

Reflection – Easter, April 4, 2021 - John 20:1-18

In our society, there are two great religious holidays each year—Christmas and Easter. For most people, it is Christmas – with all its commercial hype, gift-buying, and festivity – that is the bigger and greater season of the year. And Easter? For many, it’s just another long weekend, a break in the dreary stretch between Christmas and summer vacation ... a kind of second-rate holiday.

But in truth, we’ve gotten our thinking badly mixed up. Because if it weren’t for Easter, there would be no Christmas. If, after the death of Jesus, it weren’t for the disciples’ experience of the resurrection, then the significance of Jesus’ life and teachings probably would have been lost forever. **If Easter had not happened, Christmas would have no meaning.** Easter is the highpoint of the Christian calendar!

I remember reading the story of a grandfather who wanted to know how much his five-year-old granddaughter knew about the Easter story. When he saw little Julie playing in the backyard with her friends, he asked, “Who knows why we celebrate Easter every year?”

One of Julie’s friends chirped up first: “Oh, that’s when you go to the mall and sit on the big bunny rabbit’s lap

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and tell him what you want in your Easter basket.”

Her second friend answered: “No! It’s when you get a tree and hang eggs on it—and you wake up on Sunday and there are presents underneath it.”

At that point Grandpa interrupted and asked, “Julie, do you know why we celebrate Easter?” His young granddaughter nodded her head, and began: “It’s when Jesus was crucified. He died, and his body was put in the grave. They rolled a big stone in front of the opening. And the guards went to sleep. On the third day, there was a big earthquake and the stone rolled away.”

Hearing all that, Grandpa was encouraged that Julie knew so much of the Easter story. But then she went on, “When the earthquake happened, the whole town came and stood by the grave. And if Jesus came out and saw his shadow, they knew there would be six more weeks of winter!”

We chuckle, but in reality there are many of us who become confused by the Easter story and by what it means to have a resurrected Jesus. Over the years, there have been those who asked, “Did it really happen?” Or is Jesus’ rising from the dead just some notion that we in the church have been convinced to go along with?

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Each of the gospel writers presents us with different accounts of that first Easter day. In Mark's gospel, the women disciples – after hearing the good news of Jesus' resurrection and being commissioned to go and tell – utterly fail, leaving in fear and saying nothing to anyone. In Luke, the disciples thought the women were telling an idle tale when they returned with news from the empty tomb. So they dismissed them; didn't believe them.

And in the account we heard earlier from John's gospel, it is Mary Magdalene who first encounters the risen Jesus, not recognizing him, until he speaks her name. When she hurries off and tells the others, then Peter and John set off running towards the tomb, to inspect it for themselves.

Resurrection is not experienced in just one particular way ... there is no set pattern. And perhaps that is because Easter is not just about the resurrection of Jesus. It is about our resurrection, too. It's about new life and hope and love being unleashed upon a surprised people. It's about changed hearts and lives.

And the story of what God is doing in and through Jesus isn't over at the empty tomb. *It's only just getting started.* Resurrection isn't a conclusion, it's an invitation. It's an invitation extended to each and every

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one of us to live resurrection lives so that we might be part of the continuing story of God's redemption of the world ... working for the good in all situations ... sharing the good news of Jesus with those who are suffering or lonely, marginalized or downtrodden ... using our gifts, abilities, and faithfulness to keep on telling the story of Jesus in ways that bless the lives of others both within and outside of this church community.

Over the years, many of you here have been telling the story by singing in the choir, leading in worship, teaching Sunday School. You've been following after Jesus by feeding the hungry and visiting the lonely. You've been sharing the good news with prayer shawls and casseroles for folks in times of crisis and change. You've helped to tell of God's love for all people with generous gifts for the Mission and Service Fund or through Christmas Hampers and other outreach programs.

And that's because the story of resurrection is not to be told by standing and staring into an empty tomb. It is to be lived by turning and running headlong back into life, bearing in our own bodies and souls the promise of Easter – the promise of resurrection and new life – and as we encounter people and situations, enabling them to see and experience that same promise.

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Remember Jesus' words to Mary? "Do not linger here and do not try and hold onto me or this moment. Go and tell the others." And every day that you and I share God's love with a fellow human being, we are continuing the Jesus story.

Easter is not about proof of a body risen from death ... Easter is about hope and life and love continually lived out in the lives of those who are Christ's followers. The miracle of Easter wasn't necessarily that Jesus was physically raised from the dead. The miracle was in his followers, recognizing that they could continue to proclaim the message of God's Reign on this earth even after Jesus had been crucified. They realized that *they* were also resurrected and that whenever and wherever they continued his ministry, Jesus lived on through them.

It's noteworthy that the first Easter began in uncertainty, fear, and doubt. The gospel for today began ... *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.* While it was still dark ... that is a rather apt description of our experience in this year of pandemic, is it not? Worldwide, there have been over 129 million Coronavirus cases reported, with nearly 2 million, nine hundred thousand deaths. And in Canada, cases continue to escalate and we've had

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almost 23,000 deaths. Front line and health care workers in many parts of our country are overwhelmed; pandemic-induced loneliness, depression, and anxiety are taking their toll. And besides all that, from our own country and others we hear reports of unprovoked stabbings, mass shootings, racial tensions; of unemployment and food insecurity ...

While it was still night. While she could not see. While Mary thought death held sway. While she wept. While it was still dark, resurrection began.

And as it happened for Mary ... sorrow turned to joy, defeat turned into victory, darkness overcome by light ... so will it be for us.

May this Easter renew our wonder and open our hearts. Because Easter isn't just about a risen Jesus. It's about our resurrection as well. It's about the power of belief in a world that has lost hope. It's about knowing that no situation is beyond God's redeeming love. It's about new possibilities opening up in front of us. It's about Jesus alive ... in us! And through us, offering hope and new life for all! Alleluia! Amen!