

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Luke 24: 1-12

After more than two years of a pandemic, and a protracted but productive interim period here at First Pres — welcome back, Easter people! We gather today in such hope. These dynamic and difficult years have required much of all of us — and demanded our best. A Lead Pastor Candidate will preach in this pulpit on May 1, and we can't wait for you to meet him, so that our best can turn to enthusiastically and energetically welcoming him to lead and love us for years to come.

Throughout all the challenges and changes, somehow — I have not yet been voted off the island. Which brings me to this pulpit today. And I'm grateful, *I think*. And I feel particularly honored to read Luke's version of that first Easter morning. For it was the women associates — the two Marys and Joanna — not the installed Senior-most male disciples — who were the first ones to experience and share the mystery. Listen for the word of God as it comes to us from the 24th chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. —

The grass withers the flowers fade, but the word of our Lord endures forever.

"What are you going to talk about on Sunday?" — a friend who knows I struggle a bit with this whole preaching thing, asked. "Uh, the Resurrection?" "Well, yes... but what about it?" What about it? "Booyah! Jesus is alive. Death was defeated. All the scriptures were fulfilled, it happened just like he told us it would. Because he lived that Easter Day, and lives among us still, love wins, not fear; joy lives, not despair, and there's nothing but hope on the horizon." What more should be said?

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It's rare for me to remember any of the 52 Easter sermons I've sat through, though I desperately want you to remember this one. But I am humbly reminded that the words don't matter so much as the meaning. Easter is about the wonder and the wow that death will never have the final word. At the last, there's always hope. That's what grasps us.

That hope held us on that first Easter Sunday after we got the diagnosis, wondering if it would be our last; we felt it on Easter morning after 9/11, praying terrorism would not defeat us. We found solace that Easter after mom died; the last years when we were all at home, watching the Easter worship our staff created on Zoom, we held tight that hope that we'd return. We've delighted in memories of perfect Easter mornings when the weather was dazzling even in Michigan; when we helped our children in their patent-leather reach up to push flower stems into a chicken-wire covered cross. And we remember that terrible time on Easter when nothing was good at all. No matter what we brought with us, each year we left worship holding hope in our hands for whatever it was we most needed.

Easter speaks for itself. Death has been defeated. The doorway to our life opened thanks to a God who suffered and went to hell so that we never have to live there. For God, death will not do. We remember that.

But is the divine in the details? Should we dig for more? We don't really know about the resurrection. The Bible never tells us how God did it. How his lungs inflated, how his broken body stood, how God jump-started his heart. For some — faith hinges on that one cataclysmic moment that we'll never get to see. As John Updike pressed in his great 1960 Easter poem: *"Make no mistake: if he rose at all, It was as His body; If the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecule reknit, The amino acids rekindle, The Church will fall."* Wow - now that's some pressure seeking some proof.

Trying to follow the science of Updike, I bought books, of course. *The Unalterable Facts of Jesus' Resurrection; The Resurrection of God Incarnate*. And then this thriller -- *"An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus,"* billed as an exciting collection of international, ecumenical, and interdisciplinary papers on Jesus' resurrection. I probably shouldn't say this, sitting here next to the U of M, but leave it to interdisciplinary papers to make me want to snore right through Easter.

While my head was buried deep in the academic details — an angel came to me — one named Billy Collins, the popular poet laureate. I stumbled upon him reading his short piece — *Introduction to Poetry*, about his experience of teaching creative writing to students in New York City. Collins confirmed for me what I most love about Easter. Not the enlightening volumes written, nor the grasping for facts, not the grappling with the discrepancies. Forget preaching towards proof. What I love about Easter is the confounding conundrum of it all. Collins writes of his students:

*I ask them to take a poem and hold it up to the light like a color slide
or press an ear against its hive.
I say drop a mouse into a poem and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem's room and feel the walls for a light switch.
I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.*

To Waterski on Wonder

Sunday, April 17, 2022

Easter Sunday

The Reverend Melissa Anne Rogers

*But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it.
They begin beating it with a hose to find out what it really means.*

