

The UMC of Berea
Acts 10.34-43; Colossians 3.1-4; John 20.1-18
Easter Sunday

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! And our lives now are gathered around this resurrection—forever changed by it—not just today on Easter Sunday but every day that we choose again to living according to it: living not for ourselves but for love of neighbor, love of creation, love of this One who is risen, indeed. For this Risen One insists always on raising us, too, into a new way of being and behaving: a whole new life.

The story of the first Easter morning is a story filled with surprise, amazement, and disorientation. Perhaps that helps, actually, to make it at least a little more credible: that there is this sense of *unexpectedness*—that the disciples do not, for example, come to the empty tomb and say, “Well, there it is, just as we’d expected.” Instead, they arrive having never really trusted that Jesus could return from death, and now, they find themselves in a surprising, disturbing new world where anything is possible. They are jolted out of the rut their usual busyness—what has been typical, predictable, known—and hope and joy spring upon them, and there is no telling where all that will lead.

What a gift that our lives are claimed and shaped by this story: a story that begins before the first words in Genesis and reaches through our stories, beyond us into the fulfillment of God’s dream or beloved community—God’s new creation that is now and forever calling us forward to live in new, surprising, unexpected ways.

That is the thing about *hope*, which is so central to resurrection: it comes entirely by surprise. Notice—especially on this particular and peculiar Easter Sunday, in a time of pandemic, of social distancing—notice *when* “Christ is risen, indeed”: *while it was still dark*, we are told. “While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away....”

That is not just telling us the time of day: not in this Gospel. For John, darkness is the realm of chaos and despair, fear and violence and disease. When Judas leaves Thursday’s dinner, for example, to go and betray Jesus, the Gospel inserts this little statement, ensuring we know “it was night” (John 13.30). Darkness—nighttime—is the domain of hatred and betrayal, isolation and death and all that goes with it.

That is when God chooses to break in on us with surprising resurrection hope. Not waiting for the sun to rise—for everything to be set right or even “back to normal”—instead, sometime in the silence of the dark night—in moments of hardest anxiety, illness, despair—God goes and breaks open that sealed tomb, raising Jesus from the dead. Hope crashes in on us when we least expect it—when we’re at our most afraid—surprising us and the whole world “while it’s still dark.”

And yet, as we know, that surprising hope—resurrection—does not immediately change all our present circumstances. We are still at a distance from one another instead of celebrating Easter Sunday together in one room. We are still worried about loved ones—still lonely and feeling cutoff—still anxious about what’s coming next—still overwhelmed by pain and suffering and raw, freshly exposed inequities in our communities. Yes, Christ is risen, but there’s still too much death and disease, too many hard questions, too much injustice as, once again, our most disadvantaged neighbors bear the worst of things.

Perhaps that is one of the hardest truths about Easter hope. This day—this season, this eternal reality—does not take away the hard realities of threat, risk, or suffering. Resurrection is not that sort of “magic.” Yes, the sun rises on Easter morning, but darkness comes again.

Easter is not about pretending otherwise. It is not about closing ourselves off from difficult circumstances or pretending things really are not so bad. Neither is it some vague and fuzzy optimism that “somehow” things may work out all right in the end. No, Easter is our “sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead”—and the resurrection of this world—and the resurrection of ourselves in the direction of God’s dream.

Easter is an invitation to live with a sense of being where we should be, being sync with someone beyond ourselves, being rooted in the moment in a way that doesn’t blur our perception of reality but gives us what we need to be *in the presence of it*—even despair and grief, even uncertainty and disease—and still to live beyond ourselves toward something more loving.

All that is caught up in the example of Mary Magdalene in this morning’s story. Somehow, someway—only by grace—hope reaches out from the future into the present moment and catches hold of Mary before catching hold of the rest. “While it’s still dark,” she gets up and goes to the tomb: showing up when others do not—speaking up when others will not—standing up when others run away. The story tells us that when most all the rest of Jesus’ disciples abandon him, Mary stands beside Jesus, embodying God’s presence for him—with him—in his moment of deepest need. Against the odds—against all good sense—Mary is there on Friday, when Jesus hangs on the cross, and again “early in the morning on the first day of the week,” when she expects his body still to be locked away in the tomb.

Mary is called forward by hope—and receptive to that calling—and so, she does what love does: caring for her beloved friend, in and beyond his death, offering whatever she can—in this moment, the last rites of burial. Doing what love does, Mary shows us what it means to be Easter people: not waiting for some “eternal sunshine” when everything finally is set to right, but shining a light *in the darkness*, showing up for the sake of another.

That is what Easter asks of us. Jesus’ resurrection begins God’s new project—God’s eternal mission—not to snatch us away from earth to heaven when we die but to use us, in this life, to fill the earth with the life of heaven, just as we pray every Sunday in the words Jesus taught us to pray.

Resurrection calls us—as Mary Magdalene before us: calls us forward, toward God’s new creation, so that everything we do in this present moment—our worshiping and witnessing; our praying and teaching; our sewing face masks and donating food and, even social distancing; our advocating and serving and connecting through phone calls and loving our neighbors in countless different ways—everything we do in the present moment is our active participation toward God’s beloved community: a *sign of the first Easter* and a *foretaste of God’s new creation*.

Getting from here to there—resurrection the present world into the new one—depends, of course, on someone quite other than ourselves, beyond our efforts and willpower. But just as certainly, it does invite—calls upon—our participation. And so, perhaps part of the Easter message is, quite simply: *Be ready—ready to be surprised. Clear out at least some of the anxiety and worry and whatever else, and allow the possibility of a new world to find room in you.*

Because ultimately, resurrection is about discovering—waking up to the reality—that the world is more than we suspect, and we are more than we imagine. That is why Easter holds such

a pivotal place in our tradition: resurrection breaks open the shell of the old world we thought we knew and propels us forward, into the new world, in which inexhaustible love makes all the rules.

The “sure and certain hope” of that new creation—where “all will be well”—is offered to us even now, “while it’s still dark,” whether from pandemic or any other such thing. It’s offered to us and to the world not as a guarantee that “in the snap of a finger” we’re all going to be freed from loneliness or pain, disappointment or disease, but rather to affirm that whatever happens in this unpredictable world—sometimes wonderfully and sometimes horribly unpredictable—there *is* a new creation already on offer, calling us forward, and it can be our firm foundation now, so that we’re able—even now—to live honestly and courageously with all the challenges that come our way.

In the words of one of my favorite hymns:

Our lives flow on in endless song, above earth’s lamentation.

We hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing.

It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

What though my joys and comforts die? I know my Savior liveth.

What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth.

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging.

Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

“While it’s still dark,” God is up to something life-giving and new. For Christ is risen, indeed. Amen.