

Gates Presbyterian Church

*Hope Speaks*

Easter Sunday 2021

We have spent this past week imagining ourselves into the stories of Jesus' last days. We have watched him parade into Jerusalem on the donkey accompanied by shouts of Hosannah. We have stood by the table to witness him eating his last meal and washing the feet of his disciples. We have fallen asleep with his companions in the garden of Gethsemane, and we have listened with compassion as Jesus has asked his God for another way forward.

With Peter we have denied we know Jesus. With Pilate we have wished for an easy way out. With the crowd we have cried out for his crucifixion and with his mother Mary we have wept as he suffered and died on the cross.

This morning, we stand outside the empty tomb and witness the coming of the women, Jesus' faithful companions who have journeyed with him throughout his ministry. We hear them worrying as they approach the tomb, who will roll away the stone? The men in their group are conspicuously absent.

The women alone among the disciples have risked their safety to come and tend to their teacher. They alone have dared to go out into the crowds to purchase spices and offer Jesus the last act of love they can manage, by returning to anoint his body as is their custom.

Now they arrive and find, to their amazement, that the stone has been rolled away. When they venture in, they see a young man, robed in white, sitting on the right – occupying the place of power. His presence startles the women and he immediately offers them reassurance.

“Don't be so surprised. Aren't you looking for Jesus, the Nazarene who was crucified? He isn't here! He has come back to life!” Then he directs the women to go to Peter and the others telling them that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee and they will see him there.

I can only imagine how this felt to the women that day. What a week they have suffered through from the highs of the entrance into Jerusalem to the lows of Jesus' torture and death. Now, at a moment when their emotional and spiritual reserves have to be completely gone, they are denied their last opportunity to care for Jesus and instead must take in this news that he is gone. In fact, they are being asked to believe the unbelievable – he has come back to life.

As we stand here with them, how do we feel about this news? Can we take it in or does it seem too amazing, too good to be true after all that has happened? Certainly, Jesus has mentioned several times that he will rise from the dead and live again. At the last supper he even tells the disciples they will see him in Galilee.

And yet, when the moment comes, we find the women “trembling and bewildered, too frightened to talk.” They flee into the rising dawn and the original version of Mark’s gospel ends.

This abrupt and unsatisfying conclusion resonates with me in our particular moment, containing as it does, uncertainty and fear, a vast unknown future that is anything but sure, and the very human responses of three grieving women who just cannot take in another incredible moment after the week they have already endured.

As we stand here today, in the middle of yet another surge of this virus, lamenting the loss of more than 500,000 people. As we stand here today in a moment of deep distress over the unnecessary deaths of our black brothers and sisters, crying out for a justice that feels to many like it will never come. As we stand here today, clinging to a glimmer of hope in the form of the vaccine that could provide new life and freedom for us all, we can relate to the uncertainty and fatigue and fear these women probably felt.

We can relate to the reluctance to believe that new life might be rising up to usher in a new time when all can flourish and thrive. We can relate to the small sliver of hope that must have been within them to make them come out on that first Easter Sunday to see where Jesus lay.

This Easter, the story of hope in the midst of loss and pain and suffering, and the promise of new life in the face of death, is something we can all relate to and appreciate. As we stand at the crossroads of pandemic isolation and a slowly gathering dawn of new possibility, maybe you have felt some of the same tensions that I have.

Standing as a community in this in-between space, I feel the tug to return to all we long for, gathering together in community, sharing hugs and in-person prayer, taking communion and celebrating with a meal. I feel a rising hope as people get their vaccinations. I feel an increasing impatience as, still, we wait. I hear your requests for an open sanctuary and feel the temptation to say, “yes!” let’s just do it!

At the same time, I hear your fears that starting back too soon will jeopardize our hard won gains. I hear your anxiety that too many remain unvaccinated and some won't feel comfortable ever getting the shot. I am watching our case numbers rise and wondering about the new strains of the virus. What if they take hold and our choices contribute to someone we love getting seriously ill?

Truly this feels like an already/not yet space.

Do we dare to cling to this hope of new life? When will it feel right to walk through this door of opportunity to enter a richer existence that includes fully embodied relationships and loving embraces and personal connection?

I don't know about you, but I feel safe in my cocoon – I don't like it. And I want it to end. – But with so much sudden change and so many losses, it can be hard to feel optimistic. It can be hard to trust that things might finally be better than they look. It can be hard to have faith that stepping out of our shrunken comfort zones makes sense and constitutes an embrace of new life and not a risky dance with death.

How much harder must it have been for these women at the tomb to believe that this new life, proclaimed by an anonymous young man, really holds all that he promises? Standing in their own already/not yet space where the resurrection has taken place but they do not yet understand it, who can blame them for feeling bewildered and frightened? Who can blame them for not being ready to trust?

Even showing up on this morning carries great risks for these women. They apparently come without male chaperones – already a huge breach of the social contract under which they live.

They are approaching the grave of someone who dared to confront both the Temple leaders and the Roman oppressors, possibly risking their lives by openly confirming that they belong with him – something even Peter was not brave enough to do at this time.

They make the effort even though they realize that without help to roll away the stone they will fail to care for Jesus before they have even begun. And yet they come anyway. Standing there in fear and trembling they nevertheless are present. Fleeing as they do, they nevertheless become the first witnesses to the truth of Jesus' empty tomb.

We know, because we are standing here today, that although the women in our story this morning flee this place in fear and trembling, they must not have remained in that emotional space. Just as they gathered up their courage to buy special spices and return to care for Jesus' body, they must have gathered up their courage and told the good news too. They must have come to believe that this young man was telling them the truth. They must have remembered and trusted in Jesus' predictions that he would die and rise again.

