

Alive and Free

Pastor Cynthia Lapp
Easter, April 24, 2011

John 20:1-18

Christ is risen. Christ is risen Indeed. Alleluia.

What a glorious morning. The flowers, the fragrance, the brunch, the music. Easter worship touches us in heart, mind, body and spirit. We know that we are alive, that the body has awakened to another day. And all of us together illustrate clearly that the body of **Christ** is alive as well. Christ is risen.

Each year in this spring season, Jews and Christians make outlandish claims as we gather for holy days. At the Passover Seder, Jews gather to declare that freedom is stronger than bondage. Though Pharaoh was mighty, he could not overcome the power of the God of Moses. The people who were once slaves in Egypt are now free. According to the gospels, Jesus — an observant Jew — celebrates the truth and the power of freedom even as his people are under the Roman occupation. Jesus celebrates the freedom story with his followers and family, even though they are dominated by and at odds with the religious leaders.

For generation upon generation, Jews have eaten the Passover meal together to rejoice in their freedom from slavery. Though Israel remains enslaved to violence, though they witness slavery in human trafficking and the massive incarceration of African American men, though they may experience personal enslavement to alcohol, drugs, consumerism and petroleum, Jews still proclaim freedom. They remain resolute to the truth that God's freedom is more powerful than the slave master, freedom is coming; freedom is here.

Jesus follows this custom, celebrating the freedom that God gives — just hours before he is taken captive. We are told that Jesus not only celebrates freedom from slavery, he reinterprets the freedom meal so that it is no longer only about freedom from captivity. It becomes freedom from death itself — with his own death and life at the center.

And here we are this morning, 2000 years later, followers of this Jewish rabbi still celebrating that freedom is stronger than slavery, that life is more powerful than death. In the gospel of John, it is faithful Mary of Magdala that helps us see what Jesus has in mind when he talks about resurrection and life, when he says “I AM the way, I AM the truth, I AM Life.”

Mary is up early on that Sunday morning to resume her vigil with the body of her beloved teacher. She is alarmed to find that the tomb has been opened, that his body is no longer there. Perhaps it has been stolen by one of the zealous opposition. She runs to tell Peter and the One Whom Jesus Loved.

It takes but a word and the two disciples, still in competition to see who is closest to Jesus and who will sit next to him in glory, race to the tomb. The One Whom Jesus Loves gets there first, but does not actually enter the tomb. Peter, who must prove his devotion after denying Jesus three times, goes right into the tomb to look around. Not to be outdone, the other disciple enters as well. It is confirmed; Mary is right, Jesus' body is gone. There is nothing left but the linen wrappings, one of which is rolled nicely and set in its place. They see with their own eyes. There is nothing more to be done; they go back home.

But Mary lingers, weeping as she stoops to peer into the tomb once more. She practices seeing not only with her eyes but with her heart as Jesus taught in his ministry. Through her tears she sees people in the tomb, angels, that speak to her. She hears a sound. She turns to see who is behind her, to inquire where her Jesus might be. She hears her name and calls out to her teacher. It is in that Word that she sees Jesus alive.

And because we too have heard the Word, have been called by name, we declare that life is stronger than death, that freedom is stronger than bondage. Today we celebrate that we follow the one who says "I AM Life."

And yet I often find myself identifying with Peter and The One Whom Jesus Loved. The tomb is empty, let's go home. What could it mean that the body is gone? How can death be reversed?

It is now more than 20 Easters since I confessed to a pastor, as we were driving away from the very early Easter sunrise service at Hain's Point, that I just didn't believe in the resurrection. Now here I am, behind the pulpit on Easter morning, continuing to marvel at the audacity of the resurrection claim.

Who are we to gather in our finest and say that life is stronger than death, even as our own country is involved in two wars and dropping bombs by remote control drone in several other countries? Who are we to sing about resurrection as we bury young people who have died due to gun violence or eating disorders or suicide? We proclaim that death has lost its sting even as we watch the clean up after deadly earthquakes, tornadoes and hurricanes, as the glaciers melt and animals become extinct and non-native invasive plants take over the landscape.

