

EASTER, YEAR A, APRIL 9, 2023

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia! It is a beautiful sunny day outside that sparkles with Easter joy. Flowers are blooming and trees are bursting with buds ready to explode. On such a beautiful day we forget that the first Easter started in darkness. The women came in the dark, dressed in their black mourning clothes, filled with grief ready to enter the darkness of the tomb. In many respects the darkness of the tomb acknowledges the darkness that we all encounter in life which is real and powerful. The last couple of years we were plagued by the darkness of disease and death. There is also the darkness of war with all its senseless killing; the darkness of injustice, hatred, greed, pain, suffering and so much more. There is a lot of darkness in this world of ours. But the central message of our faith is that the darkness does not have the last word.

This is the great message of Easter. Easter is all about hope, hope in the promises of God. And as Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, reminds us, "Hope is trust in what God has done and will do in spite of evidence to the contrary. Yet we live like it's still Good Friday. We live in the darkness and the shadows of our fears and doubts as if Easter didn't happen or doesn't matter. The way we act from Easter to Easter indicates that perhaps we don't quite believe in Easter, because, the day after Easter, we live our lives in the exact same way we always have. Our actions and behaviors don't change or show the hope that Easter shouts.

I don't think that it's not that we don't believe the Easter story about resurrection. We might debate the details, wonder about the 'How's and the specifics, but all in all, we do believe that God can have the power of life to win out over the power of death. We believe that, because we must admit that we've seen miracles, we've seen good win out against terrible odds, we've seen lives changed by God's love, we've seen these things happen yet sometimes it's difficult to comprehend.

In many respects Easter is a mystery and in order to believe in a mystery you've got to engage the part of your brain that believes in possibility. It's the same part of your brain that allows you to see past what is and envision what might be.

It's really that same part of the brain that allows scientists, engineers, mathematicians, chemists, artists and musicians to be who they are and do what it is they do: to see possibility. How else are bridges built over roaring rivers, or chemicals mixed together to create new material, or rockets sent soaring into space, or great masterpieces painted or symphonies and rock and rap songs created? It's not just about intellect. It's about imagination!

Being able to see possibility means that you have to engage your whole heart, your whole mind and your whole soul and all of your senses. In order to be able to be open to possibility, you've got to embrace mystery and in doing so engage your imagination.

That's what the real gift of the resurrection is: imagining hope which is unconditional love that defies logic. The late Rev. William Sloane Coffin of Riverside Church once said: "Easter is the victory of what appeared as powerless love, over loveless power." Easter is a wonderful, powerful gift, which most of us are afraid to use. We hide in the familiar instead of stepping out and embracing one's imagination, seeing possibilities. Instead of believing in the resurrection we need to live resurrection.

Let me tell you a story that happened to a colleague of mine several years ago. He arrived home after church to find a handwritten invitation in crayon taped to his door. It was addressed to Bernie and his dog Pugsley. The invitation was from Ben, Bernie's five year old next door neighbor. Ben invited Bernie and Pugsley to attend a memorial service at the park across the street for Ben's dog Scout who had died a few weeks earlier.

Bernie said when he arrived at the park with Pugsley other neighborhood children and parents with their dogs were assembled. Ben then handed out doggy bags to each dog owner. Inside the bag was a treat for each dog and a little box that contained some of Scout's ashes. Ben thanked everyone for coming and said this was Scout's favorite place in the whole world and even though Scout was now in heaven he wanted everyone to scatter Scout's ashes around in his favorite place so they could remember him.

Bernie said the adults looked at each other with some trepidation while the children opened their boxes and with joyful abandon started scattering Scout's ashes. They began to tell stories about Scout and all the wonderful antics that Scout did. The kids began to shout "there goes Scout – see him over there – no he's there chasing that squirrel." The kids knew how express their love for Scout and share their experiences about him with total conviction. They believed Scout was still with them in that park. They knew how to celebrate Scout's life and make him real.

You see the empty tomb and the risen Christ are only part of Easter. Like that old saying, "if a tree falls in the woods and no one hears it, does it make a sound when it falls?" - if Christ is crucified and resurrected, and no one tells it, and no one changes because of it, and no one is transformed by it - does it matter? Easter is about life where death was expected - what else can God do to show us love? A beginning, where an end seemed certain - what else can God do to challenge us into action? Eternal joy where grief seemed to abound - what else can God do to show us grace?

Yes, on Easter, God inserted a different fact, a new fact. God took the worst we good do – all our pettiness, and hatred and fear and our death-dealing – and turned it into life. The Easter message is about love and forgiveness not vengeance. It turns out that the world is very different than we imagined. Those women came out to the tomb, imagining that they were writing another chapter in the long saga of the victory of death and hatred, one more episode of how the good always catch it in the end. That's the way the world ends, you know, not with a bang but a whimper of surrender and resignation at death's dark victory. But then an amazing thing called resurrection happened and as a poet wrote, "Jesus does cartwheels through the graveyard, splashing through the puddles of our tears and into our hearts."

This is the story of Easter. Easter is a day of hope, mystery and possibilities. To look at it another way George Bernard Shaw said, some men see things as they are and ask why, I dream of things that never were and ask why not? What are the things we don't ask why not about?

Ask yourselves what are the why not's that you can dream of. Why not a world where God is relevant again – not our version of God but the God of mystery, forgiveness, mercy and love? Why not a world where we show others through our actions that the risen Christ is here among us that makes the church relevant again? Why not a church that is not wedded to comforting the comfortable or its buildings and

seeks to find what mission Jesus calls us to be? Why not a world where children don't go to bed hungry? Why not a world where every man, woman and child are treated the same in the eyes of the law and in all of our relationships as a child of God. Why not a world where we are reconciled with God and with each other? Easter is a day of possibilities. It is a why not day which means we who follow Jesus, are the why not people of God.

The challenge then for us is now that we have heard the good news we need to extend our love beyond ourselves and "Go! We are called to go forth from this moment and this place to be Easter people in a world which too often hangs onto Good Friday. We who follow are called, not to embalm him in the tomb or preserve his memory, but to live as ones who know he lives. The power of the resurrection is not in what happens after death, but what the knowledge of the resurrection does for our lives before death.

So, this Easter may you open your whole self – heart, soul, mind and strength to God's inspiring call to new life and renewed love. May you feel God luring you, prompting you and encouraging you every day to live resurrection and be the why not people of God. Go and tell others He is Risen! Alleluia, Christ is Risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia. Amen.