

"Blessed Are Those who Hope Still"
John 20:1-18
April 9, 2023 Easter Sunday
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

What in the world happened inside that tomb? I wish I could tell you, but I can't. No one can. It was between God and Jesus. I **can** tell you that whatever happened was so spectacular that we are still talking about it today- thousands of years later on the other side of the world.

I cannot prove to you that Jesus was resurrected. If that is why you came today, you will be disappointed. We have no photos. No video footage. No 24-hour news coverage. No Tik Tok posts. No newspaper headlines.

All we have this morning, according to the Gospel of John, is a distraught woman standing outside the tomb of the person she loved most in the whole world. Maybe some of us can relate to Mary and to her deep pain. She knew Jesus was dead, there was no doubt about that. On Friday, she had stayed until the bitter end, along with his mother and a few other women. One or two of the men were still there too.

As dusk fell several of them took that precious, broken body down from the horrid cross, wrapped the burial cloths around it, and laid it in a borrowed tomb. Then they went home, because, what else can you do? I imagine they spent Saturday in shocked silence, reflecting on their encounters with Jesus, replaying the horrifying events that resulted in his betrayal, arrest, and murder.

Those who killed him said he was dangerous. They said he was trying to destroy the faith. They said he was riling up the poor people, the sick people, and those they had cast out of society. They said he was degrading the Temple. They said he was an enemy of Rome. They had all kinds of excuses for killing him but his followers knew he died because his enemies couldn't bear to look at him and see the face of God. Jesus came to show the world how much God loved them. But I guess you can't get away with killing someone for love, can you? So, you have to make up other reasons.

Those who followed him knew that the Romans had a good reason to be afraid of Jesus. His ministry opened up a whole new world of God's grace and mercy. He spoke with such integrity, such passion. He was mesmerizing. Then, when you really got to know him, you realized that you were seen by him in a new way. He saw you and he loved you as you really were intended to be seen and to be loved. It was life changing.

And now he is gone. How do you even begin to understand something like that?

So, early in the morning, while it was still dark, one weeping woman makes the lonely, dangerous journey through the dew-wet garden to the place where they placed his remains. I don't know what she was expecting. Maybe she just had to be near him. She sees the large stone that had been placed in front of the tomb had been moved. Suddenly the quiet dawn is interrupted by a flurry of activity. Mary ran back to town to tell Peter and John, that Jesus's body had been taken.

We don't know why she assumed that- but if a dead body is gone, what else are you going to think? Peter and John run to the tomb. They see that his body is, indeed, gone. And then--- they leave. I can't quite understand that. How could they just walk away from the empty tomb, the missing body of Jesus, and their grief-stricken friend, Mary?

Then, it is just Mary once again. This time when she looks inside the tomb, she sees two angels with whom she has a brief conversation. "Why are you weeping?" they ask. "Why aren't you?" would have been an appropriate response. But instead, she says, "They have taken my Lord and I don't know where he is." Can you hear the despair in that sentence? The one she could always count on, the one she could always find, the one who always found her, is suddenly gone. She knows that she cannot possibly survive unless she finds him.

And then she turns around, she turns away from the tomb of death and there he is. Of course, she didn't know it was him right away. He asks why she is weeping. She says, "If you have taken him away, tell me where he is, and I will go get him." The man she thinks is the gardener speaks her name. "Mary," he says. Just one word. And she knows him! "Teacher!" she cries out. Can you imagine her joy in that moment? Can you imagine her confusion? She came there looking for the resting place of a dead man and instead she found the living, breathing Jesus.

She probably wanted nothing more than to just sit with him and talk about what had happened but he sends her away. "Go to the others and tell them what you have seen." And she does. Mary was the first preacher of the resurrection, the apostle to the disciples. She was the first to recognize the risen Christ.

One of the things I find remarkable about this scene is how few people there are. Just Mary and the risen Christ, no crowds, no other disciples, no parade like on Palm Sunday. Just an intimate encounter between two people who love each other. That, I believe, is the crux of the Christian faith. We don't believe because of a doctrine, a set of rules, a list of guidelines, an Annual Conference statement, a creed, or any other written document, not even the Bible.

We believe because- someplace, sometime, somehow- we have had an intimate encounter with Jesus Christ. This encounter is different for each one of us.

John and Peter didn't believe because they saw an empty tomb- they believed when the Risen Christ came to them that evening- through locked doors. They believed when they saw him with their own eyes and heard his voice with their own ears.

Debie Thomas suggests that Easter really begins when *"ordinary people brush up against an extraordinary God; when broken, hungry humanity encounters a bizarre and inexplicable Love in the half-light of dawn."*

The question that Easter asks of us is not, "Do you believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?" What the Gospel asks is not, "Do you believe?" but 'have you encountered the risen Christ?' There is a BIG difference.

