

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
April 17, 2022
John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday

*Holy God, remove the stones that block the portals of our minds...
shine your light so that it may take over the darkness within...
and fill our thoughts with your perfect vision for creation so we may be people of
hope who believe that nothing can separate us from your love.
Amen.*

“Easter Hope”

Ah, Easter Sunday. There is nothing quite like it.

No matter how many times I told myself last week to just treat it like any other Sunday, I just couldn't do it. Because Easter is it; it's our biggest day of the year, the crux of our faith, the whole enchilada. Easter is the heartbeat of our faith.

Plus, everyone has high expectations for Easter, especially the musician and the minister. And so we worry and begin planning for the celebration around Christmas. Sometimes, if we're not too tired, we even begin thinking about what we'd do differently next year around mid-afternoon today, when the high of eating too much Easter candy begins to wear off.

You see, we just want to make sure that we get it right. That we play the right notes, or say the right thing, because Easter is utterly central. Without Easter, we wouldn't know about Jesus. If his story had ended with the crucifixion, he probably would have been forgotten; just another person crucified by the Roman Empire in a century that witnessed thousands of such executions. Maybe a word or two would have been written about him as a rabble rouser rabbi, but that is all.

So Easter is utterly central. But what does it mean? That's what I'm most interested in this morning. What does it mean to believe in the resurrection? That God raised Jesus from the dead? Why are all we here this morning to hear this 2000 year-old story that we've heard countless times before, and what

meaning does it have for our lives? That's what I'm interested in exploring this morning. Not how it happened or why it happened but what does it mean? What does it mean in the year of our Lord 2022 to proclaim, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!"

This year our Easter account comes from the Gospel according to John. John begins his version of the story in a garden when it's still dark. Is the darkness symbolic of the despair and depth of confusion Mary and the disciples felt? Probably. After all, they never expected a resurrection, because they lived in a world where hope was in constant danger, might made right, and peace had little chance. A world where the rich got richer while the poor got poorer, and the weak all eventually suffered under some Pontius Pilate or another. In a word, it was a world where death always had the final word. So Mary wasn't expecting anything new to happen.

But John also notes that it's the first day of the week, which is a hint that something new is afoot; that this is not an ending, but a beginning.

But Mary isn't aware of any of this. She only knows that her good friend and savior Jesus is dead. So she does what any good friend would do; she goes to his gravesite to be near him; to feel his presence; and to mourn. But when she arrives she sees right away that the stone has been rolled from the tomb. She's alarmed so she summons Peter and the Beloved Disciple to come quickly. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him," she declares. My guess is that she fears grave robbers have come and stolen Jesus' body.

So Peter and the Beloved Disciple take off. They run towards the tomb, a foot race ensues, and the beloved disciple gets there first. He looks in, hesitates, but doesn't enter. Peter, however, does enter. He looks around and observes the evidence; he notices the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been covering Jesus' head rolled up nicely in a place by itself. Peter's silence at what he observes and the fact that he goes home seems to indicate that he agrees with Mary's assessment. That robbers came and stole the body.

The beloved disciple, however, assesses the scene differently. When he goes into the tomb after Peter, he sees and believes. Believes what, though? John writes that both men “did not understand”, so the beloved disciple also goes home.

Only Mary remains at the tomb, and she is still distraught. Weeping, she bends over to peer inside and sees that two angels have appeared and they’re sitting where Jesus should have been lying! “Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask. And for the second time she repeats her claim: they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” This time, there’s some agitation in her voice. No surprise given that the 2 disciples have fled the scene yet again, and these 2 angels don’t seem to be any help either.

So she backs out of the tomb, and as she does so she bumps into a human figure. She thinks it’s the gardener. “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Jesus asks her. She sticks to her story. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” She’s had enough; her patience is worn thin. She just wants to know where Jesus is.

“Mary!” Jesus says.

And suddenly, it’s clear to her. “Rabbi!” she cries out.

