

*Merry Easter*

John 20:1-18

Whitefish UMC

April 24, 2011

- † “It's that time of year again, when schoolchildren are coloring pictures of Jesus hanging from a cross, and shop owners fill their windows with gaily colored cutouts of the scourging at the pillar. In the malls everyone's humming along with seasonal hits on the sound system, like "O Sacred Head, Surrounded" (did you hear the Chipmunks' version?). Car dealers are promoting great big empty-tomb size discounts on Toyotas.
- † Yes, it's beginning to look a lot like Easter. Who hasn't been invited to an "In His Steps" party, where players move plastic pieces around a board emblazoned with a map of Jesus last day of suffering in Jerusalem? Not me, for one. Somehow we just don't make the same boisterous fun of Holy Week that we do of Christmas. No one plans to have a holly jolly Easter.
- † Easter just isn't fun in the same way Christmas is, a type of fun that could be better described as styled for children. It's a commonplace to say that "Christmas is for children," but what about Easter? Is it for children, too?
- † It sure didn't seem so to me, back then. Compared to Christmas, Easter was boring. Chocolate bunnies: good. Scratchy new crinolines: bad. Long blah-blah-blah at church. A lot of wordy grown-up church talk leading to, it seemed, no payoff. You could always count on Christmas to change a lot of stuff, especially in the toy box. Easter didn't change anything.

† But when you think about the astonishing claims Christians make for Easter, that neglect seems pretty strange, even to an outsider. My friend Mitch is Jewish, but his encounters with suffering during medical training led him to doubt whether there even is a God. Yet last Christmas he sent me this note:

† *Looking at the Christmas thing as a man raised in a Jewish home, the big celebration in Christianity should be Easter. No Easter, no Christianity. So all the focus on Christmas, at least to me, seems misdirected. Why Christians don't whoop it up more at Easter is a mystery to me. How inspirational! How joyful! That is the time to toast each other, lay on gifts, and attend worship services, pack in the rich food. Something really substantial and holy to remember.*

† No Easter, no Christianity. Mitch has a point. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, who cares whether he was born in a manger or a 7-Eleven? If he didn't rise from the dead, Christmas is meaningless, too.

† I remember my toy box, but not much of what was in it, and I don't retain any of those thrilling Christmas toys today. When I grew up I put away childish things. When I grew up I began to be concerned with bigger things, many of them difficult to comprehend. Like Mitch, I saw suffering and death. I saw people live through situations so crushingly unfair that it was impossible that the universe bore no witness, impossible that there was no God who could wipe tears away and affect justice on the last day. I saw people find within themselves nobility to overcome, as well, and heard them say the strength came from a source beyond their own. These are not things children have to think about.”

- † I wish I could take credit for these whimsically ironic words, but I won't—they come from a Greek Orthodox writer named Frederica Mathewes-Green, and they were originally published on the interfaith website beliefnet.com. Yet I have to disagree with her last statement. We know that children DO have to deal with suffering and death—we've known it right here in our own church.
- † And that's why, when they are old enough to understand, we teach them that God knows what it is like to lose someone you love so much you can't imagine life without them. That God understands how it feels when life seems broken beyond repair.
- † We grown-ups need to know that too. And so Easter gives us an answer for the weariness of life, the pain, the profound loneliness and hovering fear of meaninglessness. Yet in the midst of this desolation we find Jesus, triumphant over death and still shockingly alive, present to us in ways we cannot understand, much less explain. In him we find vibrancy of life and everlasting love, and a firm compassion that does not deny our suffering but transforms and illuminates it. He is life itself. As love and life incarnate, he could not be held back by death.
- † “Where, o death, is now thy sting,” we sing in our favorite Easter hymn. And yet, there are some days when, as Mary Chapin Carpenter's lyrics describe: *It seems so black outside that you can't remember/Light ever shone on you or the ones you love in this or another lifetime.*
- † That might have been how Mary Magdalene felt that first Easter morning. It was just so dark outside; violence and fear hung like a dark cloud over her once adventurous life of following and learning from this meek but authoritative teacher around whom she had reoriented all of her days.

