

Arvada
United Methodist Church

Easter, 2009

In the Rising

John 20: 1-18

Rev. Valerie Oden

I heard that Rusty's been taking a survey this week. "How many Easter sermons do you remember?" Apparently the survey says, one person remembered one sermon, and it was about 30 years ago.

A clergy friend of mine said people don't come on Easter for a sermon. They come for the music and atmosphere. After all, what can a preacher say after "He is risen!"

And in the midst of knowing both of those things, my brother asked, "So what does the Easter story really have to do with us, today?" That is our question this morning, isn't it?

What does the Easter story really have to do with us, today? (prayer)

I'm delighted to have my parents here this weekend. I share some things in common with both of them, like how they have spent their lives in ministry, mom as a lay person and dad as a United Methodist clergy and then Bishop. But I share something else in common with them. Neither of us opens our 401k envelopes anymore. Does that ring a bell?

It's not been easy these months, for our nation, for many people and families. What does the Easter story have to say to us in that?

What does it have to say to us when a serious illness strikes someone in the family? Or someone we love is in an auto accident, and life's way of hanging tenderly by a thread grabs us and shakes us. Or when we lose someone we're close to, and our world is turned inside out.

Does the Easter story have something to say to us then?

Hardship and death touch all of us, and none of us likes it. Surely the friends and family of Jesus didn't like it anymore than we do.

When Mary rose in the dawn that morning, she didn't get up intending to celebrate Jesus' rising, like we did this morning. She didn't know this part of the story, so she must have awakened lost in grief-- the kind of grief that shatters the heart. She rose intending to honor Jesus-- to tend his body, to mourn his passing, for he whom she loved was dead.

And in her grief, at least she could care for him one more time. At least she could prepare his body, anoint him with oil, sit in his presence as she remembered the love he offered. And so she went to the tomb that morning.

But he wasn't there. And she was confused. Wouldn't you be? In her perplexity, as one gospel tells it, she went back to the house where his friends were gathered and found them, perhaps telling stories of him. I can imagine her entering the room and just

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standing there, trying to be invisible, not wanting to interrupt the music of their remembering:

“Remember the first time he touched a leper?” She heard as she walked through the door. “No one could believe it! I mean, you just don’t go around touching lepers!”

“Yea,” said another... “I remember that. And how ‘bout when he was drawing in the sand, and they brought a prostitute to him, expecting him to judge her harshly. “And all he did was keep on drawing,” chimed in another voice. “I remember his words, as he looked up from the sand—‘let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.’ And everyone left. I remember that day like it was yesterday.”

Sharing the memories, telling the stories of Jesus’ life...the disciples were doing what we all do when someone we love passes on.

“I remember,” said Philip, “that day he got sooo mad at the priests and money changers! The way they were taking advantage of everyone. Remember how he chased everyone out of the temple?” Mary laughed with them as she remembered.

“I’ll never forget that day on the hillside, when everyone was so hungry...” another voice... “and yet somehow we had enough food to feed all of us, with just a few loaves and a couple of fish!”

“I remember the way he used to teach us about the kingdom of God...how it was within us, the size of a mustard seed. I just wish he were still here to show us more about how to grow it. I always felt like he was speaking of things I knew somewhere deep inside, but couldn’t quite grasp.”

“Yea, I can relate to that.” Peter’s turn. “It was always just right there...like when he spoke of how the meek shall inherit the earth, how those who mourn will be comforted, or how the kingdom of heaven belongs to the child-like. I could always *almost* get it...”

They were quiet for a few minutes, and then Peter spoke again, “Remember how he told us he was leaving us? I don’t think any of us got that.”

“I still don’t understand. Why did it have to happen this way? How could he be...gone...? I mean, it seems like he’s right here, with us, now! But I saw him die. I know he’s in that tomb.”

That’s when Mary bursts in...“He’s not there! They’ve taken him away!” I can hear the chairs of Peter and John being knocked over as they rose so quickly, startled. “What do you mean, Mary?”

“I mean, he’s not in the tomb! He’s gone!”

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Out the door they ran, Peter and John, perhaps wondering what manner of disrespect was still left to Jesus after the events of the last couple of days. To the tomb they ran, as fast as they could. John arrived first. Stooped down and peeked in. Sure enough. Only his wrapping cloth was left. Peter joined him, and they both went in, eyeing the cloth lying there in the empty tomb.

And something happened. Something clicked. I don't know what it was. But *something* happened. For Peter and John, for Mary, for the others. I don't know what happened with Jesus, but I know that those who loved him experienced him as living.

The powers killed him because he was turning their world upside down. He was welcoming the outcasts, touching the untouchables, eating with sinners, destroying their social power structures.

But when they crucified him, did they kill love?

Something happened, 2000 years ago. I don't know exactly what, but I do know that *something* happened. I know that a light shone in someone named Jesus, and I know that that light could not be snuffed out for those who loved him, for us.

I know that he lived pointing people toward the same light that dwells within us, a light that cannot be snuffed out.

We fear death because we love. We don't want to let go of our love, either by the death of others or by our own death.

But something happened in Jesus that shows us that *real love survives death*. I think that's what the Easter story has to tell us today: No hardship, no sorrow, no death can erase real love. Divine love abides, no matter what.

Something happened in Jesus that calls us to give heed to the whisper of real meaning in our hearts. Something happened that shows us that life is not what it seems. Something happened that calls us to stand up for those who cannot stand for themselves, because they count too. Something happened that filled the hearts of his friends so deeply that they KNEW his presence after he died.

There is a truth beyond fact in the resurrection of the Christ. Forget about resuscitation. Don't worry about the impossibility of the resurrection of the body. Consider the eternal truth of the Rising of new life, new hope, new love—a life, a hope, a love that cannot be snuffed out.

The Rising. That's a term offered by a fine pastor named Rev. Peter Short. Resurrection, he said, is a one time thing, limited to the physical realm. The Rising, however, is an ongoing movement, a call, a flow...

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Rev. Short says, “*The rising is not a symbol of something else, some psychology or change theory. The rising is real. Just as death is real in every life. Just as life is real in every death. The rising is not a symbol, it is a crossing over into life; life for all it’s worth; life [abundant].*”¹

The rising *is* real. It’s the rising of love on the earth, from the roots up. It’s the rising of justice, where the valleys are raised up and the mountains of power are levelled. It’s the rising of truth from the beginning of time to this very day.

In the rising, the little ones have a voice.

In the rising, the poor know their richness, and the rich find true freedom.

In the rising, our grief is softened by awareness of the eternal connection.

In the rising, the light of dawn is eternal, and no darkness can overcome it, ever.

In the rising, we walk together through this world, lifting those who need lifting, loving because it is our nature, growing together as the hands and feet of truth and light and hope; in the rising, we are the body of Christ transforming this world by God’s grace.

We humans will always stand before the mystery of death and life. But when we stand in the Rising, we join Mary and the disciples as they proclaim, his Love cannot die. He is risen! He is risen indeed!

¹ http://www.ucobserver.org/faith/2004/04/the_resurrection