

Acts 10:34-43
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18
Psalm 118:14-17, 22-23

Easter Sunday B
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Things Are Not What They Seem

Last night at the Easter Vigil, we began as we always do, around the new fire, the symbol of the light of Christ coming back into the world. From that new fire, we lit the paschal candle, one of the most sacred and enduring symbols of Christianity. From the church's very beginnings, tall beeswax candles have been a symbol of Christ's presence with us. We lit hand candles and followed the Paschal Candle, the light of Christ, into the story space where all was in darkness, but for the candlelight that illuminated expectant and inquisitive faces. After hearing the exsultet – an ancient chant of joy and praise, we began a journey through the stories of God's covenant with God's people. We don't read those stories from the prayer book as most places do. The choir, the clergy, and best of all, our parishioners, live out those stories for us, making meaning of them and bringing them to life. And in most all of those stories, things are not what they seem. From the Creation Story to the Valley of the Dry Bones, we hear of people who thought one thing was happening, when what was really happening was something all together different. Whether God's people were being relentlessly pursued by chariot riding Egyptians, thinking they would get away only to be stopped by the Red Sea – oh but wait - THEN right before their very eyes, watching the sea part for just long enough for them to cross over... ..whether God's faithful followers who would not bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's idols were thrown into a fiery furnace whose flames could not touch them... ..or a people who claimed their bones were dried up, there hope was lost, their story was over, only to be filled with God's lifegiving breath and Spirit... things were not what they seemed. All those stories from the ancient Hebrew Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament, are our inheritance. They are stories of dying and rising, dying and rising, dying and rising. Stories that tell us, things are not what they seem.

That's what was going on early that Sunday morning when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, you know. Mary had gone to the garden to be with her beloved teacher because the ache inside her was nearly unbearable. She had been at the foot of the cross. She had watched him die. She had remained faithful to Jesus until the hard and heartbreaking end. And it was all for love. Mary couldn't have abandoned Jesus on the cross any more than she could have abandoned him in the intimacy of their most rich and lively conversations, because real love, the kind of love Jesus had spent his life preaching and teaching, the kind of love Mary Magdalene experienced in Jesus and in that community of discipleship, that love never, ever dies. It's what brought her back to the garden that sad Sunday morning – she wanted to be with Jesus, not just to remember him, but to be with him. To sit with him and to sink into the love she had known.

But when she arrived, she knew something was very wrong. The massive stone that had sealed the tomb had been moved. Yes, we know this, we hear this every year, so perhaps we don't pay close attention. We certainly aren't as shocked as Mary was. But consider this - it would be like rounding the corner to our interium - the columbarium right around the back of the church, and instead of hearing song birds, the burbling fountain and the wind blowing through the tall fir trees, instead of smelling the daphne and seeing the glorious flowers in spring bloom... instead of all that softness and beauty... what if you rounded that corner and saw niches opened up, name plaques strewn everywhere and the ashes of your beloved... gone.

No wonder Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. The men had gone home, but just as she had stayed at the foot of the cross, Mary stayed at the tomb, and because she stayed, she saw the angels. When they asked her, "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" deeply distressed, she could only say "*They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.*" And then something happened – perhaps the snap of a twig or a scent wafting through the air – something happened because before there was time for any angelic response, Mary turned from the tomb and saw a man standing nearby, a man she assumed to be the gardener.

That's how it is, right? We see what we expect to see, which sometimes means we miss a lot. Mary was in the garden so she assumed she was seeing the gardener. She must still have been crying because even the gardener asked "*Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?*" She told him the same thing she'd told the disciples and the angels... "*Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.*" Jesus said to her, "*Mary!*" And in that moment, everything changed. It wasn't the first word he'd spoken to her. It wasn't his appearance, it wasn't even his voice that caught her attention. She hadn't known him when she saw him or when he called her "*Woman.*" She knew him when he spoke her name, and when he did, everything she knew about the way the world worked, about the way life and death work, fell away.

