Christ Showed Up for ***Us***

Easter 2023 ~ John 20:1-18

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

We lift our hearts to you, risen Christ. We lift our hearts with joy. Amen.

Happy Easter, dear Ones! I am so glad we are here together to celebrate the mystery, grace and joy of the risen Christ on this resurrection day.

A student once asked anthropologist Margaret Mead, “What is the earliest sign of civilization?” – expecting her to say a clay pot, a grinding stone, maybe a weapon. Mead answered, “A healed femur” – the large leg bone linking hip to knee. In the wild, a broken femur would mean certain abandonment and death. Unless – unless – others stop and care for the one who is wounded. The first sign of civilization, said she, is compassion, compassion seen in a healed femur.

If you were to do an anthropological dig of your own past, what would you find as the earliest signs – not of civilization, but of resurrection, of Easter. What do you know of the risen Christ in your life? I have a very early memory of excitement – sitting in the church balcony really close to the trumpet player, and I feel like I can feel the adrenalin of early Easter egg hunts. These are clay pots and grinding stones of my childhood. Going deeper, what memory can I find, what experience can I feel, within myself of resurrection? Of Christ’s love rising – within or around me? Early experiences of love, holy love – as mercy, community, hope, justice, peace.

I’d like to take these few minutes of Easter proclamation not to persuade nor to illustrate something new, to tell you something you do not already know. Rather, I’d like to invite you to join me in wonder: to wonder and lay hold of what it is you know – in your bones – of Easter, what you have experienced of the power of resurrection. How is Easter true for you, within you? Easter is only true when it is true for you. The authority of the risen Christ in our lives comes not from me or the church but from your lived experience. The Gospels make this clear.

In John’s telling, Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, found the stone rolled away. After the others have come and gone, she remains, weeping. When she turned and saw Jesus standing there, Mary did not know it was he until he spoke her name. On first sight, she supposed him to be the gardener. I wonder why that is. Mary knew Jesus more closely than most. Did she not recognize him? Or might it be that even if she imagined Jesus would rise from the dead as he had promised that he wouldn’t return *to her.* Easter stories are not about dead bodies striding forth from the tomb; nobody saw that. As Will Willimon observes, Easter stories are all about appearances. The risen Christ appearing. Appearing to the very people who betrayed and forsook him.

Jesus’ appears differently to different people. Mary recognizes him when he speaks her name, “Mary” – and her heart is opened. For Thomas, doubting Thomas, Jesus says, here, place your hand on my side; touch the wounds of my crucifixion. The unnamed disciples on the road to Emmaus do not recognize him until they sit down for a meal and break bread together. Others will recognize him as they return to their work, to casting their nets for fish once more. Some years later, he will come to Paul in blinding light. The disciple John is able to apprehend with inner mystical sight. Wisdom teacher Cynthia Bourgeault observes, “Jesus is corporeally present only to the degree people cannot yet see with the eye of the heart.” Jesus’ appearances match the needs of each disciple.

Jesus doesn’t just show up; Jesus shows up for us. The great Easter truth is not that he is risen – which is a great truth indeed. The great Easter truth is that the risen Christ came back *for us.* It is one thing to say God is love; it is another thing altogether when someone says, God is love for me.

Jesus keeps doing in his resurrection what he did in his earthly ministry: he keeps showing up – often for those who are hurting, at the end of their rope, those whom society has rejected or dismissed, those puffed up with pride, those unseen. And, given your presence, I dare say, Christ showed up to you. The astounding thing is not that we have chosen Christ; the astounding thing is that God has chosen us. And the God who raises Jesus from the dead refuses to be God without us, without you. God keeps coming to us.

Can you tell a story about Christ showing up for you? About faithful parents. Or some weird mysterious thing that happened to you on the road one day. Undeserved forgiveness. Or a hymn that reached out and grabbed your heart.

In the church calendar, Easter is fifty days. In the weeks ahead, we’ll be sharing stories of Christ appearing. Can we do that too – you and I? At lunch today, tell someone an Easter story, of a time you felt that Christ showed up for you.

I’ve been wondering the stories I’ll tell. Most recently, I’ve been practicing a kind of prayer where I notice within myself, first those feelings or parts that are troubled, agitated. Then, focusing on my breath, with my hand gently on my heart, to allow those troubled parts to feel seen; in the universal eternal light of Christ. Says the psalmist says, “I still my soul and make it quiet, like a child upon its mother’s breast; my soul is quieted within me.” In Christ.

I think of when I’ve been forgiven and loved despite it all, most especially from Sarah. In forgiveness is mercy is Christ. As God said to Jonah, rescued from the belly of the whale, “Don’t you know me Jonah; I am mercy within mercy within mercy. God the all-merciful.” I think of waking up feeling an unexpected surge of hope when I’d only felt spent.

Or of community coming together to seek justice. I was in a meeting a few weeks ago with clergy and lay leaders from the Washington Interfaith Network – WIN. Rabbis, an imam, pastors, priests from every quadrant of the city telling stories about their efforts – Black equity through home ownership, immigrant rights, climate justice. We were doing what adrienne maree brown describes as, “practicing the future together, practicing justice together, living into new stories. It is our right and responsibility to create a new world,” says she. The justice of Easter rises with courage, tenacity and a long view, possible only as we join in the struggles and triumphs of each other.

And of peace. I’ve experienced the resurrection in the company of those – including my father and step-father – who, at the end, were ready to go into that good night. Said one man some years ago, "I look back over my life, all the mistakes I've made, all the times I've gone my own way, strayed, and got lost. Time and again, God found a way to get to me, showed up; looked for me when I wasn't looking for God. I am not afraid now because I don't think God'll let something like my dying defeat his love for me." (Willimon)

Katherine Sergeant Angell White was an author, editor, and avid gardener. In old age, her husband, E.B. White (of *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte’s Web* fame) watched her plot and plan for a garden in a spring she would likely not experience, because of age and infirmity. He wrote in the autumn of that year, “Armed with a diagram and a clipboard, Katherine would get into a shabby old raincoat much too long for her, put on a little round wool hat… [and plot next year’s garden]. As the years went by and age overtook her, there was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion – the small, hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.”

Dear Ones, the time for resurrection is come. It is spring in a world torn by strife. The time for resurrection is now. Receive, claim, lay hold, and proclaim the risen Christ in your life. Christ is come for you. Set forth this day: be Christ in the world. Alleluia! Alleluia!