

“The Power of the Empty Tomb”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

4-12-20 Easter Sunday

Based upon 2 Kings 13:14-21; John 20:1-18

This Spring, ever since the Covid-19 virus closed church buildings everywhere, there have been many who have questioned: “How can we have Easter when we aren’t even allowed to gather together? How can we cry out ‘Alleluia!’ when more than 100,000 people have died across the world, millions more are suffering, and normal life has been stopped in its tracks? It feels wrong; it doesn’t feel like Easter.” Recognizing this, some pastors have said, “We will wait to celebrate Easter until such time as we can gather together again and celebrate it properly;” while others have said, “We will go ahead and meet in the church no matter the risk. No one is going to stop us from having Easter.” I understand the motivation behind both decisions. But both of them reveal confusion about what Easter is and is not. It has never been a holiday which requires a building with flowers and beautiful music to celebrate, as much as we enjoy celebrating it that way; it has never been a holiday which requires community togetherness to enact, or which is contingent upon our feeling that all is perfect in the world. Easter, the first Easter, did not begin in a building; it began in a tomb. It began not with community joy, but with isolation, fear, death, and grief. What that means is that perhaps for the first time in a very long time, we are finally in the right place emotionally, spiritually, and even physically to celebrate Easter authentically, because now we can feel something similar to what the scattered, scared, and housebound disciples were feeling after the crucifixion.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann once observed: “Christianity issued from a catastrophe.”¹ We’re so used to thinking of the Gospel as good news that we can sometimes forget that. But think about what happened to those who followed Jesus. For three years they watched as he fed thousands and healed more than we know. He offered eye-opening lessons and merciful blessings, proclaimed the Kingdom of God was near and that all could dwell in it if they followed him. Those closest to him, Peter and the disciples, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Mary Magdalene, were confident that he was the long-awaited Messiah, God’s chosen one. They even believed that he was the Son of God. But then in a matter of days, they went from celebrating all of that on Palm Sunday to watching the Romans kill Jesus, and not with an army after an epic cosmic battle, but with a simple cross, the sadistic and humiliating torture device the Romans used on common criminals. They beat Jesus, mocked him, and killed him; then they put his dead body in a tomb sealed like Fort Knox, and went back to their ways of oppression as if they had just rid themselves of a pesky mosquito, not God incarnate.

It must have been as hard and devastating for the disciples to wrap their minds around what had happened as it has been for humanity to grasp in these past few weeks the grim reality of the pandemic. “This can’t be happening!” they must have thought at first; “He’s going to be OK, right? We’re going to be OK?” Then, after the truth sank in, “How could this have happened? What’s going to become of us?” Theirs was the kind of existential grief of those who believed that the world would never be the same, and there was no reason to hope. Either Jesus wasn’t the Messiah after all, or humanity had somehow managed to kill its only shot at salvation. Either way, they were doomed.

¹ Moltmann, Jürgen, *In the End—The Beginning: The Life of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 45.

Mary was still trying to process all of this when she went to the tomb by herself that first Sunday morning while the other disciples hid in their homes in fear. The Synoptic gospels talk about a group of women going to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body; they were going with a purpose. But in John's gospel, Mary goes empty-handed by herself while it's still dark. Such is the journey of a tormented soul. She was so consumed with grief when she arrived in the garden that when she saw the stone rolled away, she couldn't compute what had happened. She didn't react to the two angels inside the tomb as other people in the Bible react to angels, with joy or fear. She didn't even recognize Jesus. All she could focus on was that the body was missing, and she really needed that body.

Why would it matter whether she had his body? She couldn't protect him or bring him back herself. Jesus was dead. Maybe she needed to prove to herself that he had existed, that the last three years of love and hope weren't just a dream, or maybe even though the dream had become a nightmare, she just wasn't ready to let go. Since the first words the risen Christ said to her after opening her eyes were "Do not cling to me," suggesting she all but lunged at him, I am kind of inclined to believe the latter. C.S. Lewis once observed that he didn't realize until his wife died how much grief felt like fear.² When your grieving and afraid, it's natural to want to cling to something for security. We, who now cling to bottles of hand sanitizer and rolls of toilet paper as if they were sacred relics, can understand that. Sometimes you just need something to hold onto, even if those things can't really protect you.

Mary's behavior and our own in this pandemic make me think of the Old Testament lesson today about the great prophet Elisha. In a wonderful, yet easy to miss passage in *Second Kings*, we are told that shortly after Elisha died and was buried, another man died. The text doesn't tell us who he was or why he died, just that when his loved ones were trying to give him a funeral, it was interrupted by a roving band of marauders appearing on the horizon. Terrified, the family all but threw their loved one's body into Elisha's tomb, which was nearby, and fled. That's when something miraculous happened according to the story. As soon as the dead man's body touched Elisha's body, the man was brought back to life!

Scholars speculate that this story was included in *Second Kings* to demonstrate that Elisha's prayer that he would have a double portion of Elijah's power, was granted in his death. Elijah had been able to bring back one person from the dead. But Elisha was able to bring back two, one when he was living and this second one when he was dead. I don't know about that, but I do know that this story inspired two things. The first was the practice of the early Church of collecting the bones of saints and martyrs. For centuries the Church tried to provide bones for seekers to cling to and revere. I read somewhere that there are enough bones attributed to the apostles in Churches around the world to rebuild the skeletons of every one of the apostles several times over. When churches couldn't acquire the bodies of saints in whole or in part, they offered bits of clothing or objects which they supposedly had touched. Thousands, maybe millions of pilgrims came to see them, hoping and praying that these objects, like Elisha's body, would give them new life. I don't know how many of them left feeling reborn, and it has never been a part of our Reformed tradition to make pilgrimages like these. But it isn't hard to

² Lewis, C.S., *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.

understand why people did it. Right now, if you knew there was an object that could heal you or guarantee you wouldn't get sick and die, or would resurrect one of your loved ones, wouldn't you want to check it out?

Most people would, which is why the second thing that the Elisha story has inspired is a metaphor: to be "looking for Elisha's tomb," is to be looking for that special elusive something or someone that you think will magically transform your life for the better and give you a new beginning. Many people spend years of their lives, even most of their lives consciously or unconsciously looking for Elisha's tomb, people who have made bad mistakes and wish they could just start over, people who have been too afraid of change to break out of old, dissatisfying patterns, people who have all but died from grief after losing a loved one, or who have struggled with illness, fear, and pain. They don't go looking for an actual tomb of course; it's more like they are in tombs themselves, stuck thinking: "if only X would happen then everything would be great." They convince themselves that they would be happy, safe, and get the fresh start they needed if some kind of outside intervention happened. But since Elisha's tomb has been lost to the ages, and the equivalent of it is hard to conger, they end up permanently stuck in shame, unhappiness, grief, and pain.

I don't know if Mary wanted to find Jesus' body because she was hoping that it would have the power to resurrect all in her that had died when he died, or simply because she wasn't ready to let go of the one who had saved her in life from other sorts of tormenting demons. But when she found Jesus' tomb, he wasn't in it. Unlike Elisha's tomb, there was no body in Jesus' tomb because Jesus was risen. He rose so that all of humanity, not just one person, could rise out of the tomb with him. Jesus took a catastrophe, which was his crucifixion, and turned it into what J.R.R. Tolkien called a "eucatastrophe."³ The Greek prefix "eu" means good (as in "Eureka!" and "euphoria.") Accordingly, a eucatastrophe, Tolkien explained, "is a story which takes a sudden happy turn which pierces one with joy enough to bring tears to the eyes...[It] produces its peculiar effect because it is a sudden glimpse of Truth, your whole nature chained in material causes and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back. It perceives...that this is indeed how things really do work in the Great World for which our nature is made."⁴ Mary's tears were changed from tears of sorrow to joy when Jesus called her name. Her life which had been out of joint since his death was suddenly popped back into place enabling her to see that all was not lost. All would never be lost because Jesus had defeated death and stepped out of the tomb. Life, real life, had just begun.

This is the part of the good news that Easter proclaims: death is not an end. Even if we lose loved ones, they are not truly lost because through God's grace there is more in store for them. Through Christ we can dwell with God eternally. But Easter proclaims even more about this life than it does about the next. The empty tomb reveals that evil cannot and will not ultimately defeat good because God is good, and more powerful than anything or anyone in the universe. The empty tomb assures us that God is still with us, and even now is leading us out of darkness, grief, and fear and into light and love and hope. The empty tomb proclaims that God's grace can make us new each day in this life, so we don't have to remain stuck in shame or

³ As quoted in Koontz, Lee, *Reflectious Thoughts on God and Culture* (citing *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, #89), March 29, 2010; retrieved Mar. 21, 2016 from <http://reflectious.com/2010/02/29/first-look-john-201-18/>

⁴ *Ibid.*

resignation. That doesn't mean we won't ever suffer, but it does mean that suffering doesn't have to have the last word. Whatever happens in this pandemic, or in our own lives, God has the power to bring good out of it. That is the essence of the good news of Easter: we always have reason to hope—always—because our Savior is alive and even now helping us to recreate our lives and our world.

