

## **HEAVY HOPE**

In the chaotic tapestry that is scripture, there are a few threads that hold the whole creative narrative together. One of the threads is surprise – a God who constantly upsets the apple cart of life. Again and again, God turns things upside down – darkness becomes light, despair becomes joy, the weak become strong, the foolish become wise, the love of power is destroyed by the power of love. And death dies, so that life can be re-born.

But this particular Easter, God is not only turning things upside down. God is also turning things inside out. On Thursday evening, during our Maundy Thursday service, many of us watched Dieter wash his hands for a good thirty seconds. And we were reminded that this year Jesus is serving us, not by washing our feet, but by demanding that we wash our own hands and feet – staying as far away from touching others as possible. And then there is this morning. Instead of letting life loose, into full, fragrant sanctuaries, Jesus is asking us to celebrate life by staying locked up – sealed in the tombs of our living rooms. Yes, this day, rather than running to our family dinners to share the good news of resurrection, Jesus is asking us to eat our honey baked hams alone. And so this year, the noise and joy and crowds of Easter are missing, and we wish God would stop surprising us in such disturbing ways.

Last week, a young colleague of mine in New York, using a video clip of course, shared a brief meditation called Heavy Hope. She showed us a symbol – a cross embraced by a heart and resting in an anchor. And the symbol represents the faith, love and hope described by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 13. Well, when given this symbol as a gift, Elizabeth immediately understood that the cross represents faith and the heart represents love. But why the anchor? Why is the anchor a symbol of hope? It is because an anchor is what keeps us safe and grounded when the seas are rough and when the world is out of control. The anchor is a symbol of heavy hope – that steady promise that keeps us anchored when everything around us seems scary and disordered. And it is the kind of hope that Easter offers us this year. Henri Nouwen says it best: “There is always reason to hope, even when your eyes are full of tears.” (Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett)

Usually on Easter we read John’s tender story of Jesus calling Mary by name – of the Risen Lord calling each one of us by name, and giving us new life. But our Gospel story appointed for this year is from the Gospel of Matthew. And it is not just Jesus speaking to me personally – or you personally. It is Jesus speaking to the church – calling all of us out of our tombs of frustration and sadness and separation – calling us toward a future beyond this Covid19 mess - to life bigger than this moment– to a life of hope and justice and healing for the whole world.

In Matthew’s version of the resurrection story we have to deal with melodrama – with all the technicolor effects of earthquakes rumbling and lightning flashing and an angel rolling stones and guards dropping like dead men. Matthew tells us that two women approach the tomb – not three or one, as the other gospels do. And Matthew’s women carry no oils for anointing – apparently they have no intention of touching or caressing the dead body. No, the text tells us that the two Marys go to “see” – a word that actually means “study.” The two Mary’s go to study and explore and remember what they have felt and experienced – the grief, the horror of Good

Friday's cruelty, the fear and anxiety and the certainty that Jesus is dead. These women refuse to forget and gloss over the pain they are feeling.

I wonder, what pain and loss and anger and sadness are we feeling in the sealed tombs of these days? How are we sneaking away into the darkness before dawn – feeling like life has lost joy and purpose and love and energy? What is dead and buried in our lives? Our economic security? The comfort of a grandchild's hug? A job that feeds our soul? A prom or graduation or vacation that is cancelled? A loved one who has died and left us alone?

If we, like the two women, can take time to see and study and own our feelings, then maybe we will be in the right place for God to come and surprise us with technicolor new life –because this is the kind of God we have – recreating us and renewing us when all hope and joy and life is gone. Dear friends, unless we go to the graves of our dreams before dawn, we may well miss the God who comes to us when we think God is dead. Heavy hope, indeed.

Of course the women do not have much time to study, to see, to explore their sadness. Rocks quake, soldiers faint, an angel speaks. First a declaration: “Jesus is not here; Jesus is not dead.” And then an urgent command: “Go. Quickly, go and tell. Tell the whole world that God lives.”

And with these words, the women change. They run. Filled with fear – and filled with joy – they run – not understanding but hoping. They run – and they run straight into Jesus.

And he greets them – not with the quiet call of their name – but with the exultant cry of their new calling. “Rejoice!” he says, “do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers, my family, the family of God – tell them to go to Galilee – and there they will see me.” There WE will see him.

This Matthew text is very clear in a way that none of the other resurrection accounts are. Jesus says, “Go to Galilee. Not Jerusalem – the holy, pious, churchy place. But Galilee – the homey, earthy, daily place. Go to Galilee - where love and hate, suffering and joy, disease and wholeness, work and play mix themselves up. Galilee - where the extraordinary rises out of the ordinary. Yes, here – in our homes, in our church, in our community, in the world - here is where we will find Jesus – resurrected in us and among us.

Yes, today, Jesus gives us all a new vocation – the vocation of resurrection.

These past few weeks, I have spent much too much time consuming the news – reading the stories of suffering and death – looking at images of the pain and pandemonium that this pandemic is causing around the world. On Thursday, there was that picture of a huge trench that is being dug on an island close to New York City – where dozens of cardboard coffins are being buried, corpses with no names – bodies discovered in homes of people who died alone and unknown.

It was also a wake-up call for me to learn that the first ten Covid 19 deaths in St. Louis City were African Americans– and a huge percentage of deaths around the world have been among the poor who lack health care and healthy food and economic security. With the dismal news that all Missouri public schools will be closed for the academic year, it was sobering to read about the large number of children who have no access to online learning in their homes – innocent victims of economic disparity - based on zip code and injustice.

I have also read the wonderful stories about people helping people – health care workers risking their lives, many in this congregation – first responders and national guard working double shifts – neighborhood bear hunts and online worship services and mass production of homemade masks and governors helping one another get through this crisis.

And yet as disciples of Jesus Christ, called to a vocation of resurrection, our vision must rise above these immediate days and our immediate neighbors. We have a world that needs a massive reimagining of social systems, a world that is yearning for a vibrant resurrection of global harmony, a world that wants sudden clean air and unpolluted rivers to remain when life gets back to “normal.” And so, those of us who are safe in our homes with enough reserve to weather this crisis, we are being called to see the pain and the possibilities, and then to go, running, to tell the good news that God is resurrecting the world, and we are called be co-creators of that new life.

The story is told of the great opera composer Puccini who was stricken with cancer at the end of his life. He decided to write one more opera – Turnadot – even though he had but weeks to live. His friends said to him “But suppose you die before you complete your work?” Puccini answered, “Oh, my disciples will finish it.”

Years later, the premier of the opera took place in Milan, Italy, at La Scala Opera House, under the baton of Puccini’s student Arturo Toscanini. The performance proceeded to the point where Puccini had abruptly ended. Toscanini paused and remarked to the audience, “Thus far, the master wrote...and then the master died.” Toscanini then picked up the baton and shouted out to the audience, “But his disciples finished his work.” (Lectionary Homiletics, April, 1992, p. 26).

My friends, the work of resurrection is not complete, but we have been given the grace and the creativity to finish God’s Easter miracle. Whether we want it or not, today God hands us a baton – a new vocation of resurrection – all of us together, completing this great composition called life.

Today is a gift. But today is also a commission. Go, tell, heal, believe. Christ is Risen. Life is new. God loves us, God needs us, God sends us. This year our hope is heavy, but a Living God walks with us every step of the way.

This is the Good News of the Gospel.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

A sermon preached by  
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