

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Sunday/April 16, 2017

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“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb...” So begins John’s Easter story. The “dark” certainly conveys her feelings of deep loss but it also has a sense of mystery, and seeking. We come to the resurrection by the humility of all that we do not know. While it was still dark, (perhaps we might think of a dark, impenetrable mystery), Mary seeks the body of Jesus and finds it missing. First, angels at the tomb, then a nearby stranger, ask “Woman, why are you weeping?” At a time of grief it seems an odd question. Then, changed, in front of her, unrecognizable, until she hears her name, stands Jesus. Mary is confronted with a great mystery. Jesus tells her, “Do not hold on to me.” There is something in all of us that wants to take what is mysterious and reduce it to what we can handle. Maybe that is why we have stories of Easter bunnies (which I like, by the way). The playful story of the bunny relieves us of a mystery that is more than we can handle. But Mary has the presence to stare into the mystery of Christ’s resurrection, and all she can say at the end is, “I have seen the Lord.”

The Prophet Jeremiah, the subject of our Faith Forums in Lent, understands our need to reduce life’s mystery to what we can hold onto. “Thus says the Lord,” the prophet declares. “Do not let the wise boast of their wisdom” (Jer. 9:23f.). Don’t think you’ve got a handle on it all. Another prophet speaks for God, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55: 9). There is always a greater wisdom than we can grasp. Jeremiah continues, “do not let the mighty boast in their might.” Now power is something we can get our hands around. But it can only take you so far and so often goes awry. The story of Easter shows how insignificant is the love of power when

compared to the power of love. Finally, Jeremiah asserts, “do not let the wealthy boast of their wealth.” You can’t buy love, the saying goes. The mystery of love cannot be reduced to what we can afford. All Jeremiah can do at the end is point to God. “I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.” Mary Magdalene stands in the tradition of Jeremiah when at the end she concludes, “I have seen the Lord.”

The mystery of God’s love is more than we can handle, more than we can grasp. Who can hold on to a love that is stronger than death? All we can do is receive its Spirit. At a former parish, a man was overheard going out the door on Easter morning declaring, “I don’t believe a bit of this!” Such love as overcomes death has clearly gotten out of hand, more than we can comprehend. One might say God’s love is ascendant, a compassion greater than we can imagine. Alternatively, there may have been a time when we were unable to believe that *we* could be loved, that we were even *deserving* of love. Then God who shows no partiality, who knows us each by name, imparts a wild love that has clearly gotten out of hand. Don’t try to hold onto it. Just receive it. Once again, it is ascendant. We can love our neighbor as our self, but Jesus teaches, “Love your enemies.” If a neighbor is one who shows mercy, then our enemy is one who has shown no mercy. Love them. To be honest, I am not sure I comprehend that. That may be more than I can hold on to. God’s love however shows no partiality. It is an ascendant wisdom that I may only be able to receive. Perhaps I shouldn’t try too hard to grasp it, just be thankful for it, and say with Mary, “I have seen the Lord.”

The Easter story of God’s unconquerable love helps us make sense of the world. It tells us not to settle only for what we can hold in our hands. The mystery of life and love is so much more than that. Instead, “Seek the things that are above,” Paul says. He continues, we are hidden with Christ in God. What might it look like to gaze out on the world through Christ’s eyes? What would it be like to look at the world with Easter eyes? The Easter gospel is a lens through which we can see the world in a new light.

So the first thing we see is that God revealed a compassion on Easter that is superabundant. We can’t exhaust it. Death can’t extinguish it. This compassion touches us personally. Our neediness can’t deplete it. We can in

fact feel so needy as to drain every last ounce of compassion God has, and there is more left over. That's the mystery of God's love. God's overflowing compassion extends even to our neighbor even when he or she has chosen not to show mercy. This is a love that is more than we can handle, we can only give ourselves to it. But it is one way we look at the world through Easter eyes.

When we look at the world through Easter eyes we also see healing at work around us. The very last image that we are given in the very last book of the Bible is that of the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. To see the world with Easter eyes is to imagine mutual respect among the nations. This too may be more than we can grasp, especially today when instead of saber rattling the noises are nuclear. The cross and resurrection, however, reveal the goal toward which all life strives, that is the overcoming of enmity and loss through a difficult forgiveness and a deep compassion that is hidden at the heart of all that is; hidden in Christ as Paul would say. Global healing is an ascendant vision, hard to grasp. To look at the world with Easter eyes is to care for one another. Our mission as a church brings us into an encounter with poverty and difference. We make it our business to care for the hungry and homeless, to settle the refugee. This can only be a small part of what we do as an entire country. We struggle with the question of how to pay for such care? We worry that it can get out of hand. And I think again of Jeremiah, "Don't boast of your wealth." That is so limiting. Give yourself to the mystery of love. Compassion is ascendant and healing.

Easter is our common story. It is part of the glue that holds us together as a community. We reenact this story not just on Easter but weekly as we gather here for communion. It is the story of love's mystery, not exclusive to but focused most intensely in one person. In Jesus, compassion is clearly out of hand. The powers of evil and death roar against him like a dark storm. But there was an even greater darkness, a deeper mystery, a stronger compassion. Jesus gave himself up to it on the cross in love for the life of the world. And as the darkness gradually turned to day, a woman stood by a tomb now empty, weeping, wondering, feeling small, angry at the unfairness, at a loss of what to do. That is, until she heard a stranger say her name, not casually but deeply,

lovingly, and she stared into the mystery of victorious love and said, “I have seen the Lord.”

Amen.