Jesus had died. She was there, she saw it, she felt it, she knew it. And yet, here he was, her beloved teacher. And when Jesus called her by name, she didn't just reply "teacher" or "Jesus" or "Lord"... she said *Rabounni* – my teacher. My beloved teacher. A lot of other very important things were said after that, and a lot of important things before, but we will never begin to understand their importance until we understand what Jesus has done here, in this moment. In the simple act of speaking Mary's name, of seeing her, knowing her, recognizing her, Jesus changed everything... *Mary... Rabounni*. It's so beautiful. It couldn't possibly have been true, but there it was. I have been seen and so I see. The paschal mystery that is dying and rising, the beauty of the Christian story, the reality that life wins that love wins, that God redeems absolutely everything... all these things come to their deepest meaning in the particular - in the reality that God knows your name, and makes all these things true, in you.

I'm not sure exactly what brings each one of you to church today, but I'm guessing there are questions out there. Is God real? Does God really give us life? Is God truly the Creator, who created the laws of nature, and then completely messed with them and resurrected Jesus? Is

this something I should believe and build my life on? If you're not sure, or sure that any of this matters, if things have happened to you that have caused you to doubt the possibility of a living, loving, lifegiving God, know you are not alone. But know too, that the resurrection wasn't some sort of otherworldly magic trick. Resurrection is a way to live. Do we understand it? No. Do we need to? No, we do not. I cannot "make sense" of the resurrection any more than you can, but what I do know is that I experience resurrection in my life and in yours, so I believe it. I experience it when someone who has just received a difficult diagnosis decides to live his life with deep intentionality for as long as he lives. I experience it when someone finally decides to go into treatment for an addiction she has long denied. I experience it in baptism, in marriage and even in the divorce that will finally allow people to live in to their lives fully, lovingly, authentically. I experience it each time I know myself as beloved.

Understanding is so different from believing, from having faith, from what some would call the craziness of hoping it's true. But tell me. Would you prefer to live in the world as someone who believes that truth and beauty and hope and goodness and love are true? Or would you prefer to live as though none of that were true, and the ugliness of the world as it presents itself these days is actually all there is? It's not a frivolous question. It's a question you could stake your life on. Hope or hopelessness? One cannot prove either. How then shall we live?

The resurrection faith Mary Magdalene showed us, is a beautiful, gentle, faithful reminder of what it is to believe that love transcends everything. If we let it... anger, vengeance, politics, power, hate, fear, even death. Love transcends everything. We learned that from Jesus. And from Mary Magdalene we learn that faith... the pure and simple willingness to believe the truth that is right in front of us no matter how "unrealistic" that truth might seem - faith, gives life. Not just for you and for me and the ones we love, but life for the whole wide world.

The miracle, the Gospel, the Good News isn't just that the tomb is empty. Oh surely that's essential, but the bigger miracle, the miracle for us, right here, right now, is that we can live our lives, our regular everyday lives, encountering the risen Lord. Because as it turns out, the one who has died, lives. As it turns out, hope is alive. God is alive and at work in the world, and if you pay attention, you can't help but see it. That might be hard to believe, with all the terrible and difficult things going on out there right now – war, politics, power-mongering, racism, hatred, greed, the utter lack of concern for the ones who will inherit the mess we've made. In the face of all that, how can we claim hope is alive?

Well, look around. Here, in this beloved St Barnabas community, we encourage each other, support each other, and because we do, we make an impact on the world that is so much bigger than the sum of our precious parts. We are Christians, resurrection people, and our job is to hold hope for the world. Not the ideal of hope, but real hope, hope infused with the power of love, HOPE that acts in the world. And that, my dears, is not what the world would have us believe. There are all sorts of people and things that tell us being filled with hope is ridiculous, unwarranted, and certainly not very smart. And still, our God is the God whose name is Love, the God who calls each one of us by name to be the hope the whole wide world is waiting for.

We have a choice, we always do. We can live in resurrection hope or we can live in hopelessness. We can believe in death or we can believe in life. We can live in fear or we can live in love. We can believe God knows our names, or not. But really, all you have to do is listen. The God who loves you is calling your name, whispering, whispering *Practice Resurrection*. Amen