

*Easter Is a Verb*

John 20:1-18

If I remember correctly, I think there have been some Easters when the joy that comes with this day felt like it was just catching up with the state of our spirits. Years when Lent, the forty day season before Easter, that's all about austerity and living conscious of the darkness inside of us, meant that we had to keep tamping down the *Alleluia*'s that wanted to poke their heads out before Easter. There were years when we had to *make* ourselves pause at Good Friday because we were impatient to get back to the good news and optimism of our successful lives. I think I remember that.

That is not this Easter. It wasn't last year's Easter either, or the Easter before that. I'm conscious this morning that this is the first Easter Sunday we have celebrated together in this sanctuary in *three years*. We're still not quite accustomed to being together. The brass and sparkling music of this morning may feel to you surprising, maybe even a little jarring. This Lent we didn't have to manufacture experiences of 'sackcloth and ashes' to re-create the tone of the season. We were living Lent already. Maybe you feel like you've been living in Lent for the last two years.

That's not to say there aren't signs of life around us, hints that things are getting back to normal. But when we say 'normal' now, we usually add the phrase 'whatever that is.' We keep our masks nearby; now they're bracelets, sometimes neck warmers, chin guards. We monitor case numbers; I didn't even know what that meant before Covid. It seems like every time we think we are gaining ground on this pandemic, it reasserts its power to disrupt our lives. The articles I've been reading lately say that the good news is that the pandemic is becoming *endemic*, which means that it's not going away, but we are figuring out how to live with it.

Oh, good.

Yes. Oh, good. Because now, maybe, we will have a sense what it was like to be there on that first Easter morning. *Feel* how confusing—distressing, actually—it was to arrive at the grave of the person you'd just buried with love and grief and find the grave empty. There was no soundtrack yet with the words "Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!" Before we embellished it with 2,000 years of tradition, this story had no angels singing in the sky. There are angels in the-is story, but they are sitting quietly, subdued, next to a pile of folded graveclothes. Their words aren't 'Praise the Lord;' they're 'Why are you crying?'

Those people who were there that morning—they were us. They were just as tired and worn out by the world as we are, just as ready to be suspicious about the likelihood of good news.

For you who have heard the Easter story a hundred or a thousand times before—have you ever noticed that the resurrection stories in the Bible aren't really about Jesus? They don't describe the experience of rising from the dead. The stories are all about the *witnesses* to the resurrection. What *they* saw and felt, what they believed and doubted. In the Bible's stories of Easter morning,

Jesus always has his back turned toward us. It's his followers whose faces we can see. *Their* reactions we identify with.

John's story, the one we read this morning, is about three disciples—two men, a woman. First they run around for a while in confusion; there's a lot of running around in this story. But then there's one moment when all three of them are at the tomb at the same time. These three are individuals; each of them has a different experience. One is cautious at first; he hesitates at the door to the open cave. He is a gatherer of evidence; when he sees the grave clothes neatly folded in the empty tomb, he is satisfied, immediately. He 'saw and believed', we're told. One sees the same thing and he just turns around and goes home. Maybe he's an external processor; he has to talk these facts over with others before he can begin to make sense of what's happening. The third one—she goes back into the tomb to look again, and then again. Even then she turns away in sadness; it's only the sound of Jesus speaking her name that breaks through the fog of not understanding, her persistent sadness.

In this story, like every story we have of people who encountered Jesus after the resurrection, there is doubt and disbelief right alongside faith, what they hope for and *want* to believe. They confuse Jesus for someone else. They have trouble placing this event in the context of their lives, the news, their expectations about how the world works.

From the beginning, the Easter story has been about real people who come to this day in the full mix of their real lives. Think about it; this was 'the day after the Sabbath' for them. That means it was like Monday for us. They were on their way back to their regular jobs. They had doctor's appointments and home repairs to attend to. Work deadlines. There were wars and politics going on then too. These people weren't cheerleaders or paid staff. I'm not sure they were yet true believers. Certainly they were not hanging around waiting for resurrection to happen.

Just like us.

For every one of those eye-witnesses, Easter happened gradually. It didn't stop everything, or light up the sky with a crash of cymbals. There was no moment on that Easter day when they were required to declare with certainty their belief or unbelief. Easter *dawned* on them, slowly. It *became* good news.

In John's story, the one we read this morning, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and then she leaves. She comes back again. Both times she goes only as far as the doorway; she does not go in. She waits for the others; she watches their reactions. After they leave, she bends down and looks in. Then she goes all the way into the tomb herself. And even then, the story reads, she's not sure of what she is seeing. She turns and hears a voice. She mistakes the voice's identity. She turns again, hears her name. Only then does she realize who it is that is speaking to her. These details are not accidents. They are meant to show us that seeing, recognizing, taking in this good news, taking in new life, happens gradually, hesitantly. It requires a lot of turning around and looking again.

Three times in my life I have felt myself resurrected. Once was after the death of someone I loved very much, someone I thought I could not live without. Once was after a professional

failure I wasn't sure my career could survive. Once was after the end of a relationship I had worked very hard at. Each time, all I could see at the time was darkness. Each time, it was only later, looking back, that I realized that I had come to life again. Every time, I had to go back and re-write a story whose ending I thought was already composed.

I suppose that for some people, new life can spring up and grab you and whirl you into a dance, like a full-blown miracle. For most of us, I think, resurrection will not be that. We will realize only slowly that our lives have been saved, renewed, that life has returned to us gradually. We will turn and lift our eyes from the mud we were sure we were cemented in--once, twice, maybe three times, before we see that the way ahead of us somehow cleared when we weren't looking. And then we'll have to turn and do it again...and again. We will be *easter-ing* for a while.

The good news of this day is that we don't have to do it all by ourselves. Easter will not happen because we muscle up and self-improve our way into new life. God takes us as we are and does what only God can do: God *easters* us. Takes our broken, disappointed, hopeless situations and turns them toward life. Our work is simply to turn around and see it. To turn, probably more than once, because we tend to keep our eyes down and our hope contained.

But look again. New life is coming. Maybe it's already here. Silently, unobtrusively, without announcement, God is *easter-ing* you, even now.