

April 21, 2019
Ellen Fowler Skidmore
Forest Lake Presbyterian

Resurrection?

John 20: 1-18

We began our worship this morning with John's retelling of the resurrection of Jesus. Every Gospel tells us the story of the empty tomb in its own way. But, I think that John's retelling is especially vivid and very familiar to anyone who has ever experienced a life-changing event. If you have experienced trauma or even a sudden change of fortune in your favor, you will recognize the emotions that John portrays. If you have ever experienced a sudden, life-changing event, you will recognize the emotion and confusion of John's account.

Mary Magdalene goes very early to the tomb where Jesus was buried to grieve and to pay respects, but finds the stone removed and the body gone. Her clear conclusion is that someone has stolen his dead body. After Mary runs to tell Jesus' disciples, Simon Peter and the unnamed disciple – "whom Jesus loved" – run to see what has happened. What they see at the tomb is very clear, but exactly what they understand is not clear at all. Simon Peter sees the empty tomb and goes home. The unnamed disciple, John says, "saw and believed". But John also says that neither of them understood the scripture that said that Jesus must rise from the dead. We are left in confusion, grief and uncertainty. Trauma.

Those who have experienced trauma understand and know this story very well. Whether it was a terrible and traumatic loss, the sudden death of one we loved, or participation in a tragedy, we know what it means to see the facts and not know what they mean. If you are old enough to remember the events of 9/11, you remember the dawning recognition that something terrible had happened, but we couldn't fully grasp what had happened. It happens to me every single time there is a school shooting.

This same strange, confused, even "out of body" experience also happens to us when something good happens to us. Often, even when the life altering event is good, it takes some time for us to see the fact and understand what those facts mean. I often tell couples that I marry that while they know they love each other and have made this plan to get married, the full meaning of saying "I Do" often doesn't become clear until one of you gets the stomach flu. Or maybe it is the birth of a baby. I remember vividly, after our first child was born, Eric and I decided one night to go see a movie. We were halfway out the door before we realized, "We can't leave! There is a baby in the house!" We knew she was there, it just took a while for the full meaning of her presence to become clear for us.

Those who followed Jesus on earth, who loved the man, saw Jesus die a gruesome death on a cross. Of that they were sure. They were certain that he had been buried in the tomb. But what comes next has more of an unreal, what-does-this-mean quality to it. Mary – so sure that her conclusion of grave robbers – stays in the Garden weeping. Then, there are two angels – but so sure is Mary of her conclusion that she does not recognize them as Angels, but instead asks them to give back to her the dead body of Jesus. Then, she turns around and bumps into the gardener, and she asks the same of him. Give me back what I knew. Give me back the terrible, but known dead body of Jesus. And Jesus calls Mary by name, and that alone is able to pierce her grief and her certainty that she knows what has happened. And Mary says to the resurrected Jesus, literally, MY RABBI! And human history is never the same.

What follows Mary's meeting of Jesus in the Garden near the tomb is also familiar to us. Mary goes to tell the other disciples what she has seen, learned and now believes, and what happens next is that everyone who loves Jesus goes through the same process. What? Are you sure? Could you have been mistaken? Were you at the right tomb? Could it be so? What does this mean? Resurrection? Or Grave robbers?

And, if you came this morning more certain about the Easter Bunny and chocolate than you are about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, then I'd like to welcome you to a long line of human beings who loved and believed in Jesus, but who have struggled to believe the possibility of resurrection.

The central event of the Christian faith is this belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There are those who have said, "well, it may be a metaphor for new life." Or "since we can't prove it we will talk more about Jesus moral teachings and example." But, historically and Scripturally, I don't believe we can say that. Those who loved Jesus and followed Jesus on earth as disciples tell us that they saw Jesus die, saw him buried, and then they saw, talked, ate and drank with the Jesus whom God raised from the dead. And it was such a traumatic, life-changing event that within about 300 years, the whole course of human history had been forever changed by their experience of the Resurrection of Jesus.

Simon Peter – the same Simon Peter who had loved Jesus, followed Jesus, believed in Jesus as Messiah, denied that he knew Jesus three times, and who saw the empty grave and just went home to think about it becomes a missionary to the world – to tell the world what the resurrection of Jesus means. But we see even Simon Peter struggling to understand the implications of Jesus Resurrection. When we get to the book of Acts, we find Peter going from Jewish community to Jewish community to tell them that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, to recount his experience and convince others of the truth of the resurrection. And while he is doing that, he has a vision that blows the tops and sides off of what Peter knows it means to be a good Jew and a follower of "My Rabbi". The vision – in Acts 10 – appears to tell Peter that the rules of kosher eating – the way observant Jews still live their faith – no longer apply. Then, he is told to go with some Gentiles who come asking for him. When he does what the vision tells him to do, he is brought to the home of a Gentile Centurion – an officer in the Roman Army -

named Cornelius. Cornelius and Peter are both, we find out, being obedient to a vision. And so when the Gentile Cornelius tells Peter of his visionary instruction to ask Peter to speak, Peter speaks. And Peter – the same Peter who went quietly home on that first Easter morning – gives us a concise statement of the life-changing reality of the Resurrection. And it is as if we can hear Peter – again – making sense of strange facts and realizing the truth that has been revealed to him.

Acts 10:34-43

Peter and Cornelius and all of Cornelius household are converted at the same time. They now understand, in a way that Peter had not understood before, that God is completely impartial and that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was on behalf of the WHOLE world.

Cornelius and Peter are both changed forever by the news of the Resurrection of Jesus. Peter – an observant Jew – stays and accepts the hospitality of a Gentile Centurion – forbidden by Jewish holiness laws – and the reality and implications of Jesus' Resurrection take another step towards changing the whole world. Just as Peter ate and drank with the resurrected Christ (Acts 10:41), so now he eats and drinks with Cornelius and his household and together they come to know the life-changing implications of God's plan for the whole world. When we come to the communion table this morning, we remember again that the reality and the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus becomes clear when we eat and drink with each other and welcome each other into our hearts and homes.

I don't know where you are with regards to the Resurrection of Jesus. Like Mary, it is easier for some of us to believe the bad news, than it is to believe the good news. We would rather hold on to a dead body than believe that God can bring life out of death. Like Simon Peter, we might be open to the possibility that God actually does have power over Sin and Death, but after today we are just going to go home to think about it. Miracles are not something we like to claim publically. Maybe, like the beloved disciple, we might believe but not fully understand. But wherever we find ourselves, today you and I are invited to believe in a miracle – the core of our faith is the belief in that which does not fit our normal rules and that changes forever the reality we see, know and understand.

Christ has died!

Christ is Risen!

Christ will come again!

Death is not the end of life. What appeared to be a defeat is actually the means of saving the whole world. And the God Who Rules the Universe works in our lives and in human history to save, to love and to include. Because Jesus was resurrected we can sit and eat with those who, before, we believed were not included in God's plan for salvation. Because we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, we believe that there is no sin so great, no suffering so deep, no evil so perverse that it cannot be forgiven, healed and redeemed.

As we look at the world – as full of Sin, suffering, loss, trauma and evil as it is – we are invited to believe in a miracle. Jesus Christ – God come to earth in human form – has come to change our minds about what is true and what is eternal. The tomb is empty.

Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed!