

Living as Easter People
Colossians 3: 12-17, John 20: 1-18
Easter/A, April 24, 2011
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Why are you here? I don't mean in the weird existential "why have you been placed on this planet," kind of way. I am not wondering about your purpose in life or how your faith informs the way you live, (although those are great questions and we could certainly consider them another day.) I am wondering what motivated you to get up this morning, maybe put on your special Easter clothes, and come here to South Church. I am not concerned whether you were here last week or whether you will be here next week. I am simply curious what made you come this morning. Did you come because it is Easter and that is what you do on Easter? Did you come because you always come to church on Sunday and today is no different from any other Sunday, or is it? Perhaps you wanted to remember why this Sunday makes every other Sunday possible?

So I ask you to take a moment to consider, "Why are you here?" Most of us are here because today is special, different, perhaps more important than most other days. Perhaps the brass ensemble makes this day different or the return of the Alleluias we lustily sing in our Easter morning hymns. Perhaps it is obvious that this day is special by the plethora of flowers that adorn the sanctuary each one lovingly given in thanksgiving for special people in our lives. Today is special, but not because of the flowers or the new outfits or the amazing music we are privileged to share. Today is special for reasons many of us would have a hard time putting into words.

We make our way to church on Easter morning because we need more; more than bunnies and jelly beans and candy coated clichés that seem to be enough for so many people. When life takes an ugly turn, when we don't have the ready answer to those challenging questions, when our child is bullied or pressured to conform to societies definition of worthy or beautiful we need more. We come because we trust that when Jesus said there is more to life than death he meant it. We come because even when we feel trapped, unable to make a decision that will move us forward, we know we are not entombed; the stone has been rolled away, you will not find us there, we have gone ahead, as the risen Christ did, to proclaim the good news.

Perhaps like Mary you do not understand the power and promise of the resurrection yet, so you come this morning ready to complete the ritual of burial. Mary went to the tomb that morning fully expecting to find the body of her dead friend. She prepared herself for that moment, emotionally and physically. She brought the necessary items to prepare Jesus' body. Presumably Mary had heard Jesus tell the disciples that he would rise on the third day. Mary is not alone in her confusion. None of the disciples understood what Jesus was talking about. Jesus told people that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days and people did not understand. They thought he was bragging about some supernatural constructive powers. Jesus was talking about building a temple made of souls, not stones. They simply did not understand.

As Mary approached the tomb that morning, she may have been praying for more yet expecting only enough; enough of whatever she needed to get through that horrific day. What she discovered when she arrived was beyond her comprehension. It seems certain she did not expect to find an empty tomb. Barbara Brown Taylor explores what was in Mary's heart: "Resurrection [unlike springtime]..." she writes, "Is entirely unnatural. When a human being goes into the ground that is that.... You say goodbye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life as best you can, knowing that the only place springtime happens in a cemetery is on the graves, not in them...." As Mary approaches the tomb she is lost, "like an abandoned pup that had lost her master, staying rooted to the last place he had been without the least idea what to do next." (*Home by Another Way*)

When Mary sees what has happened she runs to tell two disciples that the stone has been rolled away and Jesus is missing. At this moment resurrection means nothing to her. Fear and grief are her motivating factors. Two other disciples come running, the one trying to beat the other to the tomb, to figure out what she could be talking about. The disciple that arrives first looks in, but turns away. Peter then enters the tomb, sees the cloths lying in a pile and he too walks away. The first disciple decides to investigate further, sees the evidence and suddenly, we are told, he believes. What he believes we do not know because the story says they still did not understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the two of them return to their homes.

Mary can not move much less make sense of what is happening. She stands weeping outside the tomb. In the midst of her despair she decides to go back into the tomb one more time. Inside she finds two angels who apparently were not there when the men went inside. They ask her why she is weeping. She tells them she has come to complete her friend's burial and now he is gone. What could have happened to Jesus? What did you expect to find as you made your way here this morning? Did you come anticipating a rolled away stone, a release from your burdens, and a mysterious transformation of your grief? Did you come to hear the story again, even if you still could not fully understand what has happened, hoping for a moment of enlightenment? Did you expect to be swept away by Mary's authentic love and deep commitment that made this resurrection encounter possible? If Mary did not go that morning, perhaps none of this would be possible. Mary goes because that is what she must do. It is not possible for her to move forward without saying good bye. It is the way she must process her grief. Her being there and her open loving spirit are what make any encounter with the risen Christ possible.

In the midst of her confusion and grief, something makes Mary turn around. There she sees Jesus, although like the other disciples, she does not yet understand. She begs this person to lead her to her beloved friend. It is not until he speaks her name that she understands what is happening. This is Jesus. He is alive and speaking to her, however she does not know how this can possibly be.

Mary responds as any of us would; she moves to embrace Jesus. But he tells her not to hold on to him, but to instead go and tell the others that she has seen the Lord. She runs

to tell the community about her miraculous encounter. That is where the Easter story ends. This is where our story begins. She tells the community what has happened. It is true, it is all true. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The world could not put him to death. He has risen from the grave and lives among us. Even if we do not understand how this happened, the technical details of “how” Jesus was raised, we know what effect this has on our lives. We can see how this has changed Mary’s life.

Easter is about the power of life. That is why we are here. Pam Driesell writes “Easter assures us that eternal, abundant life, what the Bible calls *Zoë*, not only goes on forever, but is available to us here and now. And that is what the resurrection is all about; because we all know that having a pulse does not guarantee a full life. One can have bios, or biological life, and not *Zoë*, the energy of God. One can have a heartbeat but no heart for living, an existence but no energy.” It is like God prophesying to Ezekiel to breathe on the dry bones. Even if the bones could be put back together, they are meaningless without *Ruah*, the breath of life. It is that energy of God that is released at the resurrection. It is contagious. God calls us to tap into it, nurture it, to find ways to celebrate it.

Easter addresses that universal longing to tap into this life giving energy. This energy is the “more” we are seeking from life. You might call it meaning, you might call it peace, and you might call it purpose. Augustine called it the longing for God, the restlessness that only finds rest in God. Paul Tillich called it the ground or power of being itself. Kierkegaard called it the leap of faith that quells anxiety. We come this morning seeking more. More is possible because Mary encountered the risen Jesus and then shared her story with others. More is possible because we encounter the living Christ and share in this resurrection power. Darkness can not overcome us. Death can not have the final answer. The stone has been rolled away. The Risen One is on the loose. Jesus sends us, as he sent Mary, into the world not to cover up our scars, not to deny our wounds, but to show people that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is alive in each one of us.

If you look closely you will see evidence of the resurrection all around you. I shared with the children the story of Deb Arora, the Minneapolis mom who began the Hokey Pokey project. It was her deepest desire to teach her children that people care for each other, that when invited to share their hopes and dreams, people will respond in surprisingly wonderful ways. Perhaps Deb is a faithful person, I do not know. This I do know, she is a sign of the resurrection. I also know that if we open our hearts and ears and eyes we will see signs of the resurrection in our midst as well. Take a moment to fill out one of the brightly colored papers on the table outside the social hall. Write on it a wish or witness to the resurrection that you have seen in your life. Then tie that to the tree that sits in the walkway between the church and High Street School. That will become our resurrection tree. I am certain God will receive our wishes and respond. Perhaps in some unorthodox, unexpected way, but God will make it so. That is what happens when we live as Easter people, the impossible becomes possible and what once made no sense now defines our very being. Why are you here? May the Spirit reveal to you the answer to that question that will change your life? Amen

Source:

The Rev. Pam Driesell, "Beyond Bunnies and Jelly Beans," Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, April 24, 2011.