We follow one who showed us a way to live and yet that way of life lead to his death. What resurrection?

But if we look again, can we really deny that resurrection is all around us? Glaciers are melting and yet each spring we see the flower, the butterfly, the fruit. We cannot deny war, but neither can we deny that a non-violent revolution toppled a long time unjust ruler, in Egypt, once again.

Youth *are* vulnerable to gun violence **and** they are speaking out loudly and successfully against the National Rifle Association and a movement to allow guns on college campuses in Texas.

Gay youth are at a higher risk of suicide **and** they are organizing at Goshen College to attempt to change the hiring policy so that LGBT people can be hired and teach without fear of losing their jobs.

Hurricanes are destructive **and** Cheryl and Majid Parcham, and many others, rebuild homes with Mennonite Disaster Service and keep returning to build years after the waters have receded.

Sisters and brothers, these are signs of resurrection if we see not only with our mind but with our heart and body and soul as well.

When Mary sees Jesus, she **recognizes** him with her heart. When she **hears** her name, Mary **hears** with her soul. And she remembers with her mind that the Word was in the beginning, in God's presence, that all things came into being through the Word, that the Word is life and light. Mary hears her name spoken and she sees that the Word cannot be killed.

And then Mary reaches out to touch Jesus. As she does she hears the instruction not to hold onto his body. Instead she is to tell his followers that he is going on ahead, that he will ascend to God.

This sounds familiar. We Christian disciples want to hold onto the body of Jesus. If we can just keep him here with us, where we can see him, perhaps he will be more predictable. Surely if he stays here with us, preferably in the King James Version, we can save him from the dangers of this world, even as he is saving us. And of course we want to make sure that he knows we are doing the right thing so that he can give us the adulation we deserve.

But the Risen Christ gives Mary this word — *Do not hold onto me. I am going to that same God that I call Father. I am ascending to God that I call Holy and you call Holy, my God and your God.*

This is not a word that can be understood exclusively with the mind. When we try too hard to comprehend only with the intellect we are bound. We become slaves to the mind and do not pay attention to the other ways of knowing, of understanding.

Most of us are highly trained thinkers. We understand with the mind, feel with the heart and move with the body. But what this story calls us to, in fact what Jesus calls us to, is to Love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength. (Mark 12:30) (and Luke adds love your neighbor as yourself. Luke 10:27)

We are invited to love — and to know — fully, not just with the mind or with emotions, not just spiritually or intellectually. In fact, Jesus says this is the greatest commandment; we are commanded to find ways to integrate these ways of knowing, in our love for God and each other.

Throughout Lent, in our quest to understand what it means to become human, we have been practicing. Through the beauty of worship arts, the practice of silence, music sung and listened to, hearing and seeing the Word enacted, laughing and praying together, we are opened to our humanness, to the life and freedom that God offers. The soul, mind, body and heart begin to connect and lead us, like Mary, to new ways of seeing and knowing.

Jesus says to Mary — *Do not hold onto me. Go tell the sisters and brothers, I am ascending to God that I call Father and you may also call Father, my God and your God.*

And Mary spreads the news, that Jesus is alive, in some strange new way. The Word cannot be contained, it will not die. It is becoming one with God and we are invited to call this same God our God, our Holy One.

I admit that the 20-something skeptic still takes up residence in this middle-aged body. But that is when I am living purely in my head, seeing only with the laws of physics and my mind. I am beginning to see that resurrection is a whole mind-body-heart –soul experience. Even as Jesus becomes one with God, we are to unite the parts of ourselves, so that we too can become one with God.

Let us strive to see as Mary saw, with mind, body, spirit and heart so that the Word is made flesh again, lives freely among us and never dies.

Alleluia.