

Unwrapped
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
April 4, 2021
EASTER SUNDAY

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

²Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

¹⁴The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

¹⁵There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

¹⁶the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly."

¹⁷I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

¹⁸The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.

¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

²³This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Gospel Reading: John 20:1-18

²⁰Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to

them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Meditation: *Unwrapped*

This is a season when Christians find themselves in the popular press, in a generally positive way. Despite the pandemic, the Post-Standard even managed to do a series on Friday fish fries. Many articles are full of spring-time trivial pursuit—the origins of secular and church traditions and their symbolism.

There are also extensive articles about practice and belief. They all point out gaps and contradictions in gospel accounts of that first Easter morning. The gospel writers don't tell identical stories—who was there first, who said what, who did what, etc. Not only that, but the gospels omit things and have gaps in what we might refer to as reasoned logic. I have no argument with any of that. My concern is the subtext the public may take away—that until scholars pointed it out, we didn't notice. Faithful Christians, not just skeptics and scholars, ask those same questions at least as often as every Easter and they have been asking them since the first disciples showed up in the tomb on the first Easter morning.

The challenge for faithful Christians is not to discount those irregularities and gaps. An Easter faith does not mean we aren't allowed to put our best resources to use in our study of Scripture. An Easter faith does ask us to put the records of those events in perspective with our faith experience. Presbyterian preacher and teacher Thomas Long said this about Easter preaching: "It does not begin, then, with people's general inquisitiveness about what really happened that Sunday morning long ago, trying to coax that curiosity gradually into a reasonable recitation of the Apostles' Creed... It begins with the vision that the Risen Christ is present and at work in the world and that people everywhere experience the power of this living Christ and feel Christ's claim upon their lives."

Easter preaching begins in this place, because this is where an Easter faith begins. We're not here this morning expecting the gaps to be filled and all the questions cleared away (and if any of us are, well... sorry). Our faith does not spring from logic, the resolution of doubts and questions, not even the Bible and its stories. It is indeed strengthened and informed by those things, as well as teaching and education, but faith is a gift of God, nurtured by experience.

Our faith is born in encounters with the living Christ, in the here and now of our lives. Easter is a celebration of what we already know, have experienced, and believe. If we want to make faithful sense of that first Easter, we begin with the resurrection stories of our own lives.

Because of my calling, I have the privilege of hearing resurrection stories that happen in our day and time. See if you recognize any of them:

We've refused to go to family dinners ever since our spouse died last year. Our grief is too big and their chair is too empty. It would be too painful and we wouldn't be good company. Finally, at the impatient insistence of others, we go. It's awkward at first—the laughter too loud and the sudden silences, far louder. Everyone's eyes filling with tears at her stuffing recipe on a table without her or when we look up to see someone besides him carving the meat. Gradually, smiles and stories come more easily; the silences are more comfortable. Our granddaughter wraps chubby arms around our neck, and plants a sticky kiss on our cheek. We look around, and amid the smiles and tears, the memories of things old, and the hopes of things yet to come, we are startled to notice grave wrappings lying in an empty tomb. Not our spouse's, but our own. For with relentless tenderness, in a process both painful and comforting, the people who love us have unwrapped us—helping us shed the binding scarves of grief, despair and sometimes self-pity, so that we might walk out of the tomb into a new life. They have unwrapped us for life. A resurrection story.

Or it happens when we are teaching. In one role or another, we are all teachers, of our own children, or someone else's. There's one child, who captures our attention—not because of their great gift. In the crowd of secure, energetic children, this one stands out for their very stillness, their almost painful shyness. They never volunteer but, when invited, respond with such stuttering inarticulateness, that we're not sure what they have said. They put out more effort for less result than any of the others. We celebrate the successes of the others; this is the child we carry home with us at night and look for in the morning. What's born in us is not frustration but patience as we join this child's struggle. One day, we see a light in that child's eyes—a light that is lit by our relationship with them—a light, that with the grace of God, will never go out even when they have moved away from home or into someone else's classroom—a light that's lit when they understand that they have value and are loved, regardless of what they can or cannot do. As we watch, they walk out of the tomb into new life, trailing the grave bindings of their isolation and self-doubt. Grave wrappings that we have peeled away with relentless tenderness, while they trembled with fear. Unwrapped for life. A resurrection story.

Or perhaps we hear the diagnosis of cancer or heart disease, Alzheimer's or infertility—the words ringing like nails hammered into wood. For days, weeks, months and sometimes years, we can think only of all that we once hoped for that will never be. We bind ourselves in the list of things we can no longer and may never do. We entomb ourselves with our limitations and organize our days to avoid reminders of our disability. Then, one day, there is a tug at our bandages. Something or someone is unwrapping us with relentless tenderness—the unwrapping that, even if tender, is painful. Sometimes it's a physician, who knows of options we're ignoring; or someone who isn't willing to stay in the tomb with us anymore; and sometimes the tugging is our own frustration and love for life. Gradually we discover ourselves limping out of the tomb of our loss. We are hampered by grave bindings, but now we organize our days around what we can do. We define ourselves by our ability to love and be loved, not the name of our disease. We walk out of death into new life. We have been unwrapped for life. A resurrection story.

But three of dozens and dozens of resurrection stories—stories that are never clean and neat. Despite attempts of the finest minds to reduce them to formulas of medicine or psychology, natural phenomenon or even the seductive purposes of manipulative storytellers, resurrection experiences are born of a power, presence and purpose that resists such reduction to human proportions. They happen in our lives, trailing the grave clothes that never quite go away. They mix pain and healing, fear and joy, tears and celebration, death and life. And like those witness to the first resurrection, at least at first, we're not sure what we feel, think or expect. It is with time, and reflection, in the presence of others who have resurrection stories of their own to tell, that a deep joy grows with in us. Joy bestowed by the God who calls us and leads into new life.

We are extraordinarily fortunate that our lives have been steeped in such stories. As a congregation, as part of the great company of the faithful, as citizens of the nation and world, we are in the opening pages of yet another resurrection story. We are gradually leaving the homes that on some days have felt like graves of the life we once knew; we anticipate travel, receive vaccines, dream of the days when we don't need to wear masks and when we will gather together in joy and in grief without fear. We look forward to leaving the pandemic tomb and have hope that that day is coming soon. There will be starts and stops, hesitation and backtracking. What happens will have gaps in logic and leaps of hope and success. It's likely that as in all the other resurrection stories we know, as much as we might be ready to tear loose the grave wrappings of the pandemic in a rush into new life, the unwrapping will be gradual. We will emerge cautious and tender into the world. We are being prepared for a new life that we cannot yet fully imagine. Like all those other resurrection stories, we will trail the grave clothes of our isolation and disappointment, the scars of our losses and fears. Even the resurrected Jesus bore the scars of the cross.

It can also be hoped that the new life before us is full of the knowledge and wisdom we have

gained in these days—of our interdependence with all people everywhere in the world and indeed with the whole creation; that we have responsibility not only for ourselves but for others; that community justice and safety remains a pressing need; and that we have the capacity to respond to change effectively and won't need to be forced into it in the days beyond these. We are in the opening days of a new resurrection story and have the great gift and grace of knowing it. With that knowledge, with the guidance of God and the company of Christ and one another, our eyes and spirits can be open and attuned to the wondrous life-giving work of God as it happens before our very eyes.

All year long, let us tell and celebrate the stories of resurrection so that, like Mary standing outside an empty tomb, we too can say "We have seen the Lord." Alleluia. Amen.