



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Easter Sunday – April 4, 2021

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 25:6-9, John 20:1-18

+I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the darkness of an early morning a couple of millennia ago Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the son of God, quietly slipped off the funeral bindings that human hands had wrapped round him, and exited a burial tomb that had a stone that human hands had placed there in order to confine him.

Mary arrives first – and knows that something isn't right. Things had been moved. The STONE had been moved. So she goes to get the others. And then the three disciples reach that tomb. One sees the grave clothes neatly folded and believes. One sees the same thing and there is no indication that he believes anything. And one – the first one - is surprised into believing by hearing the sound of her name. The others leave. But Mary stays. She always stays.

In each of these disciples, we find ourselves at one time or another. We're meant to. Because these reactions to the Resurrection are real. St. John leaves room for each of us -- for one who sees and believes, another who sees and leaves uncertain, and one who needs to hear her own name in order to embrace the reality in front of her.

I love the way that John makes us just stop and feel that moment of deep grief, then confusion and then deep questioning – which finally ends in astonishment - that Mary experienced. The whole exchange is poignant beyond words. And it's deeply important.

Mary Magdalene knows first. A woman. She's given priority by God as the one who receive the news that God keeps God's promises - first. Given the times and the social morays, that's radical. Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the Resurrection. The thing is, women did not witness. Not in a court of law, not in life. In fact, in the ancient near east women lived under a strong patriarchy.

So why was it that Mary is the first witness to the Resurrection? And why is it that Mary and other women were part of Jesus' ministry?

Well, the fact that Mary is told first is a challenging divine reversal and a sign of how God operates. It's a demonstration of what God's kingdom is like. It tells us what our Christian fellowship has the potential to look like here and now. This is a fundamental sign of God's kingdom – of the way the Lord operates – the last shall be first and the first shall be last, for there is neither Jew, nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, we are all one in Christ Jesus. That's a ministry of inclusion not exclusion. That tells you something significant about God's ways and God's thoughts.

A divine reversal is also how St. Peter and the other disciples who gave their lives for the Gospel - came to live in the power of the Spirit, and to preach so clearly as we will read in the coming weeks in the book of the Acts of the Apostles - so full of the conviction that Christ lives, that our sins are forgiven and that we all live in him, and will forever.

Peter had seen the Christ, and broken bread with a man who was supposed to be dead. Peter was in full possession of the facts: that Jesus the Messiah had risen from the dead – and in so doing he had completed his work of redemption. That's why he can suddenly find tremendous courage and in a deeply hostile culture of polytheism, proclaim his beliefs about the Messiah and God's plan to draw all people to God's self in love with such strength and eloquence.

This change in Peter particularly is really something when we consider that this is the same Simon Peter who Only a short while earlier, tried to hide from being known as one of Jesus' disciples - Peter who denied his Lord three times before the cock crowed twice. This change was really something.

And each of the disciples lived and died communicating the truth of the Resurrection. Because they did die for it: all of them, save one - John, are said to have died either by crucifixion themselves, or by some other method of execution.

But these folks lived the rest of their lives trying to make sense of what they'd seen and experienced. And the only credible conclusion they could come up with was that Jesus was who he said he was. Because they knew his death was real, they'd been there, so they were forced – against common sense, against the strongest currents of culture, against everything else that they knew to be normal - to recognize that his Resurrection was real too.

And that matters because Jesus' Resurrection tells us that this world matters. You see the Resurrection is a break. It's a break with what was; it's the beginning to a new world. In truth it's actually the beginning of a revolution – a long revolution that we are still in the midst of that promises a new heaven

and a new earth and that powers and principalities like racism, like sexism, like prejudice and the violation and violence that proceeds from these things will be set right.

And that's interesting. You see we are pretty comfortable with the idea that Jesus came to put us right with God – personally – and of course that's true. But God's field of vision is much, much wider than that. Jesus came to put all the systems of which we are a part right with God too. Jesus came to redeem human systems. Not with might, but with profound right – God's right.

