

Reflection for Sunday, April 17, 2022

Easter Sunday: *An Expansive Life*

Luke 24:1-12

Welcome and Peace ...

Hallelujah! Christ is risen! It is so wonderful to be able to celebrate the mystery of Easter with you.

I have been taking an on-line course through the Presbyterian Seminary in Zomba, Malawi (Africa) during lent. A few of us North Americans join the class in Malawi via Zoom. It has been a wonderful experience. Last week to open the class we were getting to know each other, telling each other about our lives. When we were finished the Malawian students said something I had never heard before, but it struck me as true and incredibly appropriate for this particular Easter morning. “Because of you, Jesus is here.” They repeated it over and over:

“Because of Dr. Bertrand (our professor), Jesus is here.”

“Because of David, Jesus is here.”

“Because of Kelly, Jesus is here.”

“Because of Blessing (a popular name in Malawi), Jesus is here.”

They even included the author of one of our textbooks,

“Because of Dr. Hartman, Jesus is here.”

Not only did it remind me of the passage from Matthew (18:20) “where two or three are gathered, I am there,” but it also reminded me how the risen Jesus lives within each of us – our witness and our actions testify to our Saviour.

So “Because of you (the congregation in the pews) and because of you (the people worshipping at home), Jesus is here. Alleluia! Happy Easter!

Today begins the season of Eastertide, fifty days of celebrating Jesus’ resurrection —making up roughly one seventh of the entire year, in effect a “sabbath” writ large for the year as a whole. The resurrection is so great a mystery, and calls for such deep exploration, and so much celebration that merely one day won’t do. Bring on the fifty-day season of jubilation!

At the very outset of Luke’s Gospel, the priest Zechariah (Elizabeth’s husband and John the Baptizer’s dad) sings a song including the line: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:78-79). Now — at last — that dawn has come!

I don't know about you, but with violence and wars, a pandemic, inflation, not to mention the personal struggles we each deal with on a daily basis, I am ready to celebrate. I want to shout "Hallelujah!" and eat hot cross buns. I want to step out of the shadows and bask in the light.

But dawn is not the day. Easter Sunday is only the beginning: Jesus' resurrection is the "first fruits" of the harvest, an encouraging glimpse of what's ahead (1 Cor 15:20-23). But "what's ahead," by definition, isn't yet here. We call it "dawn" because its rays of light break through the shadows; but for the time being, the shadows remain. Accordingly, it comes not as the solution to creation's problems, but rather as profound assurance that a new, irrevocable era has dawned — and in the end, love and justice, shalom and joy, will have the final word. The sun will rise!

Our scripture reading today doesn't include a resurrection appearance by Jesus, we are not at that point in the story yet. Today's scripture is a story of discovery.

After the sabbath, the women make their way towards Jesus' tomb to embalm his body. I can imagine them as they walk, sometimes in silence, sometimes reflecting on both Jesus' ministry and his horrific execution on the cross. They must have been traumatized. Perhaps they shared their hopes of "what could have been," or what "should have been."

Tombs were typically sealed with a large, disc-shaped stone. As the women approach their destination the early light reveals, has been inexplicably rolled aside. They enter the tomb, and quickly realize that there is no body to anoint, no sacred ritual to complete in order to say goodbye. The fragrant spices wrapped in their arms are useless. Their laments and prayers would never be uttered.

Instead two angelic figures in "dazzling clothes" (reminiscent of the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-31)) appear beside the women: *Why do you look for the living among the dead?*

The women betray no sign of expecting the resurrection; Jesus has spoken of it before, but like the male disciples, they either don't remember or don't understand (Luke 9:22; 18:33). The angelic figures remind them this way: "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Humanity must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again" (Luke 24:6-7).

The Greek term for "remember" used here — *mimnesko* — means more than just mere recollection; it means something more like "to bring past actions to bear on the present, with new power and insight." The same underlying word appears in Mary's Magnificat with reference to God helping Israel "in remembrance of God's mercy," and also in the crucified thief's plea, "Jesus, remember me" (Luke 1:54; 23:42). It's a tangible, consequential kind of recalling, a form of remembering that is at the same time a form of action — and for the women at the tomb, it carries the force of an epiphany and a commission: "Then they

remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest” (Luke 24:8-9).

