

Experiencing Jesus: The Joy of New Life
John 20:1-18
March 23, 2008

The first Easter Sunday does not start out with a choir of angels singing “Alleluia” nor joyous disciples shouting, “Christ is risen!” It begins early in the morning while it is still dark. Mary of Magdala had a difficult time sleeping. Grief causes many sleepless nights. She is anxious for this day to arrive. Two days before her beloved friend, Jesus, had tragically died. When the Sabbath started at sundown that Friday, travel to the tomb was not permitted. The Sabbath is a day of rest from human labor, a day to trust the work of the world into the hands of God. It is a day to remember that we humans are finite, but that God is infinite and full of possibilities we cannot even imagine.

Not only is it dark outside; it is also dark within Mary’s soul. Her soul is full of many questions and much uncertainty. Her friend Jesus taught her so much about God. Through Jesus’ presence in her life, she experienced the love of God in a real and powerful way. Her life had been given new meaning. For the first time in her life, she felt accepted as a woman, even valued as a daughter of God. Her life had been radically transformed by Jesus. Yet others who were threatened by him were determined to get rid of him. And they did in a most cruel and humiliating death on a cross as a criminal. It is all so confusing to Mary. She wonders how God could let this happen to a man who embodied the very presence of God. Was he a false prophet after all, too weak to stand up for himself? What will happen to her and the newfound passion she has felt in her life? Will the fire of enthusiasm and faith fade to embers and die out? How can she go on when the source of her hope is gone?

Since she cannot sleep, when it is safe Mary arises and heads to the tomb where they have placed Jesus’ body. She feels the need to be near him in her grief. Perhaps being at his resting place will be comforting. When she arrives at the tomb, Mary becomes even more distressed. The stone securing the entrance has been removed. Mary assumes that grave robbers have stolen Jesus’ body, leaving the tomb empty. Nailing him to the cross was humiliation enough, but stealing his body is the ultimate indignity. Could they not let him rest in peace?

She runs to tell the disciples. Peter and the other unnamed disciple run to the tomb to survey the evidence for themselves: the empty tomb, the linen wrappings, the head covering neatly folded. The men return home.

Mary lingers at the tomb weeping. Its emptiness mirrors the emptiness of her heart. Yet one more loss added to the long list of losses already suffered. Can you feel Mary’s emptiness? We’ve known it in our lives as well. I have felt it several times when I have had to bid farewell to congregations I have served as pastor, to children and adults whom I have baptized, to youth confirmed in faith, to couples I’ve united in marriage, to families whose loved ones I buried. I am privileged to share some of the most intimate moments of people’s lives; a bond is created that is special to both parties. Yet sometimes God and the Bishop call and I have to break those ties, moving on with uncertainty about the next congregation, how I will be accepted, whether I will find kindred souls in the faith, how my family will be received. I’ve always found that the emptiness is filled with yet another loving congregation and people eager to grow in the faith. I share this example because it is a profound way in which I’ve experienced emptiness, but I risk raising anxiety on your part, or perhaps excitement. While there is no guarantee, let me remind you that this congregation has a history of retiring pastors and I’ve got a long way to go to retirement!

I feel the emptiness of my mother's absence since her death three years ago. I long to call and tell her that her only grandson is registering for high school, that little guy who at age 4 told her was going to be a "bear ringer" in a wedding and wear a black tuxedo with a tail on the vest! I wish she could meet my new dog because, although Mom was not a lover of animals at all, I think she would like Cinnamon. She leaves a void, and yet I also sense that she is aware of what's happening in my life, that she still rejoices with me and weeps with me, and I feel her presence with me. I remember what Mitch Albom wrote, "Death is the end of a lifetime, not the end of a relationship."

Mary's somber reflection is interrupted by someone she presumes to be the gardener. "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Mary asks the gardener if he has removed the body of her friend and where it might be.

