

Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022

John 20:1-18

John begins his story with the words,

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark. . .”

This is how and where and when the discovery of risen Christ begins—  
in the darkness. . . whenever and wherever and however  
someone’s hopes are crucified or dreams put to death.

It might be an argument with an adult child or a longtime friend  
that ends in the decision by one party to cut off all contact with the other;  
it might be the loss of a job, a house, or a spouse;  
the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness;  
hearing those dreaded words “I have never loved you.”

Wherever the heartaches and losses and pain of life seem overwhelming  
and we experience the sorrow and emptiness of darkness. . .  
that is where we can and will find and see the risen Christ.

And that is the hard, but hopeful, mystery of Easter.

Now, I know such a message sounds foolish—  
to believe that Christ is nearest when he seems most absent,  
but, at the risk of trivializing your darkness and his presence,  
it is a little like realizing that we cannot see  
the brilliance of the stars until night falls.

In the same way, as long as it is sweetness and light. . .  
as long as all things are bright and beautiful. . .  
we have no need to look for and find Christ. . . nor the comfort he brings.

Instead, only when the darkness is deepest and most threatening  
do we discover that our confidence is not based on  
our holding on to Christ but on him holding on to us.

But, let us look again at the story in which we discover  
 that when the darkness gets to be too much for Mary  
 and she breaks down in tears by the door of the empty tomb,  
 it is then that she hears a familiar voice call her by name.  
 Stunned, first into disbelief and then into belief,  
 she cries out: “Rabbouni!” “My dear teacher.”

And overcome with indescribably joy, she reaches out to embrace him,  
 but to her dismay, and ours, too, I think,  
 the risen Christ says “Don’t touch me.”  
 Or, more literally, “Don’t hold on to me.” “Don’t cling to me.”

And that, in a nutshell, is the hard, but liberating, mystery of Easter—  
 that we cannot and will never be able to pin this Jesus down. . .  
 even if, as Frederick Buechner says,  
 “even if what we use are real nails and real wood.”  
 We cannot capture or hold him prisoner  
 even if what we use is a real tomb made of real stone.

In other words, this resurrected one will not be controlled or managed by us  
 but is instead “out there” on the loose somewhere—  
 somewhere ahead of us in the future. . .and, like it or not,  
 the only way out of the darkness is by leaving what is behind us  
 behind us. . .and moving on. . .moving ahead. . .

uncomfortably aware that the one who leads the way  
 is not the old teacher—that domesticated and tame Jesus  
 that we once knew. . .or thought we knew. . .  
 but that he is the risen Christ. . .the living Christ. . .  
 the “waiting-for-us-in-what-lies-ahead” Christ.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that what Mary calls Jesus. . .”Rabbouni”—  
 that that name was his Friday name. . .but this is Sunday. . .  
 and it is never going to be “last Friday” again.  
 Nothing is ever going to be “normal” anymore. . .  
 or, in the words of Thomas Wolfe’s famous novel, *“You Can’t Go Home Again.”*

And Wolfe is right. . .and Jesus is right. . .  
 and Mary, and we, eventually learn that they are right—  
 that we can never go back to the old. . .  
 because the old is dead and gone. . .the old is no more.

And if we ever need proof of that, all we have to do  
 is to look back at the past. . .at the past two years. . .  
 and see and remember what it “used to be” like. . .  
 and what we used to be like in days gone by.

The amputation we felt at the death of a loved one;  
 the painful dying. . .and ending. . .of a marriage;  
 the literal gut-wrenching anguish involved in kicking an addiction;  
 the fear that welled up inside us at having to be hospitalized  
 because of the thought of suicide or as a result of deep depression.

Experiencing any kind of significant loss  
 means that everything is forever different for us now.  
 Oh, we may look and sound the same as before,  
 but we are not the same. . .and never will be the same.

And it doesn't have to be the traumatic memory of a big-time loss either.  
 Instead, it can be a major shift in the direction of our lives will take:  
 Selling our house. . .for an apartment. . .or a care home;  
 leaving the coast for a new job elsewhere;  
 having a child or welcoming a grandchild;  
 thinking about being baptized; coming out of the closet;  
 going to church for the first time  
 or going back to church for the first time in a long time.  
 Nothing is every going to be “last Friday” for us again.

And the change doesn't have be quite so dramatic or existential either.  
 having your nose pierced or getting a tattoo;  
 seeing your hair thin and your waistline thicken;  
 forgetting, regularly, where you left your keys or your car;  
 In all kinds of ways, large or small,  
 we end up discovering that we can never go home again.

Now, certainly it is necessary and even healthy to recognize,  
 and to take responsibility for, what has happened in the past.  
 And, obviously, we have every right  
 to mourn what or whom we have lost.

But, ultimately, we have to say good-bye to it. . .  
 good-bye to yesterday. . .good-bye to what was. . .  
 to let it all go. . .to let it all die. . .so that. . .  
 so that. . .standing at the grave of what was,  
 we can discover the freedom and promise of what will be. . .  
 of what we will be. . .of what we will become.

