

"Are you in good hands?"

Sermon on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019

Based on John 18

Easter Sunday is BIG, as big as the full moon that greeted us all week long, that ball of light which you may have noticed in the night sky. The moon shines in full glory during Holy Week. That's because Easter is determined by the lunar calendar and at least once a year Christians have to admit that they are lunatics. I mean we are lunatics, right? We believe that our sins are forgiven by a man, sent by God, who died on a Roman execution cross, in the name of love. We believe that the same man who was executed on the day before the Sabbath, stood up death and walked away on the day after Sabbath, as if he'd just taken a nap. Some would say that's crazy and outrageous! I understand the skeptics in and outside of the church who are not quite sold and not sure about what to make of this Easter thing. The bunny is probably easier to explain. But this Day of Easter is big for the church, as big as the full moon of this past week, making light of the darkness that envelopes our lives, asking us, begging us, to buy into the resurrection narrative while we are still alive. And that will be exactly my point for this morning.

We may be thinking that Easter is only about the resurrection of the dead, but of course, we haven't seen anyone walk out of the cemetery Jesus-style lately. See, when it comes to the resurrection, I am not worried about Pastor Ed who left this earth and this community prematurely last week. I am not worried about Ellie Park who passed away after nine decades of a full and faith-filled life. I'm not worried about any of these people. They are in God's hands. They are in good hands. The question for us sounds more like the Allstate Commercial tag line, "Are **you** in good hands?" Easter is really about our resurrection during life, and understanding that is key to our faith journeys. There are so many ways in which people face death in the course of their lives, are there not? Our friends who meet here faithfully almost every day of the week could tell us a tale or two about the destruction, pain and death that addiction causes in families, wreaking havoc well before the biological clock comes to an end. Our friends who meet here faithfully every Thursday night could tell us a tale or two about the depression, hardship and isolation that chronic pain and chronic illness causes for sufferers and their loved ones. Finally, our friends who meet here every Sunday for worship (oh wait, that's us!) could tell us a tale or two about how some of us have been confronted with the tomb and the smell of decay in the midst of life. For all of us, the risen Christ meets us in those places and promises us resurrection, new life, hope. That's the gist of our faith!

Let me ask the same question that bugs people about Easter in a few different ways, giving voice to some other folks in our community. Someone might ask: where is the resurrection when I work night and day in a thankless job and yet find myself deeper in debt, - and can't pay my bills? Where is that risen Christ when, after working forty years, I'm about to lose my beloved home because of huge medical bills? Where is this Jesus when you wake up one morning and realize nothing matters to you anymore? Where is the God of the Easter miracle when, at the end of life, family and friends are all gone and we you left alone to negotiate the last stage on your own? Those are only some of the question that arise from the tombs that exist in this world.

I can only say it with the respect of someone who has experienced some things, but certainly not all things, who has not experienced hardship to the extent that some of you have, so I say it respectfully but firmly nevertheless: the resurrection is here, it's the dynamo of our being, it's

always here. Our lives may feel sometimes like a cookie without baking powder – just plain flat! But the baking powder is here, hidden in Christ, hidden in the Holy Sacraments and often bursting out in our community like the trumpet that Pastor Ed so often played on Easter morning with a perfect pitch. How do we access that resurrection power when we don't feel it? Holy Communion may be a start. Chew on it for a little while and let it sink into your heart and soul and mind, and realize that you are in the sacred, life-giving presence of God. Or open your eyes, ears and senses to the resurrection powers that are at work in God's creation every day and night, visible and enjoyable every spring, producing some of the most beautiful colors on earth right now, right here in our neighborhoods. God is all around us and the power of the resurrection can be literally felt everywhere. Easter says: the creator will bring that life power into the darkest places of people's existence.

Here is the Easter story according to John... Mary goes to the tomb while it's still dark. She finds the stone rolled away and Jesus' body gone. Weeping, she looks inside the tomb and sees two angels. "Woman, why are you weeping?" they ask. "They have taken away my Lord," Mary says, "and I do not know where they have laid him." Just then, she turns around and Jesus is standing there. But she doesn't recognize him. "Woman, why are you crying?" "Sir," Mary said, "if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." "Mary," Jesus said. "Mary, get a grip!" And the second he says her name, Mary realizes that this stranger standing before her is the risen Christ. "Rabbouni" she says to Jesus. Her eyes are opened. She is now in good hands.

Mary recognized the living Christ. But surprisingly, it took her a while. Why did it take her so long to recognize a familiar face like that of Jesus? This Easter story detail is perhaps the most important one to me. In our own lives, in our spiritual journeys, in our faith, we are so often blind and unable to see God in our midst. We see clearly what's on the surface, all the things going on during another busy week. But how often do we look deeper and see with the eyes of our soul, with the eyes of faith? John tells us that, like Mary, we have the risen Christ right in front of us. We have a life force in our midst. And *that's* the missing ingredient we must reclaim.

Eugene O'Neill, the great American playwright and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, wrote a play called *Lazarus Laughed*. The play tells the story of Lazarus after Jesus brought him back from death. As Lazarus is the first person to return from the realm of the dead, people want to hear from him, to hear his story. They want to know, "What was it like, Lazarus?" In his post-death life, Lazarus does have things to say. Among them, he tells people there is no death. But more than what he says, it is what he does that convinces people. Lazarus laughs. He laughs at everything, even death. And the more Lazarus laughs, the younger and stronger he becomes. His home in Bethany is called House of Laughter. He sees with the eyes of faith. He sees beyond death. He is fully resurrected and often the biggest sign of faith is humor, because you see through the surface of so many things. Did I tell you that Pastor Ed died with a smile on his face?

Easter Sunday is big, as big as the full moon that greeted us all week long, shining brightly into the night, making light of the darkness that envelopes our lives, asking us, begging us, to buy into the resurrection narrative while we are still alive.

Did you get my point? Be alive!

Amen.