

**SERMON – “TRANSFORMING THE STONE” – EASTER SUNDAY
JOHN 20: 1-18, ACTS 10: 34-43**

Did you listen carefully to our Gospel account of that first Easter morning. According to John, it was a dismal day on which Mary entered the garden. Not the bright, shining, no-grief day we usually think of as Easter day. Just think about it! We have the luxury of hindsight as we celebrate – we have the whole story and then some – not only of the days following Easter but of the centuries of those who have witnessed the risen Christ in their own lives. Many of us have our own vivid experiences of a living Lord who is very present in our lives.

Even Matthew and Luke told the story with earthquakes and brilliant flashes of lights, and the immediate presence of angels – it was as if they anxiously jumped to the joy of the moment.

But for John, the important details of the story included the process of the revelation. Mary was disillusioned and profoundly sad: her world has crumbled. What she valued most – her relationship to Jesus- has been destroyed by death. It is important for us to know that John is writing to a disillusioned community – their world has been crumbling as well. They increasingly felt abandoned, forsakened, and orphaned by God. John was addressing those feelings: there could be no quick Easter triumph. They were feeling what Mary would have understood – that realizing the power of the resurrection was no easy task in a world that constantly belied its message.

Why were they disillusioned? First of all, persecution was on the increase. At first, Christians were allowed to continue in the synagogues, keep the Torah, and still believe that Jesus was God’s messiah who had come to deliver Israel. But then, there began to be arguments about baptism and circumcision, and about the status of those Christians who were gentiles and Samaritans – could they be permitted in the synagogues as well? After the temple was destroyed in 70 C.E., the Pharisees began to include prayers against Christians and other heretics. Cast out from the faith and life they had always valued, they felt abandoned.

Secondly, as time passed, those who had experienced Jesus first hand were dying without the expected physical return of the Lord. Now they not only felt separated from their community but also from God. Jesus had promised his return and it just wasn’t happening. On top of that, there were the martyrs – like Steven and Paul, Peter, and James. Where was the victory?

John is not writing an idle tale and he is not simply recording the events of the past; he has embarked on fighting for the very life of the church. If his people do not continue to believe, the faith will die like Jesus. He is focusing on the blossoming belief of Christ’s disciples in order to convince his readers and us that the feelings of abandonment and forsakenness are overcome by that belief.

John is yearning to convince us that Belief Bridges the Breach between what we are bombarded with in the daily headlines and often in our personal lives and the promise and reality of God’s activities in our lives.

Easter does not prevent tragedy, but, with time, it will transform the experience if we will allow it.

Easter does not erase the grief of lives lost –our individual loved ones, or the nearly 4000 Americans and hundred thousand Iraqis lost in the most recent war, or the scandal of the death of thousands of children daily because of preventable diseases.

Easter does not deny the pain of cancer, or the tragedy of an accident but it does remind us of the power of promise of life that goes well beyond our brief time on this earth.

For John's followers, Easter didn't prevent the persecution and execution of believers. It did not prevent the exclusion from the synagogues because of who they are and what they believed. So what was the all important message that John was offering to his immediate community? Why bother? For John, he bothered, because he knew that the cross of death was not the last word, but the cross of transformation, of glory, of resurrection had deeply moved the early disciples and could move his generation – nearly 60 years after the death of Jesus to transform what felt like the last word of death into the new word of Life!

It is a message that we can overhear if we eavesdrop on the Gospel from our modern world.

We meet Mary this morning heading to the tomb while it was still dark. The darkness of the hour wasn't just surrounding her, it was the very description of her soul. Deep changes so often happen while it is still dark. By going to the tomb she was taking the first step out of hopelessness. Her pain was out in the open. With simplicity and love, she assumes her pain and goes to visit the memory of Jesus. Mary was in need of a change of heart. All of her sensibilities were wrapped in a shroud of grief. Starting from that pain, she begins to perceive that things have changed. She arrives and finds the grave open, but this is not a hopeful sign: she finds an old explanation for this new reality. Her first instinct is that something even worse than Jesus' death has happened: his body has been stolen, perhaps desecrated. What other explanation can there be? If he is dead, other people must have taken his body away. An inert body is at the mercy of anybody. How frequently we have a dead Jesus that can be manipulated by others – made into the image that feels right and easy for the moment. Now Mary sounds the alarm. She decides to share the pain: in outrage and terror she runs to the other disciples.

There is a lot of running going around. Peter and the one John calls the "beloved disciple" who remains unnamed run to the tomb. They dare to enter and find the linens that had bound him. Here we have the next discovery of the new reality: Jesus had been unbound from death just like Lazarus had been. The tomb cannot hold Him who makes New History. He has untied himself. In contrast to Mary, we are told that the beloved disciple (a favorite of John's) saw and believed.

It is very important for us to know that when John talks about believing, it isn't just an intellectual acceptance – that is to take something as true. No. Every time he uses that word, and describes those who believe, it involves being open to change and commitment. To believe, for John, means to be standing on tiptoe, craning our necks, to see what's next.