I can picture her arms outstretched, getting ready to hug him and welcome him back. But he stops her. “Do not hold on to me . . .”

We don’t know what she thinks in that split second of time; John doesn’t tell us. I imagine the look on her face, though, says it all: dismay, disappointment . . . Jesus senses this and offers an explanation to her: “I have to ascend to the Father,” he explains. In other words, the story isn’t over; it’s still unfolding, it’s just the beginning, and she’ll be the one to tell it to the disciples. “Tell my brothers for me that I’m ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.” And with that she goes and announces everything to the disciples.

So what does it all mean?

The fact that there's a resurrection means that it's not just a reunion story; if it were just a reunion, Jesus wouldn't have told Mary he had to go, and that she has to go and tell others what she's seen.

The fact that there's a resurrection means that it's not an ending; if it were an ending, she could have held on to Jesus, and the story could have ended with hugs and laughter.

The fact that Jesus tells Mary not to hold on to her tells us that the resurrection cannot be anchored to the past. Instead, this story is future oriented, it's a commission story in which believers, people like us, are sent out into the world to tell everyone that death is not the last word. Jesus calls Mary by name to announce to the disciples, and by extension anyone who would believe, that a new creation, a new beginning, an unimaginable future, has taken hold. And so an unexpected ending is now a beginning of telling the truth about life – that nothing, not even death itself, can separate us from the love of God. Death is destroyed and hope is renewed because Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Friends, I don't know about you, but I need the promise of the resurrection. I *need* the tomb to be empty. I need that anchor and that promise in my life. ***I need to hear*** God's assurance that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that compassion overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient – real and palpable and painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word. Instead, the abundant, overflowing love of God has the final word. This is the promise of the resurrection. This is what it all means. This is why we're here. And this is the message we are told to proclaim.

The resurrection was never the end of the story. It's only the beginning. And it's our story to keep living out, remaining vigilant in our witness when wars rage and dictators go unchecked; when others are unjustly accused, tried and condemned without a fair hearing; when others try to silence the voices of the oppressed, and discount the wisdom of those the world wants to leave behind. It's our job to speak up when some want to leave the promise of the resurrection in the past. Because just like Jesus did with Mary, God calls us by name to plant the flags of resurrection of new life, new communities, new faith, new hope, and new love.

Friends, Easter is not just about something that happened long ago, but is a reality now. The writer Anne Lamott once wrote: "**Easter** means you can put the truth in a grave but you can't keep it there." Mary, Peter and the beloved disciple, you and I live in a new world full of hope and possibility, and Jesus calls us to start living and hoping and rolling up our sleeves and working for God's new Easter creation.

So hear once again the promise of the resurrection that Jesus calls you by name and reaches out to usher us into a whole new world. And this new world is infused with divine possibility and sparkling with the promise of a Creator determined to redeem it in love.

So please know that whatever is happening in your life today, whatever you are dealing with, worried about, struggling with, there is a power alive and at work in the world and in your life. It is on your side; it will hold you up. It is the power of life and love. Because Christ is risen.

Please know that whatever you are afraid of today, tomorrow, and in the future—there is nothing ultimately to fear. Because Christ is risen.

And please know that though death is real, more real is a love from which nothing, not even death, will ever separate you from the love of God, and so you can entrust your life and the life of your dear ones to him. Because Christ is risen.

In a garden long ago, before dawn, Mary, weeping and devastated heard Jesus call her by name and in ways she did not fully understand, but at a place deep in her soul, she believed that he was the victor, not death; that the last word about him was not death but life and love; and that the meaning she and every one of us longs for was in him, a risen Lord who overcame death and destruction. New life began on that first Easter morning.

So please know, on this Easter morning, that God also calls you by name and invites you into a whole new world filled the possibility of resurrection and the promise that nothing – not even death itself – can separate us from the love of God.

Because Christ is risen. He has risen indeed.

Alleluia.

Amen.

Sources:

“Feasting on the Word”, Year C, Volume 2, commentary for Easter Sunday