- † The light that had once shone on her had been extinguished on a Roman cross. Not only was it dark in the world that morning, but it was dark in her soul. Where there had once been a glimmer of hope, there was only despair now. And while it was dark, she came to the tomb. There in the darkness of her life, she was surprised by the Light of Easter and her story has become the Christian story.
- † It is the story we remember and celebrate in worship today. It is the single most important reason we ever get together any Sunday of the year or any day of the week. It is the heartbeat of Christian community. It is the HOPE to which we cling and the PROMISE upon which we stand. It is the very essence of Christian faith. It is more than cliché. It is LIFE.
- † Maybe you can relate to Mary? Maybe on this Easter 2011 you are resigned to the futility of life and the awful pain of death, the finality of death, perhaps death of a beloved friend or family member, perhaps the death that pervades our culture, tragic deaths that come as a result of war and terrorism or random violence, perhaps the death of a life-sustaining relationship or business.
- † Maybe even one or more of these things has convinced you that not much makes sense in this life and although you are breathing, your heart is beating, but it is also breaking. There's been so much loss and sorrow in your life that you showed up here today not looking for life but expecting to find more of the same...Easter bunnies and jelly beans...some candy-coated clichés that do not touch the real questions of your life or bring comfort to your deep grief.
- † Perhaps on this Easter 2011 you can relate to the men who came to the tomb after Mary's announcement that the tomb was empty. You have followed

others to church and looked into this whole Christian thing, and you just don't understand. You just don't see the proof for such claims.

- † Here's the great thing about the Gospel story. The ones who come to the tomb don't see Jesus; they don't get any *proof*. They just go back home and continue to hang out together until one day Jesus appears in the midst of their dark night. When Jesus appears to the disciples, what he does first is show them his scars--touch my wounds, he says--see here the evidence of the lowest point of my human life, the time in my life when I was defeated and overcome and when I had been beaten down and I was myself questioning why would God forsake me. This is what his scars point to, not his triumph but his tragedy, not his victory but a time when he was vilified, a time of pain and struggle.
- † Think about how else this story could have gone. He could have said, "Look friends, it is I -completely healed. Nothing they did to me has any lasting effect. I am *perfect* again." But he says, "Hey I am scarred and wounded, but these wounds will not keep the energy and life of God flowing through me to you!"
- † A word of explanation: the Greeks have two different words for life: *bios*, which means biological life; and *zoe*, which means the energy of God. And so Jesus continues:
- † "And *guess what!* Just as God has sent me into the world, so I send you, not to cover up your scars, not to deny your wounds, but to show people that the same power that raised me from the dead is alive in you."
- † Easter is not a promise that your business or your family or the church or the world will be "like it used to be" or even that your pulse will go on beating forever. It is a promise that the power that gave you that pulse will never ever abandon you. The power that raised Jesus from the dead can raise you

from despair, and that same power is calling you by name and is still at work doing a new thing in you and in the church and in the world! Easter is the promise that nothing in your past, present, or future has the ultimate power to define you. You are defined by the *ZOE*, the energy, the light of God that flows through you and that flows through all creation making all things new!

- † And it is this power that gives LIFE, and this is the main thing that John wants us to know. He tells us all this so that we might have life, and have it abundantly, and this is where we find the meaning of Easter, the *more of life*, the light to shine in our darkness, not in the tomb of "proof" but in *GOD'S ZOE*, present in history and in the here and now, because proof won't satisfy your longing for life anyway. Think about it. So-called "proofs" amount to little more than a hill of jellybeans.
- † You don't prove love; you embrace it.
- † You don't prove power; you experience it.
- † You don't prove life; you live it!
- † You don't prove new life; you receive it!
- † *The way of life is calling us—the way of resurrection.*
- † Put your hand on your pulse.
- † Just as surely as blood is pulsing through your veins right now, the *ZOE* of Christ--the life that cannot die--is pulsing through creation making all things new! We are called by name to receive that new life and share it with the world!
- † And that, my friends, is better news than bunnies and jellybeans. It's better than a Merry Easter, full of all the trappings of Christmas. It is the reason for all our alleluias!
- † AMEN! ALLELUIA! Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

Sources:

Frederica Mathewes Green, “Merry Easter?” in Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter, 2003.

Pam Driesell, “Beyond Bunnies and Jelly Beans,” <http://day1.org>