

“Embrace the Good News”

John 20:1-18

Easter Day

March 31, 2024

Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Here we are again, the miracle of resurrection all around us on this Easter Sunday. Somehow, each year during Lent I find myself asking if Easter really will come again this year. If it's true that on that morning long ago, in the garden, while the dawn was still dark, Mary and Peter and the other disciple experienced something that changed everything. If it's true that the brief days and long nights of winter will eventually give way into spring, if it's true that the sun will return to illuminate us from the gray. If it's true that grief can exist right next to joy. If it's true that resurrection is real and love cannot be overtaken by the death-dealing powers of domination.

And friends, today as I look around at you all, as I hold the last six weeks of Lent in my heart, as we have journeyed through this life together, persevering through challenges and loss and death and holding sacred memory close, I know all of that is true.

It is the good news.

And on this Easter day, let us say “alleluia,” because grief is right next to joy and the sun illuminates through the gray and Mary saw something amazing in that garden and because resurrection is real.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Though I can be skeptical and have some issues with the gospel according to John, the resurrection as told in John 20 is my favorite. Putting aside the need to have two men around to verify a woman's testimony, and the fact that Mary Magdalene is rarely acknowledged as the first preacher to proclaim the resurrection, and the questions about why the face covering and the linen cloth were placed separately, and the wonderings about who really is the beloved disciple...I love this telling because of one simple phrase: “thinking that he was the gardener.”

Mary was...not wrong...about the risen Christ being the gardener, a Caretaker, a Planter of Seeds, a Tender of Growing Things, a Nurturer of Life. “Gardener” is perhaps one of the more accurate titles for Jesus!

Gardeners are practitioners of intimacy. Tending the earth from which all things come alive, and to which all life returns. Rejoicing with the first subtle signs of sprouts, as the soil is moved ever so gently aside to make room for life to burst through. Receiving nourishment from the miracles of tomatoes and turnip greens and strawberries. Grieving with the last plants that dry their blossoms and shrivel their stalks, entrusting the decaying to the warm embrace of the ground.

Jesus of Nazareth knew all about the co-mingling of joy and grief, nourishment and decay, life and death. Jesus the risen Christ knew. Christ the gardener knew.

Witnessing the co-mingling of joy and grief is so appropriate for this time, beloveds. Appropriate for Easter, and appropriate for Spring, and appropriate for this time in our world.

One of my favorite Instagram accounts to follow is @motherwortandrose. This week, they posted the following wisdom: And “Amidst Spring's exuberance, it can be easy to feel like our grief and sadness are at odds with the greening world. The contrast of Spring with the horrors of ongoing genocides and state violence is stark. What place does exuberance have, in these genocidal, police state hellscapes? What place does our grief have, here, amidst the festive miracle of spring? Spring invites us to remember that joy is always a resurrection. There is space for our grief in the miracle of spring.” “Old stories tell us that grief not only has a place in Spring, but that grief BRINGS the Spring. Spring is not just soft and stunning, but mighty and fierce, and only arrives through great risk, loss, and interspecies collaboration. As Sophie Strand shares, “becoming new is never safe.” All around us, brave and brilliant beings are breaking open, and falling apart. Bayo Akomolafe reminds us, ‘Grieving is how flowers bloom.’”

If you'll permit me the indulgence of adding in some ecology to the mystery of this day, I'll quote from the essay by Bayo Akomolafe mentioned:

“In 2011, a group of Harvard physicists leaned in to study the mechanisms of the flower's bloom. We know that flowers bloom to attract pollinators and thus to survive. But how do they generate enough force to curl open in summertime? What processes trigger this seminal publication of telluric and arboreal passion? In the study of the lily, it was noted that blooming works “because plants build up ‘instabilities’.” Instabilities happen when certain “cells (in stems, roots and lily blossoms) elongate more than others”, constituting excessive growth that strains the rest of the plant. This excessive growth or mismatch at the edges coaxes the petals to bend over backwards, curling them up “like a smile.” When researchers surgically removed the excess, blooming did not happen with the usual elegance we associate with the phenomenon...

In a sense that is more than metaphorical, grief is the coming apart of things. It is the material unraveling of edges, the peeling back of awkward tips. In a more than human world, grief need not be tethered to ‘internal subjective experiences’ or ‘states of mind’. Grief is a public event, not a private affair. I cannot help but imagine that the plant's blossom is a grieving. In noticing this, I realize that grief is not just a response to loss, it is a response to excess. It is how things bleed into each other. It is the dynamism of material flows melting into each other, shape-shifting at the instance of a touch. Grief is part of the motif of change.”

This sounds like resurrection to me. Grief and the dynamism of life and shape-shifting and becoming something new, something profoundly changed. I think this is why Mary Magdalene, early in the morning, went to the garden.

The first Easter morning was filled with grief for Mary, at least at first. And she questioned the gardener, “Where have you taken his body?”

You see, Mary was used to tending bodies. We know what some say about her profession, intimately acquainted with care for the body. And as she traveled as one of Jesus' disciples, she was one woman who financially supported Jesus' ministry, perhaps caring for the common purse that made sure they had somewhere to sleep each night and something to eat. And Mary tended to Jesus' body, recognizing the need to minister to him before the hour of his death, even as the disciples tried to cast her aside, ashamed of how she worshipped Jesus' dignity.

In the garden that morning, Mary's concern was with Jesus' body. Jesus' body, that she had knelt before in worship, begging help and forgiveness. Jesus' body, that perhaps still carried a remnant of the perfume that she had used to bathe his flesh and anoint him for burial mere days previously. Jesus' body, that she had witnessed endure dehumanization torture and humiliating corporal punishment. Jesus' body, that hung on the cross, a warning from empire to all who would oppose them, that resistance is futile. Jesus' body, lovingly brought down from the cross to the lap of his mother, also named Mary, then prepared for burial late on Friday. Jesus' body, laid to rest in a tomb under watch of Roman imperial soldiers.

Mary's intimate concern borne of respect for the physical body calls across the millennia for all bodies to be treated with respect and dignity.

She had, as Wendell Berry might say, practiced resurrection. She had practiced resurrection in her tender care for bodies, in her compassionate worship of Jesus', in her faithfulness of honoring a beloved one who had left the world of the living. Her presence by the tomb that morning was fierce and mighty and brave like the springtime. In the garden, she did not fear death, as she had not feared death on Friday while she waited and watched by the foot of the cross, but as she took in the abundant life just waiting to spring into bloom with a touch of the sun's dawning rays, she practiced resurrection.

And the resurrected Christ appeared to her, speaking her name with intimate knowledge of his friend, walking in the dewy grass with feet that still bore the scars of his torture, prompting Mary to change her perspective from standing facing the tomb to looking around at the Creation. Jesus Christ the Gardener, the Tender of Growing Things, tended Mary's faith by showing her that empire could not silence resistance to oppression; that solidarity with those suffering under the weight of injustice was worth it; and that the powers of domination would never overcome the power of love!

We, too, can practice resurrection. We do this by honoring our own dignity and the dignity of others' bodies by advocating for healthcare for all, for reproductive justice, for access to gender-affirming medical treatment. We can practice resurrection by turning swords into plowshares, investing in food and not bombs, protesting the use of our tax dollars to fund weapons and manipulation of warring powers, divesting from all that would be death-dealing and investing our hope for peace and following it up with action. We can practice resurrection when we witness how a loved one has made it through the valley of the shadow of death when we weren't sure they would, when illness or heartbreak or addiction or depression or mental illness or poverty or injustice was overtaking them. Or perhaps it is our resurrection, of sorts, that we give voice to. We can practice resurrection by changing our perspective, as Mary did that morning

long ago, from facing the tomb to turn and face the glory of Creation. We can practice resurrection by following the example of Jesus and aligning ourselves with the poor, the outcast, the isolated, the vulnerable, the refugee, the widow, the orphan. We can practice resurrection by proclaiming that love cannot be snuffed out like the flame of a candle, but it persists beyond time and space and birth and death; though it is an unseen force, love may be the realest thing we know.

This morning we added flowers to an empty cross, a tradition that can be traced back to the 6th century, when art began to appear of flowers bursting forth from the cross, symbolizing the resurrection. Though we do not glorify the cross, and we acknowledge the incomprehensible harm that has been done with its use, we witness that it is empty, and that even the force of state-sanctioned violence could not keep down solidarity with the oppressed. Today, we observed this tradition with intent towards liberation: this symbol of death, of empire's power, of capital punishment, of dominion and domination...was covered with flowers proclaiming "death is not the end" and "God is doing something new" and "empire cannot quench life-giving love" and "life bursts forth in the wake of pain and destruction."

Friends, the space we share on this Easter morning is not simple. It is complex and layered, sorrow on celebration on gratitude on grief, at once intimate and communal. Easter is a time for the mystery of incarnation to visit us again as it did at Christmas, as we wonder at the beauty and challenge of being human and loving this imperfect world so deeply. And the reality of resurrection is not one relegated to a morning two thousand years ago, but a hope for each of us to hold on to, and a practice for each new day.

"Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts...practice resurrection."

May we embrace the good news this day and every day. Amen.