That's why a real, bodily Resurrection is so important – to me and to you and to the church. That's how we know the work of the cross has been accomplished. That Jesus has risen in his body – the body that walked among real people healing, and showing people what God's love is really like – that body risen showing that this world – with its created order matters to God. That heaven and the created order on earth are united in Jesus' Resurrection.

And in the days after Jesus' Resurrection, when Mary and the women, when Cleopas, and Thomas and Peter, and the rest of the disciples encounter Jesus all the times that he showed up in the days after his Resurrection, in the garden, on the road to Emmaus, on the beach, in the upper room, there's something else important that biblical scholars remind us to notice about his body.

Jesus appears to the disciples with his wounds. Now just in case that seems obvious to you – because we've heard this story so many times we're deaf to these things, think about it: he appears with his wounds. I mean, we might have expected that they would be gone, healed, erased by whatever change he's gone through.

But no. Jesus' wounds are really significant. They mean that he is the same person that went through the crucifixion. It's not as if the crucifixion has been undone; he's not back to how he was beforehand, before all those horrible things happened to him – before the stripes on his back from the vicious lashings he received, before the cruel marks of the nails that killed him.

I mean, it's not magic. He is the person to whom these things happened. But now that experience has been separated from all that made them traumatic and destructive, and Jesus is free now to move and act and be present in ways that he could not before – because that very body has been raised.

That's important because it speaks to an important truth for us: that when we go through really painful experiences, our aim should not be to get back to how we were before them, to erase them. We can't even if we want to. But like Christ, we come through them transformed - bearing the wounds of what we have experienced for they honour that pain, but knowing that in time they will be separated from what makes them destructive.

The temptation is to try and “get over” experiences in life ends up being a refusal to be transformed – it’s an understandable refusal because transformation is a painful process, but there’s no avoiding it; it is the condition of this world. And beyond the pain is new life.

So, for all these things – these very concrete and tangible, and real reasons, I think we Christians, we followers of the way of Jesus Christ, should be very careful to cherish the reality and the corporeality of the Resurrection.

It is crucial to understand that Jesus' Resurrection is not just about "love is stronger than death," or "life beyond death," important and true though these things may be. But because it is Jesus who is resurrected, it is Jesus' ministry that is vindicated. Who Jesus is; what he stands for; it is these that are shown to be un-killable.

God's love for the world; God's desire for justice, peace, and well-being; the fact that through the cross, we and the systems we are part of are put right with God. These things – these results of Resurrection victory are stronger and more important than the worst the world can do.

The strangeness of the Resurrection and its refusal to allow anything to dull its edge, to mute its strangeness is in fact its power. Why would anyone tell a story like this and expect to be believed – unless it was unavoidably true? Unless they were communicating a reality that they’d experienced and could do nothing with it but to go, tell?

To believe in the Resurrection of Jesus takes a lot of faith and courage I know. But I have to tell you: it’s more than just saying yes to the claim made by Mary and, eventually, the disciples in the Easter story. It’s at the same time saying “no” to the power of death and destruction that surrounds us. In place of the bad news we hear and the bad experiences we have, we make the claim that there is a sustaining power, our loving and great God, who brings life out of death and reconciliation out of conflict, and transformation out of pain – and healing out of a pandemic.

Easter marks the beginning of a new creation; a revolution of love. It begins with the Resurrection of Jesus, and it continues in the passing of time where the gospel is proclaimed – not just read – but proclaimed and people come to faith and their works of mercy, and the love we show to each other and the world make this revolution of love a reality. The Church at its best continues to be the community of the new creation in a world that is too often headed for destruction by violence, prejudice, abuse, and death.

Instead, we tell folks about life – real life, true life, resurrected life. Thanks be to God – Alleluia.

+In the name of the Resurrected Christ, Amen.