Well, Peter and that other disciple leave again, perhaps trying to coax Mary to leave with them. But she is not ready – neither to leave or to believe.

I imagine that she can not possibly understand how the disciples could just return to their homes. She remained, and she continued to weep. However, through her tears, she dares now to look into the tomb, and the messenger of life is there. We are told that there are two angels in white, and she doesn't even appear to be stunned. Is she so wrapped up in her own pain that she cannot see further? She takes what her own pain has produced as the final answer. She is wrapped up in deaths and endings, wallowing in a closed circle of despair.

Mary of Magdala is all of us when facing the pain of death, or the closed horizons of everyday tragedies or the horror of the extraordinary. We often shut ourselves off from the answer that would relieve us. The followers of John were tempted to listen to the Jewish and Roman

authorities who were denying the reality of the living Christ: who were mocking their already shaken faith as pipedream, and worse than that – heresy. The Reality is that the commitment of faith will make it possible to discover that even the thickest clouds can be driven away. John really hopes that he can move us away from skepticism – out of dead ends- to recover the joy of the message.

So his account continues. Mary is now alone in the garden. Her next encounter is with Christ himself. And she still cannot believe. She thinks it's the gardener and she is still harping on the same question: what have you done with the body – the dead Jesus? Her readiness to keep Jesus dead and buried prevents her from knowing the living Christ. We are challenged to examine our own images:

Is there room for the living Christ in our world and in our lives?
Are we letting our faith find relevance in our everyday lives.
Does your faith sustain you when things are rough?

It can and will if we are willing to let the living Christ in. There are many ways to experience resurrection.

We experience resurrection when we receive new life out of the dead end circles of skepticism, or restlessness, or despair, or pain, or low self-esteem, or narrow mindedness. That resurrection comes when we reconnect with God: when our spirits feel alive.

We experience resurrection when the sense of emptiness, or lack of direction, or focus, or purpose become intolerable to us; and in the midst of that negativity we suddenly become aware of a sense of meaning arising out of our souls. We meet the Living Christ in the struggle and we hear him calling our name.

We experience resurrection when we move from being convinced we are no good or less than adequate or out of the norm to being affirmed in the beauty of who we are – when unconditional grace brushes up against us! We meet the living Christ in those who name us and love us and remind us of our sacred worth. We hear Christ calling our name and linking it with those words “Beloved Child of God”.

We experience resurrection when we become comfortable enough with our doubts and questions to enter into a prayerful exploration with others to come to the answers that give us strength and life to our relationship with the risen Christ. We meet the living Christ in our conversations and our deepest delving into the perplexities.

We experience resurrection when we are empowered to overcome our self – absorption that often comes from dwelling on our own problems, and instead take on a larger cause and enter into a larger community for the common good. We will find the living Christ in the face of others who are in need.

We experience resurrection when we refuse to be defeated in the quest for good to overcome evil. It is those moments when we remember the great victories: the early church did survive despite the powers of Rome trying to snuff it out; the Berlin Wall crumbled and new freedoms of expression and life abounded; the mechanisms of apartheid were dismantled and a new nation grapples with the difficulty and pain of birth in South Africa. We remember wars that ended and what seemed at the time an impossible rebuilding of society has evolved. We meet Christ when we can sing “Goodness is stronger than evil, Life is stronger than death! Victory is ours, Victory

is ours! We meet the living Christ when we continue to insist on justice for the people of the World.

We experience resurrection when we are aware of the power of prayer and meditation and our spirits sense a new unity with God: when God feels close. In the quiet, we meet the Living Christ who whispers our name and opens our hearts.

Mary needed two more jolts out of her preoccupation with death: she had to turn and hear Jesus call her by name, and not want to remain clinging on to the memory of Jesus whom she had known but was now dead. She had to let go, not expecting him to return to them as he had been but transformed as he returned not to them but to God. All would not be the same. It would be wonderfully different, but little did she know as the tears were not quite dry. Her first instinct and ours is to want everything to return to the way it was. But when the spirit is at work, nothing remains the same. She had to go, and let him go, so that she could go out with a new message: "I have seen the Lord" – she was to be the apostle to the apostles. The joy of the encounter is joined by the sending. The Lord does not call us together only to make himself present among us; he gathers us so that we will make him present to others; not to keep him where we are, but rather to go where he would have us go.

The world is different from the vantage point of a faith in the resurrection. When we can believe in the power of the resurrection, anything can happen. When we believe in the resurrected Christ we are not orphaned or abandoned.

Easter can be one of two things for persons like you and me. It can be a nice ritual of spring that brings a momentary breath of freshness to an otherwise dull year, a happy face painted on a pained life, or a short season of smiles succeeded by more sadness. Or it can be a magnificent and lasting comfort that colors and transforms everything experienced into the rising of Christ once again.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed – today and forevermore! Amen.