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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA

Easter Sunday

April 17, 2022

Isaiah 65:17–19, 24–25; Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24;

I Corinthians 15:19–26; John 20:1–18

I wonder if you feel like I do about Easter. Some years Easter seems to mean more than other years. Some years Easter might just feel like just another Sunday, perhaps with the addition of some beautiful music and pretty flowers and special Easter food. Sure, we finally get to say “alleluia” after seven weeks of Lent, we affirm our belief in Jesus who defeated the power of death, we sing songs of hope and joy. But Easter day may not feel particularly special, or maybe we’re just so overwhelmed by Good Friday, so entrenched in the dark corners of the tomb we feel we’re living in that we can’t see the light peeking through the crack of the stone in front of it.

But then there are some Easters when we so are desperate to hear the good news of the risen Christ that when it happens, we feel like we can finally breathe again. An Easter when the freedom of Jesus’ resurrection is visceral, like finally waking up without pain or symptoms after a long illness. An Easter when Jesus’ story intersects with our own stories in ways we had never expected or experienced before.

For me, this is one of those years. I have felt desperate for Easter this year. The reality of what happened on that first Easter seems to parallel my own reality. The promise of Easter is what’s holding me up right now after what we’ve all gone through and are still going through.

This year we are gathering in person together at church for Easter for the first time since 2019. Of course, COVID is still with us and my household is finally coming out of it after a long two weeks. On top of that, the images and stories out of Ukraine are devastating. Inflation may feel like it’s choking us. Our bodies might be failing, and our planet is struggling, and the future may feel bleak. We are watching deep cultural shifts unfold before our eyes. There is heightened division and isolation in our community. We may be grieving the death of someone we loved or anticipating the decline or death of someone we can’t imagine our lives without.

This year I am desperate for Easter, for the risen Christ, and perhaps you are too.

And it makes me wonder what the difference is between a year when Easter seems like just another day and when Easter is like finally getting our thirst quenched after a long dry spell.

So, I look to Mary Magdalene in the gospel today—Mary who trudged through the darkness with spices and ointments in her arms to Jesus’ tomb to anoint his dead body. Mary who was persistent with the angels and the “gardener” wanting to find Jesus’ body. Mary who turned to Jesus when he called her name. Mary—a woman—who was the first preacher to proclaim the good news of the risen Christ—“I have seen the Lord!”

Do you remember at the beginning of this gospel story once Mary saw the stone removed from the tomb, she ran to tell Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved that the body of Jesus was missing and then the two disciples run back to the tomb? For some reason the gospel tells us that one outran the other and eventually both of them entered the tomb. But that’s not what Mary did.

The difference between Mary and the other disciples who ran to the tomb was that she wasn’t going to give up on Jesus. The other two disciples went inside the tomb and saw the linen wrappings lying there and turned around and went home. As the gospel says, they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead. Even though they had heard Jesus say repeatedly that the Son of Man must rise from the dead, they were focused on Jesus’ death. They went inside the tomb where death had happened and essentially got stuck there, kind of like how we get entrenched in the tombs of our own Good Fridays.

But Mary only bent over to look into the tomb. Mary didn’t get stuck in death. Mary was not willing to give up what Jesus had said earlier in the book of John: “I am the resurrection and the life...I will not leave you orphaned...because I live, you also will live...” Mary kept expecting something beyond her current reality. She may not have known that she would bump into the risen Jesus at the tomb, and yes, she was weeping as she stood there. But she didn’t run back home. She persisted and would not go back to her old life until she encountered Jesus, risen or not.

It was because of her persistence, it was because she didn't run back home to her old life, that Mary encountered Jesus and heard him call her name.

The difference between Easter being just another day and Easter truly bringing us new life is whether like the other two disciples we encounter the story of the risen Christ and then just go back home, or whether like Mary we persist in the story, expecting to encounter Jesus in the midst of our tears, in the midst of not knowing what lies ahead, in the midst of a world that may feel like it's falling apart.

Jesus will rise and will appear to us whether we expect it or not. But it's when we expect Jesus to come, when we resist getting stuck in death, when we listen for Jesus to call our name, that's when we'll truly experience Easter and it's like we can finally breathe again.

A couple weeks ago ten of us from our One Parish, One Prisoner Team—which will be commissioned in a few moments—received a letter from a prisoner named Jeremiah who is incarcerated in Monroe whom we will support when he is released in January. He didn't share a lot of details with us—we'll get to know him over the next several months of letter writing. But in his letter after he described the organization of restoration for other released prisoners he has plans to start, he signed his letter, "In all faith, hope, and love in Christ, Jeremiah, the sinner whom Jesus loved."

Jeremiah, despite being in the tomb of incarceration, despite knowing his sinfulness, despite all that his life has been, is persisting in the story of Jesus' resurrection: Jesus loves him, died, and rose for him. Easter means something for him. He is made new because of the resurrection of Jesus, and he is not running back home to his old life. His hurts, as Richard Rohr says, have now become the home for his greatest hopes. And we get to witness, support, and pray for this beloved child of God.

And if new life can come for Jeremiah, if he can persist in the story of Jesus' resurrection, so can we, my dear friends in Christ. It's Easter and we can finally breathe again. For he is risen, **he is risen indeed, alleluia!**