

United Church in the Valley: April 21, 2019

Minister: Matthew Heesing

**Easter Sunday**

***Making Space for the Struggle***

**“...of Resurrection”**

Scripture Reading:

*John 20:1-18*

Early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.

Much to her surprise, she saw that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance.

She ran to Simon Peter and another disciple, and said, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb!

We don’t know where they have put him!”

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.

Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter, and reached the tomb first.

He bent over and saw the strips of linen cloth, lying inside the tomb, but he did not go in.

When Simon Peter got there, right away, he entered the tomb, and saw the strips of cloth.

He also saw the piece of cloth that had been used to cover Jesus’ face.

It was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.

Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

But at that time, Peter and the other disciple still did not understand

that the Scriptures said Jesus would be resurrected. So the two of them returned to their homes.

But Mary Magdalene remained where she was, crying outside the tomb.

She was still weeping, when she stooped down to look into the tomb, and saw two angels inside.

They were dressed in dazzling robes, and were sitting where Jesus’ body had been.

One was at the head, and the other was at the foot.

The angels asked Mary, “Why are you weeping?”

She answered, “They have taken away my Lord,

and I don’t know where they have put him.”

No sooner had she said this,

than she turned around and saw Jesus standing there,

but she did not recognize him.

Jesus asked her, “Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she said,

“Sir, if you have carried him away,

tell me where you have put him, and I will go get him.”

Then Jesus said to her, “Mary!”

Mary responded, “Teacher!”

Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me!

I have not yet returned to God.

Go instead to my disciples, my sisters and brothers,

and tell them I’m ascending

to my Creator, and your Creator, my God, and your God.”

So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples “I have seen the Lord!”

Sermon:

It seems a little strange, doesn't it?

*"Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there,  
but she did not recognize him."*

It seems a little strange.

And you might be thinking—

well, maybe Mary

is in shock,

she's experiencing grief,

according to the text,

she's *weeping* outside the tomb,

so maybe her eyes, filled with tears,

just can't make out Jesus clearly,

maybe that's the reason

she can't identify Jesus at first.

Maybe.

But you know, this is not the *only* story

in which individuals do not immediately recognize

the risen Jesus whom we also call the Christ.

In the Gospel according to Luke, it says

*"Now that same day—the Easter Sunday—  
two disciples were going to the village of Emmaus,  
about seven miles from Jerusalem.*

*They were talking with each other  
about everything that had happened.*

*And as they talked,*

*Jesus himself came up and walked beside them,  
but they did not recognize him."*

And if that weren't enough,

later in the Gospel according to John, it says

*"Afterward, Jesus appeared again to his disciples,  
by the Sea of Galilee.*

*Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John,  
and two other disciples were together.*

*'I'm going out to fish,' Simon Peter told them,  
and they said, 'We'll go with you.'*

*So they went out and got into the boat,  
but that night they caught nothing.*

*Yet early in the morning,*

*Jesus stood on the shore,*

but the disciples did not recognize him."

So what's going on?  
 In all of these different accounts and encounters,  
 why this common element of confusion?  
 It almost appears a bit anti-climactic, doesn't it?  
 To quote Rob Bell,  
 "It is such a letdown to rise from the dead,  
 and have your friends not recognize you."

Indeed, it seems a little strange—  
 yet these disconcerting details serve a purpose.  
 They point to the important fact  
 that there is a distinction,  
 not a conflation,  
 between resurrection  
 and resuscitation.

"Resurrection" is one of those words  
 that brings to mind this quote from Princess Bride:  
*"You keep [on] using that word.  
 I do not think it means what you think it means."*  
 "Resurrection" is a word we use quite *often*,  
 not only at Easter, but all throughout the year, and yet—  
 I do not think it means what you think it means.  
 I think we often confuse resurrection with resuscitation:  
 the latter, of course, being the act of bringing a person  
 who's been dead or believed to be dead back to life—  
 as defined by Marcus Borg  
 resuscitation is a "resumption of previous existence,"  
 a return to the life one had before.  
 And at first glance  
 it may *seem* like *that's* what *Easter's* all about—  
 Jesus is dead, but now he's risen,  
 he had no pulse, but now he is alive and present—  
 we use the word "resurrection,"  
 but make a common misconception  
 if we view what occurred on Easter morning  
 as simply an act of profound resuscitation.

"Resurrection" does not mean what we think it means.

For far more than only a restoration,  
*resurrection* involves a *transformation*—  
 a glimmer of familiarity,  
 but also an immense disparity between  
 how things looked  
 and the new life now.

It's a lot like how a caterpillar morphs into a butterfly—  
it emerges from the tomb-like cocoon  
as the same individual, in one sense,  
but also unrecognizable, something beyond.