The beautiful thing about the story back then, and indeed about our own stories today, is that responding to the empty tomb with fear and trembling does not have to be the last word on this subject. Embracing the full truth reminds us that our God loves us so much that God's self, in the person of Jesus, came to dwell among us, voluntarily receiving the hatred and violence of the world on his own body in the form of torture and death, all so that we can have life and have it abundantly.

Embracing this truth invites us into a world where we matter deeply to God; where our stories always include the offer of an alternate ending of hope and deeper relationship with God, where our faith can always grow and strengthen despite our fears and bewilderment.

I love the deep humanity of these three women. Their faith brings them out of their hiding places and down a garden path to meet suffering and death head on. They must have felt some tiny spark of hope to believe that making this journey was worthwhile. The men in their circle stayed home, locked away, we read in other parts of scripture, for fear of the Jews. But the women come anyway. Why?

Something pushed them onward toward the belief that coming to the tomb would mean something to them. Coming would provide a small piece of healing and comfort. Now, I don't think the scriptures give us any evidence that they suspected they would find Jesus gone and hear that he had risen. But somewhere inside, I believe the Holy Spirit was already at work pulling these women out of their isolation to meet the grief of the world and in that grief to find also resurrected life.

This is the mystery of our faith. Just as we name it during our communion liturgy: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. We don't have to understand what happened here. We don't have to figure out the scientific explanation for resurrection. We don't have to say we never doubt.

We just have to be willing to step outside our comfort zones and start down the path toward what we do know of Jesus. We have to love him enough to want to care for him – understanding that caring for Jesus in our world today, means caring for all God’s people, the new body of Christ in the world. We have to hold just a tiny spark of hope – enough to encourage our action, to inspire us to start out, to dare us to believe that God desires more for this world and, together, we can be part of making that better life a reality.

Finding the empty tomb and hearing the words that Jesus is alive invites us into hope. Hope like the hope Debbie told us about this morning. A hope that has always been hidden under our hats. Hope that we cannot see sometimes for all the suffering that surrounds us. Hope that we might even cease to believe in when things get really hard. Hope that seems impossible and foolish but nevertheless persistently appears if we only look hard enough to find it.

The community in our children’s story this morning was transformed by its search for hope. It is not that their circumstances changed so much, but their response to those circumstances did. They began to believe that more was possible. That hope was available to them. That broken doors and leaking roofs were not the end of their story. It isn’t that they no longer suffered. It is that they no longer experienced that suffering in the same way.

What if Easter is about changing how we experience our lives. Rooted as it is in deep and unbearable suffering, our faith does not promise that nothing bad will ever happen. It does not promise that life will not sometimes break us. It does not promise that we will never feel pain and betrayal and hurt.

What Easter promises is that God remains with us through all that we experience. Jesus stands with us in the most broken places of our lives. Jesus lies with us in the losses and the deaths we encounter as we move through life. Jesus remains present when we weep and tremble and flee. And also when we dare to pick ourselves up and step outside to honor the small glimmer of hope that we cling to.

Just as the women cling to their love of Jesus, their human companion and teacher, and that love is enough to make them step out into a new dawn, we too must look for the sparks of the spirit within our own communities that invite us to move toward something that gives us all renewed life – maybe it is as simple as a sign held high at a rally for black lives. Maybe it is as straight forward as an ingathering of food for neighbors who are hungry.

Maybe it is as easy as a phone call to a government leader to advocate for change that brings equity. Maybe it is as personal as welcoming the refugee who arrives in our neighborhood.

To live into the Easter moments in our lives is to seek the moments of new creation that lie hidden within even the deepest pains we endure.

Hope, as Jim Wallis points out in a commentary on this passage this week, is a door we walk through that allows an anticipated future we believe through faith to be possible to become a historic reality. To walk through such a door requires courage and a willingness to do what others will find foolish nonsense. To walk through such a door offers those that follow the gift of an example they can copy and the demonstration of an outcome they can witness.

The Christian hope, as Paul points out so often, is a hope that is foolishness to the world. It takes into account all the wrong things. It relies on all the wrong facts. It boasts all the wrong outcomes and values. But Christian hope, foolish Christian hope, also defies all expectations by breathing life into death, offering resurrection when all we can see is loss, offering hope when all we can see is despair.

It may indeed be foolish to hope in God's presence when it seems so obvious that God is nowhere around in the first place. But it is only in diving deep into these places we claim are empty of the divine that we get to meet the resilient strength of the suffering Jesus to lift us back to renewed life.

It is in the deep pain of the empty tomb that we find the open space of the resurrected Jesus. He is not here, he has gone before us to meet us in Galilee – the place where all of this began. The place where the first disciples met and decided to follow Jesus. The place where he performed miracles and pronounced healings, where he called out religious leaders for abandoning the people and he challenged the poor to feed one another.

And God invites us to return with Jesus too, to the start of our journey as followers of the Way. Only this time, unlike the first disciples, we will know how this story ends. As Easter people, we will know that while pain and suffering are part of the deal, Jesus does not leave us there. We will know that while our faith will be challenged, our God will remain faithful. We will know that even in those times when our strength may not be up to the task, our despair may deepen, and loss and suffering may feel like constant

companions, Jesus will have arrived here before us and can show us the way through.

Finally, we will know that none these challenges constitutes the end of the story. None of this pain speaks the last word. We will know that we will arrive quite regularly at the empty tomb. We will walk quite often with the risen Lord. We will eat and speak and teach with the Spirit that Jesus sends. We will learn to believe with increasing hope and conviction that Christ has risen. He has risen indeed. And that will make all the difference.