And so, we need not be afraid of the unknown because,  
 although we don't know what the future holds,  
 we can trust the one who holds the future—  
 the one who is out there ahead of us,  
 leading and guiding us, enticing and romancing us,  
 pulling, and, sometimes, even yanking at us  
 into doing what he has in store for us to do  
 and into becoming what he has called. . .is calling us. . .to be.

And that brings us to the hard, and challenging, mystery of Easter.

Now, I'm not sure who said it but someone said it because I once read it:  
 "The living body of Jesus died and rose and became a people."  
 To rephrase and reframe it: We, you and I, together—  
 we are the living body of the living Jesus.

Barbara Brown Taylor gets at the same idea in a different way  
 when she writes: "Everytime the risen Christ appeared to his friends,  
 they became stronger, wiser, kinder and more daring.  
 Every time he **came** to them, they **became** more like him."

And, in my not-so-humble opinion, that is what happened  
 and is happening and will always happen to us  
 who are known as Living Faith Lutheran Church—  
 "the little church by the Bay". . .

to those of us who are more like Christ today than we were yesterday  
 and who will be more like him tomorrow than we are today. . .  
 because, and God help us, **we** are Christ's body now,  
 in this place, at this time.

We are the living body of the living Jesus  
 in our faithfulness, and in our faithlessness;  
 in our holiness, and in our sinfulness;  
 on our best days, and on our worst.

So, although 2000 years separate us from Mary,  
 like her, when we look around, we see him alive  
 whenever and wherever the church carries out  
 its pastoral and sacramental ministry;

when we gather around baptismal fonts or communion tables,  
 pray at nursing homes, hospitals or cemeteries;  
 when we care for the homeless, the drug-addicted or mentally ill  
 who sleep in tents out in the woods. . .or take refuge in doorways  
 or find shelter in the alcove of banks just in front of the ATMs.

He is alive and at work when we support relief agency projects  
 on behalf of the hungry and the dying  
 in the many seemingly God-forsaken places  
 across our nation or around the world.

He lives and breathes and acts whenever and wherever  
 we bear witness to him with our tongues and eyes,  
 our arms and legs, our bellies, our bones and our brains.

Now, I must confess that it is easy for me. . .and maybe for you, too. . .  
 to want to sentimentalize or spiritualize Easter  
 so that it is all about us being happy in life now  
 and being rewarded with a life of bliss in the age to come.  
 But, honestly, that isn't only, or even primarily, what Easter means,  
 nor is it what being the living body of the risen Jesus means.

Easter also means remembering that Jesus wasn't crucified by the Romans because some religious leaders accused him of being the Son of God. Instead, he was nailed to a cross because Rome considered him a threat to the empire— and that's how the empire punished rebels and revolutionaries. . . while getting added bonus of a public and brutal example to those who might consider a similar course of action.

And so, since we are the body of Christ this world, we shouldn't be surprised at what we are expected to do and be, nor surprised at how the powers of this world will respond.

As the living body of the living Jesus, we are called to stand with those whom Jesus once called and still calls his own:  
 "The little, the last, the least, and the lost" —  
 the poor and the hungry, those who don't have or make a living wage because of disabilities or a lost job;  
 indigenous peoples from sea to sea to sea who live in substandard housing, who don't have drinkable water, and whose history is shot through with the pain and suffering of lost and buried children, damaged parents and unrealized hopes for better futures;

the elderly who are unable to afford the cost of home-care aides or community-care nursing;  
 the refugees, migrants and immigrants who, according to press statements, will be welcomed with open arms but whose applications for resettlement go unprocessed or rejected leaving them forced to remain living in unspeakable conditions or with the unending threat of starvation or war.

When we, at the living body of the living Jesus, protest or face-off against the powers-that-be; when we stand up and speak up and act up against the empire, it shouldn't surprise us when the those in power respond to us just as they did to the one whose body and name and cross we bear.

But. . .and this is the ultimate end and hope of Easter—  
but just as the powers and principalities of Jesus' day  
could not bury him, eliminate him, or silence him,  
so they cannot and will not bury, eliminate or silence  
our voices either. . .because this Jesus is not dead,  
but he is alive. . .alive and at work in and among and through us.

So, as individuals, as churches, as communities of faith,  
we need not fear the darkness because that is where  
we will find and see and meet the risen and reigning Christ.

As individuals and a congregation of believers,  
we need not fear the future because the one  
who comes this morning in bread and wine  
comes to share with us his living presence  
and the hope, strength, peace and courage of his spirit.

Finally, as the living body of the living Christ in this world,  
we need not be afraid of what we are called to be and sent to do—  
because, and I believe this with all my heart—  
because the truth is. . .the real truth is. . .  
the real honest-to-God truth is  
that Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Amen.