out of place, but she wasn't thinking resurrection. Mary's first thought was that someone had stolen Jesus' body—a theft. One more indignity, when there had already been too many. She was afraid. So she ran (“run” is exactly the verb the Gospel uses); she ran to tell Peter and John—not that they'd know what to do; just so she wouldn't be alone.

And then the story actually gets a little bit comical. Peter and John run to the tomb, look around, confirm for themselves that Mary was right, and then they run right back home. There was a great deal of running that morning. That's what we tend to do when shocking things happen: we run around a lot.

Here's the detail I want to pay attention to today: After Peter and John left, Mary went back into the tomb, a second time. And this time she stayed. She wasn't waiting for good news; she didn't expect anything good to happen in this place where her friend had been buried and then his body stolen. Still, she had to see. This time she went all the way into the cave, so that she could see for herself.

And as she tiptoed into that scary, dark blackness, she heard something. She heard a voice. “Why are you crying?” the voice asked. “Who are you looking for?”...which is sort of like asking, “What are you hoping you'll find here in this darkness?” Mary didn't even look up. She assumed it was the gardener, the hired help; she answered him politely, but automatically—in that “I can't really talk to you about this now” voice. “They took him,” she said. “I don't know where he is.”

And then the voice speaks again. “Mary,” it says. Her name. The word is familiar; the voice is familiar; she has heard them before. She stops sniffing; her ears go more alert. And this time she turns around and looks up, behind her, into the light. And she sees that it's him. Jesus, the one she came here to keep loving the best she knew how.

Really, she'd just come for the body-tending tradition.

It had never occurred to her to hope that Jesus might be alive.

Here's the thing I find encouraging this morning: she didn't get it at first. Jesus had told them he would rise from the dead; that they shouldn't worry if he died, because he was going ahead of them to prepare something; but she hadn't really heard, or understood, what he was talking about. She didn't get it when she got to the tomb the first time that morning and saw that the body was missing. She didn't even get it the first time she heard his voice. She got it when she stayed around long enough to listen again. She got it when she was willing to go all the way into the darkness, to see for herself.

Finally, on what was for her the second, or third, or maybe hundredth time of hearing it, Mary heard what Jesus had been trying to say all along. What she—and we—long to hear: that *everything* ends in life—even death. That even in a world where innocent people die, there is more reason for hope than for cynicism. That there is light that can enter even our darkest secrets, our heaviest burdens, our most hopeless scenarios. That in Jesus' rising from his death, there is the promise that we can rise from our lives.

I have no doubt that you've heard the Easter story before—maybe dozens of times. Most of us still aren't quite sure we've gotten the point, or that it makes any difference. Resurrection is a slippery concept. We don't *feel* resurrected. What would that even feel like? But you are here today...to hear the story again. Maybe because *this* time, there's a death you have to deal with. A shadow in your life that just won't go away. Some darkness you have no choice but to walk all the way into.

Maybe today you can hear this: that inside what feels like shadow, or darkness, even death, there is a light. Someone is calling your name. Maybe this time, you're ready to hear the voice of hope, even if it comes from the most unlikely source. The religion you gave up on a long time ago. The story you've heard a million times before. The gardener.

Answering that voice is not easy or unthinking work. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl tells a story about his fellow prisoners in a Nazi prison camp during World War II. They'd been held captive for so long that when they were released, Frankl said, "they walked out into the sunlight, blinked nervously, and then silently walked back into the familiar darkness of the prisons, to which they had been accustomed for such a long time."

We too are inclined to get comfortable in our familiar darkness. The message of Easter is that God is not willing to leave you there. No matter how deep it is, the shadow in your life is no bigger or stronger than the darkness of that tomb that held Jesus. "Come out," God says—to him, to you. "I need you out here. Alive. In the world, not in that cave."

Maybe the best news this morning is that resurrection happens more than once. There is always another chance, another hope, another voice that will speak to us of new life—no matter how many times we've heard it before, no matter how many times we have *failed* to hear it before.

Do you know this symbol? ¶

It means “new paragraph”. It means: the story goes on, but with a slight turn in its direction. No matter how stuck you have been, no matter how dark the shadow or how much of your life shadow has come to fill, no matter how many times before you have *not* been resurrected, there is a new paragraph to be written, a paragraph that will take you closer to the life you were meant to live. God has not stopped speaking to you. You are nowhere near beyond the possibility of new life.

Christ is risen. May you rise too.