Or, to use an example from Jesus:

“Truly, truly, I tell you,  
unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies,  
it remains only a seed,  
but if it dies, it produces much fruit.”

Easter is a story of resurrection,  
not resuscitation—  
it's *not* a return to exactly what was,  
of familiar forms and previous norms—  
but rather, it involves a revelation,  
an *embracing*,  
of brand new life.

And sometimes  
that can be a struggle.

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Over the last six weeks of Lent,  
we've been *exploring* what it means to  
make *space* for the struggle—  
to wrestle with those things that we would rather ignore,  
to dig a little deeper into difficult subjects,  
and today, on the central Sunday of our faith,  
when we maybe least expect it—  
it's Easter Sunday after all!—  
we encounter yet another struggle,  
for us all to come to terms with  
and make space for in our lives:  
the struggle of resurrection.

And you might be thinking—  
what's the *struggle* of resurrection,  
isn't it a celebration—  
yes—but it's not about resuscitation!  
For Jesus is alive, risen from the dead—  
but Mary and the disciples don't recognize him at first.  
In fact, in the Easter story according to Mark,  
the women who visit the tomb in the morning  
run away,  
terrified at the notion  
that things won't be as they expect.

It's true—me and you, we like the familiar,  
 and we like to bring the familiar back,  
 we would rather return to how things were,  
 divine resuscitation, we would love to get behind,  
 but that's not what we find at Easter—  
 “Don't hang onto me,” says Jesus to Mary—  
 as if implying—whoa, whoa, whoa,  
 you have to let go  
 of what you thought  
 you'd always know.  
 The *resurrected* Jesus  
 is a whole new reality and way of being,  
 far beyond the former ways of seeing—  
 past what all of the disciples expect.

Easter Sunday is all about  
 the belief  
 that through death comes *new* life—  
 it's not what's in the past that lies in store,  
 it's not a promise of old life again, but something far more.  
 And this has immense implications for  
 us as a Church.  
 After all, we are a Church that proclaims resurrection,  
 resurrection is the central part of our story,  
 the glory of the gift of new life from God  
 is the very essence of the Good News that we have to share.  
*But* do we even care,  
 do we *believe* in it, ourselves?  
 I'm honestly not sure.

With all the recent talk of deficits  
 and projects and pushing through,  
 I wonder:  
 are we simply striving  
 for everything to stay the same?  
 Do we sing of *resurrection* on Easter Sunday,  
 but work with the expectation of *resuscitation* instead?  
 You tell me.

Of course, resuscitation is the *appealing* way forward—  
 as we try to find ways to keep us alive,  
 life support, to help us survive,  
 whether fundraising enhancements  
 or forming teams for grants and rentals,  
 all so we might return to the good ol' days,  
 the instantly recognizable,  
 the ways that we have always been.

But here's the thing:  
 resuscitation just prolongs the inevitable.  
 Resuscitated bodies still eventually decay—  
 but what might happen if *today*,  
 we started making space for the struggle of resurrection?  
 What if we actually *trusted*  
 in the promise that starting with Jesus,  
 God is making *all* things new—  
 even, maybe especially,  
 the church?  
 We are the Body of Christ, after all.  
 And if the very first physical body of Christ could be transformed,  
 well—why can't we?

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When Mary and the disciples  
 first encountered the risen Christ,  
 they did not recognize him.  
 Eventually, though, they did:  
 for Mary, it was when the risen Christ said her name,  
 speaking a familiar word of love.  
 For the disciples on the road to Emmaus,  
 it was when the risen Christ  
 broke the bread and passed the cup—  
 continuing a familiar ritual of meaning.  
 And for the discouraged, grief-stricken disciples,  
 fishing in the boat all night long to no avail,  
 recognition only occurred when the risen Christ  
 provided an abundance of fish—  
 an act of exceptional generosity and surprising care.  
 When and where in the story  
 is the resurrected—  
 not resuscitated—risen Christ  
 actually recognized?  
 In word,  
 in sacrament and ritual,  
 in service to others.

The same is also true for us.  
 For if we choose to pursue  
 a reality of resurrection,  
 if we put our money and our effort  
 where our mouth is Sunday mornings,  
 if we move with the hope of resurrection  
*not* resuscitation any more,  
 we will not *look* the same as before.

But the heart of who we are, it will remain,  
in whatever way that we maintain  
the work that we are called to do  
of loving Word  
of meaningful sacrament and ritual,  
of generous and caring service to others—  
that is the work that the God of resurrection  
will empower us to continue,  
the work through which this community  
*will* recognize us,  
the work that will cause those around us to proclaim  
much like Mary,  
even here, in Turner Valley,  
*“I have seen the Lord!”*

Church, let's embrace resurrection.  
For Christ is risen. Hallelujah!  
Christ is risen indeed!