Debie Thomas writes, *"What I see in the resurrection narratives are individual people having profoundly individual encounters with Christ. The encounters don't look identical. When Peter sees the empty tomb, he runs away. When the beloved disciple sees it, he believes without comprehension. When Mary sees it, she weeps and waits for more."*

In other words, we come to the empty tomb as ourselves, for good or for ill. We don't shed our baggage ahead of time; it barges in with us and shapes our perceptions and conclusions.

What matters, then, is encountering the risen Jesus in the particulars of our own messy lives. What matters is finding in the empty tomb the hope we need for our own struggles, losses, traumas, and disappointments.

Whatever universal claims we make as Christians we must begin in the rich, fertile ground of our own hearts, our own stories. Whatever acclamations we cry out on Easter Sunday must begin with a willingness to linger in the garden, desolate and alone, listening for the sounds of our own names, spoken in love. For our testimonies to ring true, they must originate in a radical, intimate encounter. The question is not, 'Why should people in general believe?' but rather 'Why do you believe?' 'How has the risen Christ revealed himself to you?'" (1)

An encounter with Christ will lead us into new life, new light, new hope. It will not erase all of our doubts and questions and uncertainties. It will not make our life perfect. An encounter with the risen Christ will provide us with a companion on our journey of life and faith. That companion is Jesus himself.

A bonus in this life of faith is that we are called together with others who have encountered Jesus and those who wish to. We gather as a congregation, as a family of faith, to share our stories of meeting Jesus; to tell others what happened when he spoke our name. We can't and shouldn't keep these encounters to ourselves. As we share them

with others, they may see a glimpse of the risen Christ and run off to seek him out for themselves. When we look at our seemingly small, ordinary lives in light of the ridiculous miracle of resurrection, they don't seem so small and so ordinary after all.

This morning, I want you to hear one woman's story of encountering Jesus in a dark and scary place. Anna Hasegawa will share with us, through zoom, a story of Easter resurrection and hope.

It was in 1942, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor - long enough ago so that I might no longer be able to recall facts accurately. But we lived in Long Beach, California at the time, not too far from a submarine base, so that when the Executive Order went out for persons of Japanese ancestry to be evacuated, we were among the earliest group to be selected. As I recall, we were given about two weeks' notice to prepare for departure with the instructions that we could only bring what we could actually carry. As we were frantically trying to decide what to do with our worldly goods - the car, our furniture, our books - there was a knock on the door one evening and two tall, polite gentlemen came to whisk my father away, explaining only that it was for security reasons. It made no sense - my father was a pacifist, a Japanese language teacher and an outspoken supporter of this country, having fled Japan in his youth because of the military pressures. In spite of our protest, they would only say, "We're sorry," - and he was taken away.

My mother, who had always depended heavily on my father, found it hard to function so that it fell to us three teen-agers to take matters into our own hands and begin making decisions. We grew up in a hurry, but those were dark, frantic days indeed. Somehow, we were able to be ready when the round-up crew came to pick us up. And as I recall somehow, I remember it as having been on Palm Sunday. I remember thinking, as we drove by our church, that we should be gathered in there celebrating Palm Sunday together.

Later, I remember shivering in the cold bleachers at the Santa Anita Assembly Center - perhaps 200-300 of us, facing the huge, empty racetracks on Easter Sunday morning. I remember thinking, what a strange place it was to be worshipping - as a prisoner in my own country - and telling myself that this was probably a moment I must hold on to, one that I could evaluate more clearly at a later time. I recall hearing our voices repeating that age-old cry, "He is risen, He is risen indeed!" I don't remember the exact message that day, but I think it was about hope, about freedom, about new life. And as I look back, I can see that indeed, it has been so. I can truly feel grateful for the promise of Easter, that out of the deepest darkness and despair can come resurrection - new hope, new freedom, new life - often better than we could have anticipated by our own planning. (2)

Easter really does begin when *"ordinary people brush up against an extraordinary God; when broken, hungry humanity encounters a bizarre and inexplicable Love in the half-light of dawn."*

Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed!

Thanks be to God!

Go, and tell **your** story!

Amen.

End Notes:

- "I Have Seen the Lord," Debie Thomas, from Journey with Jesus. April 14, 2019.
- "Easter Thoughts," by Anna Hasegawa, first shared at Covington Church of the Brethren Easter Sunrise Service, April 23, 2000.

PASTORAL PRAYER

What is there to say on Easter Sunday, Holy God, other than thank you?

Thank you for new life in the place of certain death.

Thank you for a living presence instead of loss and absence.

Thank you for hope so big we can't understand it.

Thank you for *Mary* and her unrelenting quest to find *Jesus*.

Thank you for the willingness of *Peter* and *John* to look into the tomb.

Thank you that the cross wasn't the final word.

Thank you.

Thank you for the remarkable, unbelievable, amazing, awesome, heart-stopping truth of resurrection.

Thank you, in the name of the risen *Christ*. Amen.