The women – including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James – return and report all they have experienced to the eleven.

The men receive the women’s proclamation as “an idle tale” / “nonsense” (Luke 24:11). They don’t believe. Throughout this passage there is a struggle between belief and disbelief – the women, the men, everyone is trying to comprehend all they have seen and heard. Even today we struggle. Sometime when I look at what is happening in the world or experience brokenness in my own life, I struggle with believing in God’s transforming, resurrecting power. But that is when I am operating from the shadows of the tomb. The dawn is there, I need to be like the women and step out of the tomb, into the light. Out of death and into life.

It’s Easter Sunday, but the reading from Luke is hardly a simple story of triumph! It’s only the beginning — and rightly so, since a mystery as fathomless as Easter can only *begin* on a single day, beckoning us to enter into its depths and riches for the fifty-day season to follow, and beyond.

In this way, the reading makes clear that Easter Sunday is not the end of Lent — it’s the beginning of Eastertide, and in a deeper sense, the beginning of Christian life. The trumpets and lilies signal not a final victory, then, but a commencement, a launch, a kickoff — a dawn of a new day.

And that “new day” still has shadows, and wounds (as we will see in later stories, even the risen Christ still has the wounds on his body), and struggles, and doubts. Indeed, if our first reaction to a report of resurrection is skepticism, we’re in good company. Jesus’ own disciples, the ones who arguably knew him best, initially refuse to believe. After seeing for himself that the tomb is empty, Peter is “amazed” — but not yet convinced (Luke 24:12). And as we’ll see in the weeks ahead, this kind of stance — amazed-and-not-necessarily-convinced — is what Easter faith looks like more often than not.

The women, however, take their amazement another step forward: whether or not they’re completely convinced, they proclaim the mystery. They announce the good news. They are the original apostles: precisely where the men are “slow of heart,” precisely where Peter is silent, these women courageously, eloquently preach. Women who were (and still are) often ignored, forgotten, even written out of history. It makes me wonder who are we ignoring, forgetting? Who might be trying to witness to us today that we might not be paying attention to? Who do we believe?

Peter might have been silent, but he was intrigued enough to inspect the tomb himself. The text doesn’t say what took place at the tomb, all we know is that he is amazed at what had

happened (Luke 24:12). I am grateful for this reminder that even when you feel unheard, ignored, dismissed (which is so exasperating!), even then there is a kernel of something, a beginning. You never know when the Spirit may be silently nudging someone towards possibility, towards new life.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women go to the tomb with spices to tend to Jesus' body. When they find the tomb empty and are stunned by the presence and words of the men in dazzling clothing, they remember. They remember what Jesus had said, which compels them to go out and tell the story. Even in utter shock, they return to their deepest knowing and allow themselves to receive the expansiveness of resurrection. Their imaginations and hearts expand, and they must take action in response. Many of the disciples won't open themselves to this expansiveness – they dismiss it. Peter is the only one who is curious enough (perhaps he feels a little stirring of the Spirit within) to return to the tomb, and as a result, he is filled with amazement and awe.

I wonder...

- can we be curious enough to return and remember?
- can we allow ourselves to be filled with expansive hope?
- can we trust in the promise of new life?

In her commentary, Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia writes: "We open ourselves up to the unexpected as we arrive at the tomb and realize we have to lay our own spices down, letting go of what we know how to do to step toward whatever is next." This Easter morning, I wonder what you are invited to lay down or let go of in order to step into what is next?

What does it look like for you to be like the women at the tomb, to trust what you know deeply, and to share that truth out loud? What does it look like for you to be like Peter, to be curious enough to go where new life is blooming?

We have journeyed through the Lenten season with the theme, Full to the Brim, being reminded of God's lavish love and unending grace. I wonder what is the expansive life God is inviting you to live?

Like the cross, the empty tomb is a great divine mystery, a rising sun dispelling shadows in multiple directions. It's only a beginning, but the tide has decisively turned. The dawn has come. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Sources:

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Nancy Walker