Easter is not a day for exegetical scholars but a day for cave explorers. The Resurrection is poetry that calls us to waterski across the surface of an unbelievable event while waving to Jesus who winks at us through the discrepancies. That all of this is so puzzling — well, that’s what makes faith — faith. Marguerite Shuster wrote that the most critical words from the pulpit to you today will be the least credible, because the best and most life-changing news is the least believable news. But we want to believe the brainteaser, and metabolize all its meaning, to disregard the doubt the variants of the story serve up. Hesitation may hound us, but bound we are to believe this man went to hell and back for us because that means we don’t have to. Darn the details, we choose to be beyond befuddlement. We reach out to the resurrection like Collins calls us to — life-giving, hope-inspiring poetry that we enter. It’s not Wordle. We don’t master it any more than we master the perfect soufflé, or Stanley Kubrick films, Zoom break-out rooms... or grief. We simply hold it up to the light and marvel at the gorgeous colors.

What we will always get on Easter is a telling of what happened that morning — insights drawn from the particular version of four slightly different accounts of what occurred at the tomb. Usually we see John’s Mary, weeping at the tomb, or hear her voice, “I have Seen the Lord!” But occasionally, we look to Luke to receive something that resonates again and again in life. Three traumatized women bowing before two men dazzling anointing them — and us — with a question — “Why do you search for the living among the dead?”

Luke leaves us with more than a compelling quote for the ages — he reveals quite clearly what Resurrection requires of us — this momentous mystery must be met and multiplied — in community. In all the versions of Jesus’ resurrection in the Gospels is this — new life arises within community. Though that mystical moment of resurrection happens in solitary confinement, almost everything before and after happens to companions. If Resurrection is solo offering — plurals receive it. Look at their pronouns — they came, they found, they went in, they were terrified. The women, the men, the eleven, they told. The community of the companions is where he chooses to come.

Which is certainly part of the reason why you have chosen to come here this morning. *The New York Times* asked clergy what they had learned from the pandemic, a rabbi from Park Slope said — “We need each other. Judaism teaches us that the Shekhinah — the presence of God — is most clearly present when a group is gathered. So our ability to commune with the divine, to commune with God, is related to our ability to commune with each other. There is no substitute for holding each other’s hands, for putting our arms around each other, for singing together, and we feel it acutely when it’s gone.” Eager for that Easter feeling, we come and get it — here.

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But it's more than a feeling we come for. In that living presence of Jesus who saves us we know a Jesus who changes us, that in this encounter with him and each other we can discard our own grave clothes of defensiveness, loneliness, pride, shame -- to love ourselves, to be accepted by a God, to be given the grace to accept the people around us. To see beyond our differences to work together for a world free of death. To live that first day, as best we can, every day.

Resurrection has to be more than our reality — it creates a community of people we return to again and again who help repair our broken hearts. When we invest in exploring this Easter enigma week after week, daring to be ourselves with our doubts, questions and flaws with other resurrection people, we do change. Showing up to work together at the Habitat for Humanity site. Chaperoning a youth lock-in. Working to find that pitch or strike the right chord in glory to God. Lending your time listening to 2nd graders laugh. Braving Bible Study when you think you're surely the dumbest person in the room. Being truly present in worship. And yes, even in long committee meetings, when you might want to be kicked off the island. AND — on this day of Passover and Ramadan, we are reminded us that this spiritual sphinx of resurrection is more revealing as we talk with folks who met God in other ways, and learn from them, celebrating the mysteries of what they believe, too.

Jonathan Haidt writes in *The Righteous Mind* that if we want or need to change, it happens through relationship. "Conversion is made possible when affection forces us to entertain thoughts that are dissonant with our own opinions. ... The only way we change our mind about an issue or a person is because we lean toward someone we love who thinks differently. In looking to them, we suspend our own opinions and see the world through their eyes." The church should be leading the way in the world, for we know a thing or two about conversion and communion.

That this is so confounding is why we need to receive it together. In courageous, messy conversation, it happens. As author Adrienne Rich put it — "It is in the complexity of relationships that we can do justice to the complexity of faith." Doing justice to Easter, justice to Jesus — is to live with deep unsolvable uncertainty. The divine may be in the details, too, but this marvel we behold makes us companions in the chaos of life and faith.

Do not look for the living among the dead, they told them. Friends, there is nothing but hope on the horizon. Our God is the God of endless possibility. We have left the tombs behind for wide-open skies. Let's leave the details to the interdisciplinary papers and go waterskiing on the wonder of this day as poetry. And shall we bring our best — to Jesus — who waves us on. Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!