Right now, this is hard for people to believe because too many people are either looking for a body to cling to or hiding out to avoid danger like the rest of the disciples were. That's why we need to recognize how Mary's encounter with Jesus in the garden ends. After telling Mary not to cling to him as if he were a magic talisman, Jesus then commissions her to go and share the good news with the rest of the disciples who were paralyzed by fear and grief as she had been. "Go and tell them I am going to my father and your father, to my God and your God," Jesus said. The fact that she went and did this is what really made the Resurrection real because the empty tomb in and of itself would never have been enough to prove to people that Jesus was raised, just that his body was gone. But she told the Twelve, and then they told others about their sightings of Jesus and the transforming grace he offered. Although the authorities told them to be quiet, they kept talking. Although the world was still filled with suffering, they kept talking. Although there were plenty of reasons to be afraid, they kept talking. It was their witness to hope and love which ultimately helped others to stop focusing on tombs and start focusing on living into newness with God.

If we want Easter to feel real this year, therefore, then we, like Mary need to let go of the idea that Easter requires meeting together in a building for song and praise; we need to stop waiting for the world to look right too. To experience the eucatastrophe in the midst of the Coronotastrophe, all we have to do is step out of the tomb and into the garden of God's new creation, by proclaiming to the world that even in this time of great darkness, we have every reason to hope. Basically, we need to do the equivalent of what the Whos down in Whoville in the end of the Dr. Seuss classic How the Grinch Stole Christmas did, but for Easter not Christmas. A talented author named Kristi Bothur reworked the story to inspire us⁵:

How the Virus Stole Easter

By Kristi Bothur

(With a nod to Dr. Seuss)

Tw'as late in '19 when the virus began
Bringing chaos and fear to all people, each land.

People were sick, hospitals full,
Doctors overwhelmed, no one in school.

As winter gave way to the promise of spring,
The virus raged on, touching peasant and king.

⁵ Bothur, Kristi, "How the Virus Stole Easter" April 2020, <https://ec-prod-sites.s3.amazonaws.com/5635/documents/2020/4/How%20the%20Virus%20Stole%20Easter%20by%20Kristi%20Bothur.pdf>

People hid in their homes from the enemy unseen.
They YouTubed and Zoomed, social-distanced, and cleaned.

April approached and churches were closed.
“There won’t be an Easter,” the world supposed

“There won’t be church services, and egg hunts are out.
No reason for new dresses when we can’t go about.”

Holy Week started, as bleak as the rest.
The world was focused on masks and on tests.

Easter can’t happen this year,” it proclaimed.
“Online and at home, it just won’t be the same.”

Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the days came and went.
The virus pressed on; it just would not relent.

The world woke Sunday and nothing had changed.
The virus still menaced, the people, estranged.

Pooh to the saints,” the world was grumbling.
“They’re finding out now that no Easter is coming.

They’re just waking up! We know just what they’ll do!
Their mouths will hang open a minute or two,

And then all the saints will all cry boo-hoo.
That noise,” said the world, “will be something to hear.”
So it paused and the world put a hand to its ear.

And it did hear a sound coming through all the skies.
It started down low, then it started to rise.

But the sound wasn’t depressed.
Why, this sound was triumphant!

It couldn’t be so!
But it grew with abundance!

The world stared around, popping its eyes.
Then it shook! What it saw was a shocking surprise!

Every saint in every nation, the tall and the small,
Was celebrating Jesus in spite of it all!

It hadn't stopped Easter from coming! It came!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And the world with its life quite stuck in quarantine
Stood puzzling and puzzling.

“Just how can it be?
It came without bonnets, it came without bunnies,

It came without egg hunts, cantatas, or money.”
Then the world thought of something it hadn't before.

“Maybe Easter,” it thought, “doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Easter, perhaps, means a little bit more.”

And what happened then?
Well....the story's not done.

What will YOU do?
Will you share with that one

Or two or more people needing hope in this night?
Will you share the source of your life in this fight?

The churches are empty - but so is the tomb,
And Jesus is victor over death, doom, and gloom.

So this year at Easter, let this be our prayer,
As the virus still rages all around, everywhere.

May the world see hope when it looks at God's people.
May the world see the church is not a building or steeple.

May the world find Faith in Jesus' death and resurrection,
May the world find Joy in a time of dejection.

May 2020 be known as the year of survival,
But not only that -
Let it start a revival.
Amen.