The gardener responds by saying her name, "Mary." Mary recognizes Jesus' voice. This isn't the gardener; this is her beloved teacher and friend. As her name is spoken, that empty painful void is suddenly filled with the love and affirmation she had experienced from Jesus. Her value and worth as a human being has not been stripped away. Her life has not ended. What's really empty is the grave! The only thing that remains empty in the Easter story is the tomb.

Mary's temporarily empty heart is flooded with warmth, light, and love again. The truth of Easter is that our emptiness is, for God, creative potential. Every Sabbath we are to rest and remember that while we are finite, God is infinite and full of possibilities we cannot even imagine. In the fallow places of life where it seems that life has ended, Christ the gardener can plot out whole new gardens rich with succulent fruit and beautiful blossoms. In the emptiness of life, where it seems that death has devastated all, God sees the potential to work new life. One person whose life had been laid low by a tragedy concluded, "I thought my heart was broken, but it was really just broken open." God enters into the openness with creative power to bring new life to birth.

Mary might have missed this new life, for initially she does not recognize Jesus. She mistakes him for the gardener and looks right past the very gift that she is seeking. Perhaps she doesn't recognize Jesus because she is looking for the old, not the new. She is looking for what she has lost, instead of what she is being given.

It is important to know what resurrection means. It is not reincarnation, the return of the same self in a new form. That belongs to Hinduism. It does not mean immortality of the soul. That belongs to Greek philosophy.

Resurrection means creation *ex nihilo*, dying completely – and then breaking forth in new ways. The resurrected Christ is not physically the same as the crucified Jesus. Resurrection means life bursting forth out of nothingness—even the nothingness of grief. It means that life is new and different.¹

Mary initially doesn't recognize resurrection because she does not want it. What she wants are things the way they used to be – with Jesus as a constant companion offering direction for her journey. The last thing she wants is to know and relate to Jesus in a new "spiritual" way, for if her Jesus changes, then she will have to change, too.

We can resonate with Mary in this sense as well. We like to cling to things the way they are, the way things used to be. We want to go back to the way things were *before*: *before* we changed schools; *before* our children grew up and left home; *before* our husband died or our wife got sick; *before* that friendship ended; *before* our body parts started giving out and our energy dwindled; *before* tragedy struck and heartache turned us bitter; *before* the world changed; *before*

work got difficult and faith got confused and life turned sour. If we can't go back, we'd prefer to live in the pain of loss, with the familiar ache of the nostalgia, because if the ache is there, the past is there.

Sometimes we yearn not for the way things were—but the way things could have been—*if only*. *If only* that child had lived, *if only* we had followed our dream, *if only* we had accepted that job, *if only* life could have dealt us a better deck. But when we dwell on what has not been, we are unable to fully acknowledge who we really are, and what God has in store for us *now*.

Jesus responds to Mary saying, "Don't cling to me." Don't focus on the way things were or the way things might have been. "Don't hold on to me, but go and tell." Don't get stuck in the emptiness of what no longer is; move forward into the new life God is creating for you. Integrate the past into your life, but don't stay there. Participate in the wondrous unfolding of something fresh and different. Don't miss out on the beauty planted right before you. God indeed is doing something new and exciting in your life, if you let go of the past.

One young boy was not very happy about going to church on Easter Sunday morning. His new shoes were too tight, his tie pinched his neck and the weather was too beautiful to be cooped up inside. As he sulked in the back seat, his parents heard him mutter, "I don't know why we have to go to church on Easter anyway; they keep telling the same old story and it always comes out the same in the end."

He is right – the story always comes out the same in the end. But sometimes we get stuck in the middle and we don't move on to the end of the story. We allow the chaos of life to suck us into a pit from which we find it hard to remove ourselves. We tell the same old story year after year because we need to remember that while our power is finite, God's power is infinite. Out of the nothingness of loss, grief, and disappointment, new life can replace the old.

Claim the courage, my friends, to stop clinging to the past and to embrace the fresh possibilities of the future. In that new life, may you find true, deep, and abiding joy.

ⁱ Susan R. Andrews, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XIII, No. 4, March 2002, pp. 36-37.