THE REST OF THE STORY (TO BE CONTINUED)

If you’re a visitor here this morning, or you haven’t been here for awhile, I’d LIKE to tell you that what you see here is a typical, ordinary Sunday. But it’s not. The very crowded sanctuary and all the flowers and my white pulpit gown aren’t typical, because this isn’t an “ordinary” Sunday. This is Easter, a sacred celebration of the victory of life over death that’s out of the ordinary for all of us.

Today’s celebration of Jesus’ resurrection is the holiest, most wonder-full day of the church year. It’s also the only holy day the date of which is set by the lunar calendar. Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the spring equinox, which is March 20th.

As complicated as that sounds, it makes a kind of cosmic sense in that Easter coincides with the greening of the earth, at least here in the northern hemisphere where we live. Jesus Christ is risen, and the whole world comes to life again. That seems somehow fitting and appropriate. The sap rises in dormant trees, which then burst forth in blossom; animals that have been in hibernation wake up and go on with their animal-lives; and flowers exude their sweet smell into the air. The connection between Jesus’ resurrection and the world’s rebirth in the spring is a joyous one, and helps to renew our faith in the creative and life-giving, life-restoring power of our God.
But that connection can also be misleading, because spring is a completely natural occurrence. When you buy a daffodil bulb in the fall, it looks like nothing in your hands—a small onion, perhaps, with its skin and scraggly roots. But true and experienced gardeners don’t mind because they know that once they plant the bulb in the ground, all they have to do is wait. In the spring, the daffodils will rise up through the soil and explode with color, like yellow butterfly-blossoms shedding their cocoons. But as miraculous as that is, it’s completely natural—an event of nature that God set on auto-pilot.

Resurrection, on the other hand, is entirely UN-natural. When a human being dies and is buried or cremated, that’s all there is. The end. *Finis.* You don’t wait around for that person to reappear so you can pick up where you left off—not on THIS side of the grave, anyway. You say good-bye. You pay your respects, wipe the tears from your eyes and go on with your life as best you can.

That’s what the three women—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome—were doing that first Easter morning. They were paying their respects, as well as probably going to Jesus’ tomb to prove to themselves that what had happened only a few days before wasn’t just a bad dream, but was, in fact, true. Jesus, their beloved teacher and friend, was actually dead.

By Jewish law, they had to wait until after the Sabbath to do what they wanted to do; so in the first light of morning of the first day of the week, they were looking at the dawn through eyes still swollen and red from all the tears they had shed. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome had that hollow feeling that comes with great loss. Their heartache was a physical thing; they were literally in pain. They were just going through the motions that morning, their minds dulled beyond thought. It took all the strength and will they could muster to keep from breaking down and bursting into tears again, to
fend off the hurt, to keep at bay the monster of grief that had held them in its resilient grip for the past two days.

These three women ate nothing. They put on clothes of mourning and loss. Silently they prepared the spices and the oil needed to care for the body of Jesus. And then, not daring to even look into one another’s eyes, they set off, gliding ghost-like through the empty street in the grey of dawn, making no sound, no murmur, to dispel the trance of silent grief they were in.

The task of anointing Jesus’ body was an act of grace and an act of fear. The women needed to do something with their grief, so they seized the opportunity to lovingly care for Jesus’ body as one last act of devotion to him. But as much as they wanted, no, NEEDED to do this for their beloved teacher, they each trembled at the thought of it. Could they bear the hurt of seeing Jesus’ body there, broken and bloodied? Could they actually go through with their plan? Would this be an act of healing devotion; or would it only open up the floodgates and let in a rush of yet more pain and tears?

At least they had something to do, somewhere to go, some focus for their deep grief. Making the burial arrangements would offer some relief from the prospect of a lonely future. But there were some obstacles to overcome, the biggest of which was: who would roll back the heavy stone that blocked the entrance to Jesus’ tomb? In quiet whispers on the way to his place of burial, they discussed that conspicuous challenge. And they held their grief at bay by trying to come up with ideas to solve that problem.

But when they got to the tomb, to their great astonishment, they found the stone already rolled away. And right in front of their shocked, astonished eyes, a stranger sat. He told them JESUS WASN’T THERE; HE HAD BEEN RAISED.
The women were stricken with terror; and they were also appalled. Jesus should have been there, and he should have been dead. In spite of everything their Lord had told them, how he would be killed and then raised up on the third day, they still expected to find his body. But instead, the tomb that had held it was now empty.

We know that there are different kinds of “empty,” some good and some bad. For example, there’s a clear, empty sky when you’re going on a picnic, and an unyielding, empty sky when the land is parched and dry and desperately needs rain.

There’s an empty stomach when you’re struggling to stay on your diet by not eating so much food; and there’s an empty stomach when there is little or no food in the house to eat.

There’s an empty calendar when you’ve had WAY too much to do but you joyfully discover that today you actually have a break from your busy schedule; and there’s an empty calendar when you have nothing to do and no plans whatsoever because of frailty or old age, and your lonely, boring days stretch and on and on into what seems like an infinite future.

There’s an empty room when you know that somebody you love is on their way back home; and there’s a whole other kind of empty room when you know the occupant isn’t coming back, and never will. Yes, there are different kinds of empty, both good and bad; and an empty TOMB--that doesn’t seem like a good kind of empty, only shocking and deplorable. So, not surprisingly, the women were seized with terror. Who wouldn’t be?

And yet, when the stranger in the tomb--and clearly this stranger was a holy and divine presence--when on that early morning so long ago the stranger pointed further into the tomb, he spoke to the women NOT in sorrow but in
triumph! His was a word of VICTORY, not loss; it was a declaration of LOVE, not horror. “GO and TELL HIS DISCIPLES . . . the tomb is empty.”

The three women were terrified by the tomb’s emptiness. They would have known what to do and how to react if death had been there. That would have been natural, and they would have known how to care for the dead.

But what do you do with an empty tomb?

Mark recorded that, for Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, the empty tomb was both awful and full of awe. But that’s not unusual at all. New life in the midst of death is frightening. It’s unnatural. To expect to find a sealed, occupied tomb and instead find an empty one with some mysterious being sitting there; to seek out the past and discover the future; to look for a corpse and find—well, nothing, emptiness—none of that is natural or normal. And so Mark tells us that the three women said nothing to anyone out of fear. I suspect that this isn’t unusual when you have just been confronted with the death-defeating power of God. Wouldn’t WE be afraid, as well? Wouldn’t WE keep our mouths shut, for fear that we’re going crazy—or that, at the very least, other people would think we’re crazy? Yes, the close-lipped silence of those three women is perfectly understandable, because they were terrified.

That’s why the resurrection story in Mark’s Gospel is so compelling in its simplicity and honesty. It’s a story of grief, fear and broken-heartedness, without a tied up in a bow, Hollywood-ready happy ending. At the end of Mark’s account of the resurrection, all we’re left with is holy silence and awe. There were no special guest appearances by Jesus, no gentle, comforting conversations or explanations, no shouts of joy from the women that Christ was risen. There was only a stone rolled away, an unexpected stranger, an empty
cave where Jesus’ body should have been—and a promise: a promise that Jesus has gone ahead of them into Galilee. And then, silence.

But we know something happened to those women. They weren’t struck silent and remained terrified forever. Although Jesus’ death and the empty tomb were the end of life as they knew and understood it, it was far from the end of the story. No, this event was the beginning of something new. At some point in their terrified silence, the women began to move, to run, to go from the tomb and go on with life as it was transformed by the resurrection event. The very fact that Mark’s Gospel exists is testimony to the fact that the three women did eventually collect themselves and gather up the courage to go and tell.

We know they told others about the empty tomb because you and I are here this morning, after having the story of Jesus’ empty tomb told, retold and passed down for two thousand years as a living treasure from friend to friend, from parent to child, sister to brother, father to daughter, disciple of Christ to potential disciple of Christ. The story of Jesus’ resurrection has been repeated through the centuries until now, the present, and here we are. And we know what those women saw. The tomb was empty. Jesus was raised from the dead; he goes ahead of US, too, and one day we will also see the risen Christ. So, “Go,” said the mysterious man to the two Marys, to Salome, and to us. “Go and tell.”

Resurrection can be profoundly disturbing, particularly for those of us who may be comfortable with the world as it is, and who fear that although God’s new resurrection future might be good news for the poor, the downtrodden and the dispossessed, it may NOT be so great for those who are well off and have reaped a comfortable life without a lot of concern for those who haven’t.
But when you think about it, to live in the resurrection hope is to confidently place our well-being, our eternal future, into the hands of a God who is able to raise the dead to Eternal Life so that they may feast at the divine banquet table that God has prepared for all of us.

One of the great wonders of the resurrection story is that the hope and joy it brings has lasted so long, and the story continues to be told and retold, generation after generation, despite the forces of greed and ambition and lust for power; despite prejudice and hatred and grief; despite violence and death.

On this Easter Sunday, when we celebrate the empty tomb and the victory of life over death, we probably have questions that can’t really be answered and doubts that can’t be fully satisfied. We may want to simply run away from the mystery and the great power of this day, as the three women in Mark’s Gospel did. But deep down in our hearts, we know that we can’t, and we must not. Because now that we stand at the entrance of Jesus’ tomb and see that it’s empty, we realize that the rest of the story is ours to complete.

With God’s help, the story of the empty tomb will continue on through our response to it, by our courage, our faith, and our telling others how we have personally experienced the love of God that was expressed so powerfully by Christ’s death on the cross and sealed for all eternity by Christ’s resurrected life.

My friends, in this world, death is natural. Loss is natural. Grief is natural. But the rolled away stone and the empty tomb reveal a highly unnatural truth. Out of the event of Jesus’ resurrection that we’re celebrating today, on Easter, God has implanted a seed of life in us that can’t be killed; and if we remember that, then there’s nothing we can’t do: even move mountains, banish fear, love our enemies, and change the world. That’s what can and does
happen when we have faith in the Good News that Christ is risen, and death and the grave are vanquished, once and for all.

And so Mark leaves us to write the rest of the Easter story. We’re left to encounter the risen Christ for ourselves and discover the unlimited power of God’s new, Eternal life. Mark leaves us to wrestle with our fears and decide between life and death. Jesus our Savior is going before us, to the Galilees of our lives; and you and I are called to go and tell. How we respond to that good news, and whether we choose to go forth and catch up with the risen Christ and tell the world about it--well, right now, that part of the story hasn’t been written yet. But every single day of our lives, yet another page of the Easter story is being written.

May our part in that resurrection story end happily ever after. Amen.